

Bishop John Tong of Hong Kong, "man of dialogue," but with "non-negotiable principles"

by Gianni Criveller

A wide-ranging interview with the successor to the combative Cardinal Zen. The progress and prospects of the Church's efforts in the territory, and toward the sister Church in China, in a give-and-take relationship. Openness and dialogue with the Chinese government, but remembering the Chinese bishops in prison, and asking for complete religious liberty. Memories of childhood and of his conversion. The work of the Holy Spirit Study Centre.

Hong Kong (AsiaNews) - Bishop John Tong, who turns 70 this July, is the ordinary bishop of Hong Kong. He succeeds Cardinal Joseph Zen, whose resignation the pope accepted last April 15. Fr. Gianni Criveller, a missionary of the PIME, who has spent 16 years in Hong Kong, has long been working together with Bishop Tong, and ask him for this interview, which we presented in its entirety. In it, the prelate talks about the progress of the mission in Hong Kong and on the mainland, relations with the government of Hong Kong and Beijing, and the difficulties with religious freedom. the bishop presents himself as a man of dialogue, but with "nonnegotiable" principles, and calls upon China to guarantee full religious freedom and human rights for the population. He asserts that he will continue the defense of freedom of education for Catholic schools in Hong Kong.

Q: What are the main objectives in your service as Bishop in Hong Kong? What will be your pastoral priorities?

I am quite familiar with the pastoral objectives of the diocese since I served as one of the vicars general since 1992. The main objective in my service as the Ordinary of Hong Kong will be encouraging all the Catholics to implement the pastoral priorities set by the diocesan Synod in 2002. The Diocese has already chosen its pastoral priority from July 1, 2009 through December 31, 2010: the Year of Priestly Vocations. We have already made a lot of efforts in implementing the priorities set by the Synod, and have also achieved some good results. But we need to continue and make more efforts in the future.

Q: What can the church of Hong Kong do for the evangelization of Hong Kong, China, Asia and the world?

We all acknowledge that all the baptized should be missionaries and have the spirit of evangelization, following the instructions given to us by Our Lord. When I talk about evangelization, I like to propose two symbolic images: a water reservoir and washing hands. In Hong Kong we have several reservoirs, and they are so necessary to sustain our life. The function of a reservoir is to receive and give water, otherwise the water inside the reservoir will lose its freshness. Similarly, if we really want to make our faith always living and refreshing, we have to receive from and give to others at the same time. This is why I think that even in relation with the Church in China, we are not only giving, but also receiving: the two communities benefit from each other. The other image illustrates a similar concept. When we wash hands, we do not say that one hand washes the other, but rather that both hands wash each other, benefiting each other. Similarly, there is only one way to be a good Christian; that is to be a good

missionary. Being Christian and having the spirit of evangelization are like washing hands; one hand cannot do without the other.

We ask our Catholics to make ever-greater efforts in evangelization. Every year we have a good number of newly baptized. At the Easter Vigil in 2008 we had almost 2800 neophytes, mostly adults. At this Easter Vigil we had a good number of newly baptized: 2730. We have also been sending out some missionaries to countries in Asia and elsewhere in the world: some lay missionaries to Cambodia, and priests to Tanzania, Canada and other countries. Although we do not have many local priests, we still encourage this missionary spirit within our community.

Q: Do foreign missionaries still have a role in Hong Kong? Which one?

Definitely. Hong Kong is a young church. Our faith still needs to be positively influenced by Catholics coming from overseas, especially those countries which have deep faith and a long Christian tradition. We appreciate PIME missionaries because they come from such an ancient Catholic country. They have brought to us many charisms, treasures and culture that are not only different, but can also be a positive model for us. Of course, the same should be applied to missionaries coming from other countries. Personally I am very interested in learning new things from different countries and different cultures. We have missionaries from 30 different countries and Catholic faithful from about 50 nationalities. Hong Kong is an international community. I consider this a great blessing, because our faith and culture can be enriched.

Q: What about relationship with other Christian denominations and religions?

I had been the chairperson of the diocesan ecumenical commission in the 1970s, therefore I gained some experience in this field. I did my best to promote good relationship with other Christian communities, and I still have many good friends among their leaders. They also remember me with fondness.

Regarding other religions, I think our relationships have been very harmonious. We try to follow the declaration from the Council Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions. We look forward to deepen friendship with members of other religions and join them in the service of society. At the same time, we uphold our principles. We always keep our faith in Christ as the only savior of the whole world. In no way do we give up our principles.

Q: What are the most urgent problems in Hong Kong's society?

Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city, and one of the world financial centres; therefore our society and our people are deeply influenced by the global situation. Now we are facing the financial and economic tsunami. I fully agree with the Holy Father who issued a statement last Christmas and again on the occasion of the New Year. He spoke about the anxieties suffered by the peoples because of the economic tsunami. But, he said, we should not consider this as a crisis only, but as an opportunity as well. If we look it on an ethical way, we can turn crisis into an opportunity. We can rediscover the value of simplicity,

fraternity and unity in the global family. If everybody lives a simple life, according to what one needs rather than pursuing material desires, one can rediscover the beauty of simplicity and get rid of egoism. Due to progress in communication, we are in a global family, or a global village. We should indeed learn how to live with each other, because we are all brothers and sisters. No matter which nationality or culture we belong to, we should help each other and live in solidarity. God has definitely offered enough resources for our needs. What is urgent and necessary is solidarity and justice.

Q: How can the church serve the society and its needs?

The church should follow, practice and promote the teaching of our Holy Father Benedict XVI. We need right vision, right concept, and faith. This means faith in God, in ourselves and in others, without ever giving up. With such a concept and such a spirit, all problems in society can eventually be solved.

Q: How is your relationship with the government?

My relationship with the government in Hong Kong is not bad. I do not expect any special treatment from the government. There is no harm in having a harmonious relationship with the government, so that we can better serve the society. But we will never compromise on our principles and we will always uphold Catholic doctrine. Following the announcement of my installment as the Ordinary of the Diocese, I have received some congratulatory messages from government officials in Hong Kong: the Secretary for Civil Affairs and the Secretary for Education. The latter, Mr. Michel Suen, sent me a letter although we met only on one or two occasions. So far they have showed good will towards me. I appreciate their friendship, yet I will not forget to tell them what my bottom lines are, and what are the Church's standpoints.

Q: What about Education judicial case?

Our standpoints on education will not change. I will set up an ad hoc team to follow up the judicial case, while we are always open for dialogue and negotiations.

Q: Will Hong Kong continue exercise its role of sister/bridge church toward China? How?

I always use one word to describe the rationale of my work regarding China for the last 30 years: SMART. This is the policy we have been following at the Holy Spirit Study Centre. The abbreviation stands for Small (we support projects that are small); Measurable (or accountable, there should be a system of checking projects); Articulate (all elements and stages of projects must be clearly stated); Results achieving (projects must deliver what was promised); Time bound (projects should start and be completed in reasonable time). We continue working with this policy. In this way we can make our bridge-building ever more effective. I am not an ambitious man. If we can continue our work, building upon the trust that other people have been giving to us, we can make contributions to the Church in China and to the Universal Church. I was trained in scholastic philosophy and theology. *Contra factum*,

non valet argumentum. (There is no valid argument against facts.) We have been making contributions in this way. So far our work has been appreciated in many parts of the world, and in the Universal Church. We realize that our contribution is still limited, but we can help the Church in China to a certain degree. This requires right concept and vision, and then one needs effort and perseverance to implement the concept and to turn vision into reality, so that little by little reality can be improved. This is the way I think and do, and I know my colleagues share my viewpoint. These principles are useful not only for our work for the Church in China, but also for our spiritual life.

Q: Will teachers from Hong Kong still go to seminaries in China? What can the church in Hong Kong do for sister churches in China?

Nowadays many Catholics go to China as visitors. Many of them can offer good influence and updated ideas to our brothers and sisters in China. The present situation permits some Catholics from China to come to Hong Kong. We make great effort to properly welcome them. The diocese has organized an ad hoc committee to receive them. We guide them to see the city, but we especially organize some meaningful pastoral exposures for them. They visit can some interesting churches, participate in church activities and visit some organizations within the diocese, such as the Liturgical Commission, the Catechetical Centre, hospital pastoral care units. So far these guided tours have been highly appreciated. There is interaction. Our relationship goes in both directions: we go to China, and Catholics from China come to us. Some of our professors are still allowed to teach in China seminaries, but fewer than before. On the other hand, some of our priests and Sisters are invited to give retreats, spiritual guidance and spiritual meetings in China. The number is higher than before. I think God is always good to us. As an Irish proverb says: When God closes a door, then He opens a window. What are the priorities for the Church in China?

I follow the Letter of the Holy Father addressed to the Catholics in China. Some priorities are: promoting reconciliation and unity among different communities in China, and their full communion with the Universal Church and the Holy Father. Formation of priests, Sisters, seminarians and laity is also important. I always stress the importance of having the right vision and the right concept as a bridge/sister church.

Q: Do you think you can play any role in the service of Church in China?

Of course I can play a role, as a Catholic, and as a leader of Hong Kong Catholic Church. I can lead the curia, clergy and laity to move forward toward the right direction. I have been playing this role for the past 30 years, and I will continue doing so. This is why I am staying at the seminary (rather than moving to the Diocesan Centre), and this is why I will continue to be the director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre. This is a bit exceptional, but when I mentioned it to people, they were not surprised, because they know how much I care about our work for the Church in China.

Q: How do you see yourself in relationship with Chinese politics? What are your contacts with the Central government and its Liaison Office here in Hong Kong?

I think it is ok. Yes, I would use this word: ok. My door of contacts is open, and so far the same is true from their side to me. At least we can talk to each other. As I have mentioned already in my public statement and at the press conference on April 16, I have my bottom lines. Firstly, I wish to show my openness and warm attitude toward everybody. But I cannot hide or sacrifice my principles and bottom lines. Therefore I will follow the Holy Father's letter. He has stated the direction for us to follow, and I will do just that. I am a member of the Commission for the Church in China, established by the Holy See. In the meetings of that Commission, I occasionally expressed my opinion openly, and I have noticed some of my opinions have been welcome by the Holy See. I have already checked my bottom lines with the Holy See. And holding firm to my positions, I can handle my dialogue with the Chinese government.

Q: Did you receive their congratulations on your appointment?

Yes, I received congratulations from officials of the Chinese governments. The vice-director of the Liaison Office here in Hong Kong sent me a warm letter of congratulations. On April 16, after my press conference, the spokesperson of the Foreign Ministry in Beijing, answering a question from a journalist, talked about my appointment without any negative criticism. Official Chinese media has reported her statement. She mentioned the agreement with the British government about the principle of "One Country, Two Systems." She said she hopes that our relationships will improve, and she encourages the interactions between the Church in Hong Kong and the Church in China. Of course she repeated some of their old lines, such as the principles of non-interference, non-subordination and mutual respect. At least she talked about me quite neutrally, and not negatively. Again, I would say that my relationships with Beijing are acceptable so far.

Q: Will you go to China if invited? On what conditions?

You know that last year I was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. In case I will be invited to visit China again, I will follow the same principles I stated in my article published on the Osservatore Romano in August 2008. I will first consult my superior. And then if I go to China, I will go in a very discreet way because there are still bishops who are in prison in China, and I will not forget them. They are my brothers therefore I will always show concern and respect for them. I remember when I have accompanied Cardinal John B. Wu (then Bishop Wu) visiting China in 1985. We tried to meet with the Bishop of Shanghai, Ignatius Kung, who was still under detention. During that trip in our conversations with the officials we expressed many times our insistence of visiting Bishop Kung. In those days, of course, we did not know that he was already a cardinal in pectore. So they know our lines. We are not going to China as tourist, or to be entertained at table by officials. We are not interested in those things. We are concerned with all our brothers and sister whose human rights and religious freedom are restricted.

Q: What should the Chinese government do to improve its relationship with the Catholic Church?

I think unless authorities allow religious freedom and full human rights to all our brothers and sisters of the church, there cannot be full relations between the two parties. It is our duty to try our best to

enlighten the Chinese government on these issues. This is what we can do to help the Catholic Church in China. It is good to see that the Holy See has an informal dialogue with the Chinese government. At least the door is not closed. We are guided by the spirit of Vatican II: only dialogue and negotiation can solve conflicts. Fighting and animosity will never help. This is what I learned when I studied theology in Rome, it was precisely the time when the Second Vatican Council was in session. I have been enlightened by the spirit of Vatican II.

Q: You mentioned the Pope's letter to Catholic Church in China. How have the Pope's directives been implemented? What can the Holy See do to support the Church in China?

First of all we should give all the faithful the chance to read the letter of the Holy Father. The second step is: helping them to understand it properly. No one should give a partial interpretation of it; the Letter must be accepted in its entirety. If we read the letter correctly, we will learn how to forgive and to sacrifice for the greater good of the Church. Therefore I am glad to hear that in the near future the Holy See might publish a compendium that serves as guide and as a commentary. The compendium will benefit Catholics, especially those in China, to have a correct understanding of the letter.

Q: You serve after the outspoken and charismatic Cardinal Zen. Where do you see yourself in continuation with his leadership? Where will there be a change?

Some people thought that I would lose my sleep after taking over Cardinal Joseph Zen's responsibility. But I can tell you that I keep sleeping very well for six hours every night. I know my limitations. But I trust in God, in Catholic teaching, and in the collective wisdom of the Catholic community. My predecessors built up excellent and healthy structures for the Diocese. We leaders should collect different opinions before making any important decision. We should have open eyes to see different situations and open ears to listen to different opinions. The Diocese is provided with a Pastoral Council, a Council of Priests, and various commissions. The Hong Kong church, although still young, is quite well established and structured. As one of the Vicars General for 17 years, I was in charge of the Bishop's office and of the Seminary, where now I am still teaching a few classes. I know my coworkers and colleagues in the diocese very well, and trust them. Therefore I can say: so far so good. I hope and pray that, with the help of others, I can manage my workload. I still find time to play basketball. As long as my age allows, I will continue to do physical exercise. So my schedule is more or less the same as before. I appreciate Cardinal Zen's outstanding charisms, but I think the church does not rely on one person only, no matter how good he or she might be. We are a community.

Q: Tell us something more about yourself. Where were you born? What about your family?

I was born in Hong Kong in a non-Catholic family. (In fact, Bishop Tong was born in Staunton Street n. 8, at the second floor in a house located in the area now popularly called Soho, along the middle level escalator. The rebuilt house now hosts a restaurant, Pepperoni's. Gianni's note).

Q: So, you are the first Hong Kong bishop who was born in Hong Kong!

You are right: I am the first Hong Kong bishop who was born in this city (laugh). My father was born in Guangdong province; I do not know what village exactly. My mother was born in Macau. Her grandfather produced mantles for lights in Hong Kong. When she was a young girl she studied at the Sacred Heart School of the Canossian sisters in Caine Road. As mentioned, she was not Catholic. One day the school had the visit of Archbishop Mario Zanin, the Apostolic Delegate to China visiting Hong Kong (It was April 1934, Gianni's note). The Sisters mobilized all the students to welcome the prestigious guest in the most solemn fashion. My mother was chosen, by the Principal, Sister Mabel Anderson, to present the flowers to Archbishop Zanin on behalf of all school. Maybe she was chosen because she always dressed nicely. She told us this episode many times, always feeling very proud of that privilege. Since then she had the highest respect for the Sisters, particularly for Sr. Anderson. The good impression about the church remained in her heart but, at that time, she did not receive baptism.

Q: What happened next?

When I was two years old, the Japanese invaded Hong Kong. My family had to move to Macau, and shortly after, to Canton. I was the only boy in the family. My father had an elder brother, who had a daughter. In the traditional family, boys were preferred over the girls. Therefore, for my protection, I was separated from my parents and sent to stay with my grandmother (on father's side) in a village in Hua County, Guangdong Province. Later, Hua County became part of the municipality of Canton (Guangzhou). My grandmother loved me very much and she protected me no matter what. One day there was not enough food. My grandma sent someone to the neighboring village to borrow some rice. We got only one small bowl of it. So Grandma, who was very dictatorial, decided that I was the only one to have the rice. At that time I was proud, but later in my life I felt ashamed of that privilege. It shows the injustice of superiority of men over women in the traditional society. But I remember this episode with some fondness, because my grandma really loved me and took good care of me. So when I was in the Macau seminary and heard the news of her death, I cried a lot.

Q: When were you reunited with your parents?

When the war finished, on the Feast of the Assumption (August 15) 1945, I moved to Canton City. I was with my grandma for more than three years, from when I was two and a half to age six. Then I was reunited with my parents in Canton and started my primary school education. My father got sick of tuberculosis. My mother had to work as a teacher. Those times were very harsh. It was on those days I learned my endurance and tolerance. Before he got sick, my father worked as a bursar in a company. He was much trusted by the owner, and in those days owners cared about their employees. When my father got sick, the boss gave us a small flat to live free of charge, and also gave my family some monthly allowance. In any case, the money was not enough, so my mother had to work.

Q: You and your family were still non-Catholic. When did you enter the Church?

As I mentioned above, my mother was very well disposed toward the church. The episode with Archbishop Zanin might have been providential. After the war, facing much hardship, she remembered those good days, and how much the church did for her. I should thank God for our hard life in Canton, which prompted my mother to seek baptism. After her, we were all baptized in Canton in the years following the war. We lived near a church, so she encouraged us to go often to the church. The cathedral is in Ho Bak (north of the Pearl River); our church was in Ho Nan (south of the river), in a less developed area. The church was near the riverside. The missionaries working there were American Maryknollers. They bought a house and started a small mission.

In those years the fighting between Communists and Nationalists in northern and central China was quite devastating. Many wounded and destitute soldiers sought refuge in Canton. Everyday I saw such people coming down looking for assistance. I witnessed how much the foreign missionaries, particularly my parish priest, Fr Bernard Meyer, MM, helped many in need. He really had the same love and compassion of Christ towards those in need. Fr. Meyer introduced my mother to teach in a school. In those days, a high school graduate like my mother was considered as having a good standard of education. So my mother became a teacher, even if she was not trained as such.

Q: What about your vocation?

The parish priest introduced me to the Catholic primary school in Canton. I took the examination, I passed, and then I was admitted into the school. It was next to the cathedral, called Ming Dak Primary School. I was granted a scholarship. I practically studied free of charge from primary school, then of course the seminary etc, so I was supported by the church all my life. I am a church-raised boy. As for my vocation, of course it took a long time to become clear and firm. Since I was still in Canton, and moved by the good example of my parish priest, I thought it was good to become a priest. Fr. Meyer came to visit my home and told my parents about my desire. After the Communists established their regime in China, we noticed that church activities were under pressure. The parish priest and other priests invited me to go to Macau, because it could allow me to pursue my vocation. It was like the situation here in Hong Kong before 1997. My parents thought that the church was trustworthy, and it would be good to leave China. Therefore they agreed. In February 1951, I left China, and I went directly to Macau where I entered the seminary.

Q: What about the rest of your family?

My mother, younger sister and younger brother, moved to Hong Kong one by one, at different times. They were allowed to emigrate because we had relatives in Hong Kong. I am almost ten years older than my brother, and seven years older than my sister. So when I entered the Macau minor seminary in 1951 my brother and my sister were still very small. My father did not move to Hong Kong: he died in China in 1952, at the young age of 42.

Q: How about your theological education?

I stayed in Macau 6 years plus few months, at Saint Joseph seminary, where I finished my high school studies. In 1957 I came to the Holy Spirit Seminary in Hong Kong where I studied philosophy and some theology. In 1964 I went to Rome. I continued my theological studies at Pontifical Urbaniana University, and lived in the Collegio Urbano. I was ordained a priest in January 1966, by Pope Paul VI. It was one month after the closing ceremony of Vatican II. I obtained both licentiate and doctorate in dogmatic theology.

Q: Where are your family members now?

My younger brother lives now in Canada. He is almost retired. He is a driving instructor. My sister-in-law works for the government. They have three daughters, one of whom is already married.

My sister, my brother-in-law and my mother are here in Hong Kong. All of them are retired. My mother is 90 years old. She stays at the Home for the Aged run by the Little Sisters of the Poor here in Aberdeen.

Q: How is your mother?

She is all right under the good care of the Sisters. But she is almost blind, due to macular degeneration. She cannot walk. She has been sitting on a wheelchair for a long time. For this reason her health is deteriorating. She also suffers from a mild level of dementia. Sometimes she is clear, sometime confused. However, I think she understands that I have been appointed the Bishop of Hong Kong.

Q: What about your previous services in the diocese?

Since I returned to Hong Kong, I have lived in the seminary all the time. This has been my only residence. I have been teaching theology, and later Chinese philosophy also. I was the Dean of Studies in the 1970s. In 1979 I was one of those invited to initiate the Holy Spirit Study Centre (HSSC). I asked to take a half-year sabbatical to update myself before the start of the HSSC. I traveled to the States and elsewhere for six months. Then I returned to Hong Kong and took up my new assignment. I was not alone; others collaborate with me. I have always thought that it is very important to work with others and to find the right direction together.

Q: Was it your suggestion to found the Holy Spirit Study Centre?

No, it was a diocesan decision. China was opening, and everybody understood that Hong Kong should do something for the Church in China. Before 1979 we hardly had information about the Church in China. But after the opening, people started to travel across the border. They brought back some news. People inside asked for help. It was necessary to do something to meet those needs. In the Council of Priests, we agreed that a structure should be established to express concern for the Church in China. I presided over the meeting, but I did not know that later I would be chosen for the job.

Q: Why did Bishop Wu chose you as main responsible for the HSSC?

I do not know why Bishop John B. Wu chose me for this job. He did not tell me. Maybe he considered that I was raised in China; that I studied Chinese philosophy at CUHK. I received a M. Phil. (Master's in Philosophy) in the 1970s. In those years I was invited by Concilium, the theological review, to collaborate with them, and I took part to some international meetings. I was also occasionally invited to give talks outside of Hong Kong. In the diocese, I was the Dean of Theology, chairperson of Council of Priests, and chairperson of the Ecumenical Commission. I also was chairperson of the Association of Diocesan Chinese Priests. So I was quite active in the diocese. Sometime, I also did some writings for Cardinal Wu. Maybe these were the reasons why Bishop Wu chose me, but I cannot say with certainty. Many people from abroad went to pay a visit to Bishop Wu, and they asked what Hong Kong was doing about China. I remember with fondness that he was always very proud to introduce me to those people, saying: "Fr. Tong is now taking care of these things."

Q: The Bishop's call was a turning point in your life, wasn't it?

Yes, you are right. This appointment was a turning point for me, because I had to travel and to participate in more international meetings. I started to be known by many people around the world who were interested in China. Many people would contact us at the HSSC before visiting China. Therefore we had to learn how to articulate our ideas, let them know what we think... And then we had to keep checking whether what we thought was right or not. So, step by step, we built up our knowledge and experience. This has been a great gift for us. It was God's providence.

Q: Do you remember any important moments in the life of the Centre?

There were many important moments in the life of the Centre, and important visits, such as the Secretary of State Card. Agostino Casaroli and the present Holy Father, then Card. Joseph Ratzinger. Many bishops and well-known personalities from all around the world came to visit us. At the beginning we were quite naïve and lacking in experience. We needed some time to built knowledge and experience.

Q: How would you describe yourself, your personality?

I think I am a mild person. I follow the Chinese saying, known also in Latin: *In medio stat virtus* (virtue is in the middle). I think it is important to be a man of communication and dialogue. Somebody once gave me as a gift a replica of a painting originally from Russia. I particularly like that painting: it is about the Annunciation. The angel brought a message to Mary, and she answered "yes" to God through the angel. Then she brought Jesus to the whole world. We have to follow in the footsteps of the Angel and of Mary in being persons of communication. When I talk about communication, I do not mean technique, but human communication. I find that giving and receiving are very important. I believe I am a simple and

ordinary person. If just possible, I would like to do something good for others, as Ps. 23:6 says, "Ah, how goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life."
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