

## Experiences of Evangelization in Hong Kong

*Cardinal John Tong, Bishop of Hong Kong*

Fr Welling, Fr Koszorz, brothers and sisters in Christ,

Thank you for your invitation. On behalf of our Diocese of Hong Kong, I would like to extend our greetings and warm wishes to this Conference and to our Church in Poland, the home country of our beloved Pope John Paul II and of many missionaries in China in the last century. Also, I take this opportunity to refresh my knowledge and to learn about evangelization in Europe and in China. I wish that this meeting may bear fruit for evangelization, just as our Lord Jesus sent his disciples out to spread the Good News and the love of God to all peoples in the world.

In this paper “Experiences of Evangelization in Hong Kong,” I will first introduce the background of the Hong Kong Church, and then my vocation and experiences in evangelization as a bishop in Hong Kong for almost 20 years. Vatican II proclaimed that the Church is “missionary by its very nature” (*Ad Gentes*, 2) which now tells us that all members of the Church are called to be missionaries. Mission comes from the Gospel, and mission precedes the Church. When I was preparing this paper, I reflected on this Vatican document on missionary activity. It says: “God generously pours out, and never ceases to pour out, the divine goodness, so that the one who is Creator of all things might at last become ‘all in all’ (1 Cor. 15:28), thus simultaneously assuring God’s own glory and our happiness” (*Ad Gentes*, 2).

### Brief Background of Evangelization in Hong Kong

Let me introduce the background of our Diocese of Hong Kong. Our city developed from a small fishing village to a large cosmopolitan city in today’s world. In the same way our Catholic community in Hong Kong, which started with a tiny group of Irish soldiers around 1841, grew into a community of over 500,000 Catholics today. In the 1950s, our Diocese gained a high number of conversions, with 16,000 new converts a year. As Hong Kong was facing an influx of refugees from mainland China, many people were attracted by the Church’s social and educational services, and thus joined the Church.

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Cardinal John Tong was installed as the Bishop of Hong Kong in 2009. He was created a Cardinal in 2012. He is the director and a founder of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, a research centre of the Hong Kong Diocese focusing on the Church in China. This year marks the 35th anniversary of the Centre. The following text is his contribution to the 9th European Catholic China Colloquium, “Challenges of Evangelisation – China and Europe,” Konstan-  
cin/Warsaw, Poland, September 10–13, 2015.

Today, we have become the largest Chinese diocese in the world, with over half a million Catholics. According to our latest statistics, there are 380,000 Chinese Catholics in Hong Kong, plus more than 180,000 Catholics of other nationalities. Altogether, Hong Kong has over 560,000 Catholics. The local society remains affluent and secularized. We need extra effort in carrying out our mission of evangelization.

With Divine Providence, Pope Francis appointed three auxiliary bishops to our Diocese, Bishops Michael Yeung, Stephen Lee and Joseph Ha. Many of you may already know them. They are competent leaders and each has his talents and charism. This empowers and strengthens the leadership of the Diocese. Each auxiliary bishop takes up certain ministries of our evangelization work, and makes it more focused and specialized.

Furthermore, missionaries are offering great help to our diocese. We have 900 Religious personnel, both Chinese and foreigners, including about 300 priests, 500 Sisters, a total of 60 religious Brothers and permanent deacons, plus more than 40 seminarians. Fortunately, we are united and cooperate well.

## My Vocation: Evangelized by Maryknoll Priests

I was born in 1939 into a non-Catholic family in Hong Kong. After the Japanese invaded the region during World War II, my family was forced to move to Canton (Guangzhou), China. My mother received a Catholic education with the seed of faith in Hong Kong. After the war, her gratitude for the Church prompted her to seek baptism, and our family was joyfully baptized too. Our parish was led by Maryknoll Fathers Bernard Meyer, Thomas Malone and James Manning. I witnessed the love and compassion of Christ shown to the needy through those foreign missionaries. With them as role models of evangelizers in my life, I left China in 1951 and pursued my priesthood in Macau and Hong Kong.

Later, I was sent to Rome to study at the Pontificio Collegio Urbano de Propaganda Fide in 1964. Our graduating class of 1966 had 69 seminarians from 25 countries. I had a wonderful time with them. We were like a family. We still keep contact with one another. It was a manifestation of the catholicity of our Church. They were God's gifts to me. We were supposed to be ordained before Christmas 1965. We started our retreat in preparation for our ordination. To our great surprise, our rector announced that the Holy Father would ordain us on January 6, 1966. Moving our ordination from Christmas to Epiphany, reminded us that we should be witnesses to the whole world. After graduation, Cardinal Agagianian, then Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, gave each of us a cross. He said it was a sign of our mission to the world, and reminded us to bear witness for our local Church and for the whole world. In 1970, I returned to Hong Kong and began to teach at the seminary and work in various pastoral ministries.

## Four Pastoral Concerns of the Diocese of Hong Kong

I have been always reminded by the teaching of Saint John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (The Mission of the Redeemer): "For missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive.

*Faith is strengthened when it is given to others!*" (RM, 2) I also like to quote the story of a famous American, Ben Franklin, in my homilies. He once loaned some money to a poor man, who asked: "Thank you. When do you want me to repay you?" Ben answered: "You do not have to repay me. But one day when you are able, you should pass it to someone in need." In the same way God gave us the faith through missionaries. Whenever we are able, we should pass on the gift of faith to other people, helping them to believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. When I became the bishop of Hong Kong in 2009, I placed evangelization as the first of the four pastoral priorities in my diocese. The other three are promotion of priestly and religious vocations, service for non-Chinese Catholics, and strengthening the role of the Bridge Church to the Church in China. Certainly, there are challenges in implementing these pastoral concerns. Let me elaborate on these four pastoral concerns as follows:

**Evangelization** is always the primary concern of the diocese. Our diocese is regarded as the biggest Chinese diocese in the world in terms of Catholic population. Our diocese walks on three legs: parishes, schools and social services. We have 51 parishes, 270 schools and a wide range of social services, especially rendered by Caritas-Hong Kong. We are happy to see that these three main sectors are all active in evangelization.

With God's blessing, our **parishes** manage to get 7,000 baptisms a year, half infants and children, and half adults. Among adult converts, many were influenced by the teaching they received at the Church schools they studied in before; and others were influenced by the lay volunteer catechists, who are trained in giving catechetical instructions. However, we also observed that some of the new Catholics were inactive or losing interest in coming to church. The diocese encourages the new Catholics to undergo an **ongoing formation of faith**. After Baptism at the Easter Vigil, the diocese will hold gatherings for all new Catholics to introduce them to the leaders, facilities and services of the diocese. Courses offered by the Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy, the Biblical Institute, the Diocesan Catechetical Centre, the Catholic Central Council of the Laity and other Catholic groups will be introduced to them. It is hoped that the new Catholics will deepen their spirituality, faith and their sense of belonging to the Catholic Church. Some parishes mobilized the godparents to accompany the candidates six months before Baptism. This helps the new members to join parish activities and Church groups. Also, the newly baptized are invited to help in new catechism classes. This gives greater motivation and impetus to search for more knowledge about the Church and the Gospel. The diocese has 1,000 volunteer catechists who completed a two-year training program in teaching catechism.

In the fields of **education** and social services, our diocese has faced challenges since 2004, after the diocese lost the legal battle against the issue of the Incorporated Management Committee to be set up in each school. The diocese saw it as a restriction on implementing the Catholic ideals of education. However, the diocese persists in the promotion of the Christian faith in our schools. Now, many difficulties have been overcome. The school managing bodies are operating smoothly. Our social services are largely implemented by Caritas-Hong Kong. The education section of Caritas is now offering courses on spirituality, culture and religion, life and ethics. The Caritas' colleges are moving towards the establishment of a **Catholic university**. It is scheduled to open fully in September 2016.

Actually, local Catholics are actively involved in **social services**, especially serving those living in poverty, in prisons and hospitals, visiting solitary elderly persons and families in difficulties. Parishes offer free meals and share the difficulties of families in the neighborhood. Also, Cardinal Joseph Zen calls for collections of moon-cakes for all prisoners at the Mid-autumn Festival each year.

Certainly, our witness in society is not limited to the servant role only, but we also take up a prophetic role. On **political participation**, over the past two years, the Hong Kong government released a political reform proposal on universal suffrage for the Chief Executive and for the Legislative Council. This issue has caused society to be divided in the views of the political platform, relations with China, trust in Beijing and in the local government. Vigorous opinions in favor of and against the reform proposals were expressed. That led to the Umbrella Movement, an occupation of main roads and downtown areas, that called for an “authentic” suffrage, and lasted for 79 days. The diocese submitted its view to the government on the issue. We called for dialogue and reconciliation in families and in society to repair the rifts. Like society at large, the views and stands of Catholics were divided. It was a time of challenges.

**Vocation promotion** to the priesthood and the religious life is our second priority. As of June 2015, we have five seminarians in the diocesan seminary. The average age of priests is nearly 66 years. Certainly, the situation is not satisfactory. Ageing is a challenge of our diocese and of the local population. The most recent ordination of a diocesan priest took place on July 4. On the other hand, our diocese has two dozen permanent deacons, well trained in theology, philosophy and pastoral ministries. They are mostly retirees, with families. However, priests cannot be replaced by permanent deacons. We are praying hard for more vocations to the priesthood. In late May, more than 700 Catholics from many parishes gathered at the seminary, despite a heat wave of 30 or more degrees Celsius, to pray for priestly vocations in the diocese. The celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life has aroused more interest in the promotion of priestly vocations.

Besides, there are calls for vocations of lay missionaries to serve in Asia and Africa. The Catholic Lay Missionary Association has given formation to those who are ready to answer the call. Since 1980s, the association has sent missionaries to Kenya, Mauritius, Zambia and Zimbabwe in Africa, as well as to Cambodia and Myanmar in Asia.

**Service for non-Chinese Catholics** is our third pastoral priority. We have chaplains to take care of non-Chinese Catholics from English-speaking, Spanish-speaking, German-speaking and French-speaking countries, and also for Catholic communities of Polish, Japanese, Italians, Indonesians, Koreans, Vietnamese and Filipinos. The Filipinos are the largest group, numbering 120,000, and 80% of them Catholic. Most of them work in Hong Kong as domestic employees. We advise every parish to provide at least one English Mass on the weekends for non-Chinese Catholics. The diocese runs two emergency shelters for maids who lost their jobs and one pastoral centre for migrant workers, including Indonesians and Thais. In addition, we have chaplains to serve at the airport and to provide pastoral services for seamen.

Actually, the non-Chinese Catholics are helping in evangelization. Once I asked a non-Chinese catechist how her parish attracted 100 new adult converts every year. She said

she would approach the churchgoers who come to Sunday Mass alone, and invited their non-Catholic family members to come to catechism classes. She gave each a letter for their non-Catholic family members. As a result, about 100 responses were received every year, showing interest in joining the catechism classes. This catechist has been doing a great job bringing converts into the Church for more than 25 years.

**Being a Bridge Church** between the Church in China and the Universal Church is our fourth priority. Over the past decades, I have visited mainland China more than 100 times. I met many wonderful bishops, priests, Sisters and Catholics who were preaching the Gospel with their words and deeds. Today, mainland Chinese Catholics exercise a variety of evangelization work. Ongoing formation is important. Some Catholics have traveled to Hong Kong, Macau and even Taiwan for further formation. Efforts to raise the quality of the formation for ministry of marriage and family, youth ministry, seminary formators, liturgy and parish management are being made. We hope to share with the Church in China our faith and knowledge, and to learn from them how to enrich ours.

Our Holy Father Pope Francis promulgated his *Apostolic Letter to All Consecrated People* on the opening of the Year of Consecrated Life on November 30, 2014. This message contains all the elements of evangelization. It is meant not only for Christians leading a consecrated life, but for every Catholic in the whole Church. I observe that the Holy Father, in this Letter, offers three visions for all consecrated persons, including all the evangelizers, namely: To look to the past with gratitude; to live the present with passion; and to embrace the future with hope. Pope Francis also made three appeals to all Catholics:

1. Be joyful witnesses of the Gospel;
2. Be witnesses who trust in God while facing challenges;
3. Unite with one another, and be concerned for the poor, so that the Kingdom of God will be realized soon throughout our society.

In China, many congregations of Sisters work in the countryside teaching catechism. It is easier and more convenient for Sisters than priests to approach women in the villages. With the One Child Policy, there are abandoned baby girls and babies with disabilities. There are orphanages and clinics in remote places staffed by Sisters. They earn a good name for the Church. I remember a Catholic hospital in Hebei province, which opened in 1985 with government permission. In a year's time, it had already treated some 7,000 patients, including 200 in-patients. The hospital received many letters of appreciation from patients and their families. Even the government has openly lauded its service. In fact, the purpose for opening this hospital was to provide a place for many young Sisters who professed their vows to live a communal life. Their kindness and quality service had gained a good reputation for the Church. It is a good example to reflect on what Pope Francis said:

*Unite with one another, and be concerned for the poor, so that the Kingdom of God will be realized soon throughout our society.*

I knew a Chinese priest who had a small parish of 200 Catholics before 1949. Later, he could no longer function as a priest. Instead he was assigned to carry charcoal. That was hard work for an educated man unaccustomed to heavy manual labor. He asked himself: "Why am I doing this? Is this the reward I get for remaining a priest, to carry a heavy load

on my shoulders all day long and deliver charcoal to people's houses?" But after a while he adjusted to his new job, and decided to work with a Christian spirit. He could not preach to people when he delivered his charcoal, of course, but he could have a Christian attitude towards all those whom he met. In the 1980s he was finally allowed to return to his church and to resume his sacramental ministry, but he could only preach and pray on church property. Yet 800 people now crowd into that church every weekend, four times the number of the old days, to learn the catechism and to hear the Word of God. The people remembered him as the old charcoal carrier. He gave a **joyful witness of the Gospel** to Jesus by carrying countless baskets of charcoal.

There was an old couple whom I met on a visit some years ago. Both of them were medical doctors. The wife was Catholic, the husband was not. She wanted him to become Catholic, but he did not wish to be baptized. They had a son before a political movement broke out. The husband, along with other intellectuals, was sent to a labor camp. The separation was very difficult for both of them. The wife had to work long hours during the day and care for her son at night. Pressured by the government to divorce her husband and to renounce her religion, she was told that she would gain political advantages. But she refused. Each night, she prayed with her son to have strength from God to endure her difficulties. In the late 1970s, one day she learnt that her husband and others would be released. On that very day, she and her son went to the railway station to welcome him. When the train arrived, they were the only family members on the train platform waiting for the men. Her husband was deeply moved and said: "Now I know that the Catholic Church is the true religion." Then he took catechetical instructions and was later baptized. The wife was really a good **witness who trusted in God while facing challenges**.

What do the above stories about the charcoal carrying priest and the medical couple have in common? I think it shows the manner of spreading the Gospel in China, if not in all of Asia. Evangelization is carried out more through personal contact, than through the preaching of doctrines. The people remembered the happy attitude of the charcoal carrying priest in the midst of persecution, and so they were attracted to his church after the "open door" policy began. The medical doctor was deeply impressed when he saw his wife and son waiting for him on the station platform after his release from labor camp, especially when no other relatives of other released prisoners were there. In other words, it was the personal witness to the faith by Catholics that moved others to convert.

This seemed to be the method of Matteo Ricci, the famous Jesuit missionary in the Ming Dynasty. His first book was on friendship, as if he wanted first to make friends with the Chinese people, and only later introduce them to the Catholic faith. His great friend, and high Chinese official, Xu Guangqi, is an example. After many years of acquaintance with Ricci, and working with him on the translation of Euclid's mathematics, Xu Guangqi decided to enter the Church. In fact, it was not Ricci, but another Jesuit, who instructed Xu in the faith. It seems that in China, one must first make friends with the Chinese people, and after they get to know you, then they may want to know about your religious motivation and faith.

So, in our diocese, we emphasize personal contact in our efforts at spreading the Gospel. Are there any family members who are not yet Catholics, we ask? Are there any spouses

of Catholics, who have not yet become Catholics themselves? Are there any children in families who have not yet received Baptism?

As the new Catholics become more familiar with the faith, deeper aspects of the faith can be introduced, e.g., methods of prayer and meditation and the social teachings of the Church, and how action for social justice is an integral part of preaching the Gospel, as the bishops' synod of 1971 declared. There should be continued growth in our life of faith. In the parish, the Catholics should form a community in which all the members mutually encourage and support one another. Then move out from there to invite others to join their parish family.

## Concluding Prayer to Our Lady of Sheshan

In March 2013, I was privileged to take part in the election and installation of the new pope in the Vatican. Pope Francis accepted the cardinals' congratulations and blessings one by one. When my turn came, I offered him a bronze statue of Our Lady of Sheshan, and asked him to pray for the Catholics in China. He said, "Chinese Catholics have given many testimonies to the Universal Church." To my surprise, he kissed my right hand to show his love and devotion for the Church in China. Later, he told me that the Marian statue, standing in his own room, reminds him of the Jesuit Saint Francis Xavier who arrived in China more than 460 years ago. He told me he never forgets to pray for the Chinese Catholics.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us follow the good example of Pope Francis to deepen our filial love for our Mother Mary and invoke her intercession that God will bestow blessings on the Church in China, hoping that the Catholics on the mainland will enjoy full religious freedom, be reconciled with each other, and achieve full communion with the Universal Church. Let us ask Our Lady of Sheshan to help us to respond positively to our Lord Jesus to proclaim the Gospel, to live the spirit of mission and to be His witnesses of the spirit of mission, as called for by the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes*) of Vatican II. May God bless you!