

## A Unique Situation: The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong Twenty Years after the City's Handover

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Even without considering the political aspects of the two decades since the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Great Britain to China on July 1, 1997, the effect on Hong Kong's Catholic Church has been quite unique, and no other local church in the world has experienced anything like it.

The Hong Kong Church almost experienced the retirement of two Cardinals. Cardinal Zen retired as the Bishop of Hong Kong in 2009, after repeated applications to the Holy See. His successor was Bishop of the diocese, Cardinal Tong, who was not too much younger than Cardinal Zen. Both of them had been consecrated bishops together in 1996 as part of the strategy of preparation for a smooth transition of Hong Kong's sovereignty in 1997.

Following the planned retirement of Cardinal Tong as Ordinary of the diocese in August 2017, the transition period is substantially over. The Hong Kong Diocese should enter a new phase following the succession of Coadjutor Bishop Michael Yeung as Ordinary Bishop of the diocese.

Unexpectedly for the majority of Catholics in Hong Kong, the number of Catholic believers in Hong Kong has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. In 1996, the number of Chinese Catholics was 242,000, while the number of foreign Catholics stood at 120,000. In 2016, the figures were 389,000 Chinese Catholics and 202,000 foreign Catholics.

Adult baptisms in 1996 were only 2,100, and the total number for the year was 4,400. Twenty years later, in 2016, adult baptisms numbered 3,500, and the total number for the year was 6,600.

No effect caused by the political change was noticed. An atheistic central government would never recognize the Catholic Church's growth in a positive way anyway.

### **Catholic Versus Catholic in the Chief Executive Elections**

In the 2017 Chief Executive Election two out of the three candidates were Catholics, namely Mr. John Tsang and Ms. Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor.

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The result was that Carrie Lam got 777 votes to Tsang's 350. Thus Lam will become head of the government on July 1, 2017. The two together garnered more than 98 percent of the votes.

It was not the first time that two Catholics vied for this important political position. In 2005, two Catholics, Mr. Donald Tsang and Mr. Leung Kar-kit, competed for the job.

It is a pity that none of them could generate a route-map for Hong Kong to achieve a fully democratic political system. In 2005, the number of electors was only 800, while in 2017, the number of electors was 1,200.

## The Church Faces Seven Huge Challenges

Political challenges seem only to represent part of the problem for the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, both in the past and in the future. The Church is facing many huge problems.

1. The shortage of local vocations. Hong Kong has never experienced any sizable harvest of local vocations ever since the diocese was established. But the current situation is far worse than at any period in the past, as the Catholic population keeps increasing. Strangely enough, we do not really lack vocations, but candidates tend to think about it for a long period of time. Some seminarians joined the seminary after 20 years of reflection. At the end of 2016, the Hong Kong Diocese had only 5 seminarians, together with 3 deacons who will be ordained in the near future. Luckily the religious orders have a quite strong team. 6 men's religious orders together have 17 seminarians and 13 novices. Women's religious orders have 15 novices and 9 candidates.

Luckily the queue to become permanent deacons is quite long. Though they are very helpful both at the diocesan level and the parish level, their participation cannot be treated as a replacement for the service of the priesthood. The diocese is fighting an uphill battle to recruit more young priests.

2. The polarization of society places a great burden of reconciliation on the Church. Church people generally support the democratic movements but some in rather radical ways. Even before the Umbrella Movement, there existed within the Church different blocs of people concerned with social issues and social action. After the Umbrella Movement 2014, polarization seems to have gone to extremes. No doubt most people sympathized with the students and their activities, but whether the Church should get involved in this kind of activity with a high profile is another question. Some believed that the Church has been going too far, but others blamed the Church for not being active enough. In the long run this polarization will cause great problems for the Church.
3. Secularization of Catholic Schools. Not many school principals and headmasters are religious. Twenty years ago, in the academic year of 1996–1997, within the 170

Catholic schools (not including the Caritas professional schools and kindergartens) run by the Diocese and different religious congregations, there were 61 religious working as principals or headmasters. In the academic year of 2016–2017, within the same number of Catholic schools, there are only 12 religious working as principals or headmasters. In Hong Kong Island there are only 4. In Kowloon there are 7, and in the New Territories there is only one.

Generally speaking, the lay people heading the schools are less concerned with religious activities but are more devoted to studies and curricula. Some schools even cancelled the subject of biblical study or religious knowledge from their curriculum, not because of political reasons but just as a pragmatic consideration of the results of the open examinations.

4. The pro-homosexual campaign challenging family values. The Diocese adopts an open attitude towards the homosexual movement and is always ready to have open dialogue with them. But regarding family values, the Diocese, together with most Catholics, finds it necessary to state openly that the Church affirms marriage between one man and one woman, not with someone of the same sex. Cardinal John Tong sent an open congratulatory letter to Ms Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor two days after her victory in the Chief Executive Election. In his letter Cardinal Tong requested the Chief Executive-elect, “Our Diocese hopes that the new SAR Government, as has been the case in the past, will continue to protect the local people’s freedom of religious belief, freedom of expression and a pluralism in running schools, as well as to respect the Church’s marriage and family values.” It reflects that challenges to family values are a top priority among diocesan concerns on social issues.
5. The rocketing price of real estate in Hong Kong makes it difficult for the Diocese to develop new church communities. Even though in the new townships there is a need to build new churches for new communities, the price of land causes a dilemma for the Diocese. It is different from the times of the 1960s and 1970s, when the Diocese could build social service centres and make use of the community hall of such centres for religious activities. Even since pre-1997 the Diocese sensed that the old model was not suitable for future new situations, and it was necessary to purchase real estate for building churches. In 1990 and the early 21st Century, the churches at Ching Yi, Tian Shui Wai, Cheng Kwan O were built on purchased land. But nowadays it is more and more difficult to find a place, and to afford the purchase price is even more difficult.
6. A Catholic University at the wrong time. Basically Hong Kong is no longer lacking in institutes that give a university degree. And the population decline already caused a hard time for the non-subsidized institutes. In the first decade of the 21st century the Jesuit Fathers had an ambition to establish a brand new liberal arts university in Hong Kong. Fr. Steven Chow SJ was appointed by the General Chapter of the Jesuits to head the establishment work. They even planned to assign an American Jesuit

scholar to be the first Chancellor of this institute in the future. After 6 years of difficult bargaining with all stock holders, the Jesuits declared, on May 5, 2015, that the plan was totally in vain.

On the other hand, the Caritas Higher Institute under Caritas Hong Kong has been trying its best to seek the promotion of its vocational training institute to the level of a private university. The former president of Caritas Hong Kong, Bishop Michael Yeung, now Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong, even suggested naming it St. Francis University after Pope Francis. Unfortunately this new institute was designed as a technical and professional training academy, not a liberal arts university. With the decreasing number of young people, recruiting students has become more and more difficult for such private and self-funded tertiary institutes. Since 2014, most private institutes cannot get enough students. Some institutes just got 20 percent new students compared to their capacity. It is quite challenging for the future St. Francis University to survive these hard times.

7. Political challenge emerging slowly and silently. Ms Carrie Lam mentioned in her manifesto for the 2017 Chief Executive Election the establishment of a sort of religious bureau in Hong Kong. The suggestion caused great alarm and strong opposition from Hong Kong Catholics. On March 3 the Hong Kong Diocese issued an open statement “expressing the diocese’s resolute opposition to the possible ‘setting up of a Religious Affairs Unit’ or similar institutions in Hong Kong.”

A couple of days after the open letter, Carrie Lam openly announced that she withdrew the proposed policy. But the hearts of Catholics in Hong Kong are not put at ease by such a simple gesture. They still keep a close watch on the new Chief Executive. Nobody can guarantee that similar tactics will not be produced again in the future.

In general, the Church is still very active. The two Cardinals, one is 85 and the other about 78, are still very busy in different ways, far more busy than most people of the same age. Most priests and religious sisters are holding more than one full time job. Lay Catholics are working hard during their daily work but are working even harder after office hours for their parishes. Quite a number of them seek an early retirement so that they can participate fully in Church life. This is a busy Church rooted in a very busy city.

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Note: All church data come from *Hong Kong Catholic Church Directory* 1997 and 2017. All non-church data come from the media of the date mentioned in the paragraphs.