New Challenges in Hong Kong SAR

The economic crisis that followed immediately after the return of Hong Kong to China in 1997 was the first serious challenge to confront the new Special Administrative Region. It brought many families and small businesses to their knees. Unemployment rose along with related social hardships resulting in numerous suicides. The crisis reached its peak in the spring of 2003 when, due to the SARS epidemic, Hong Kong was cut off from the rest of the world and feared for its survival.

People power

The summer of 2003, however, witnessed an even more significant event: almost a million citizens marched against plans by the Hong Kong government to introduce a national security law, known as Article 23. A few days before the march, Hong Kong had been declared officially SARS free. The protest march turned out to be a rebirth of sorts; a collective awakening from a nightmare caused by a terrible transmissible disease and bad politics.

An unprecedented political shakeup ensued on the heels of the march, which awoke the generally politically apathetic Hong Kong population. The Secretary for Security, Regina Ip, who was responsible for proposing Article 23 resigned, as did the unpopular Finance



Fr. Pietro Paolo Dossi greets the faithful after Mass at Star of the Sea Church in Chai Wan.

Secretary, Anthony Leung, who was implicated in a scandal.

On September 5, the Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa announced the total withdrawal of Article 23. A year and half later, Tung himself was forced to step down. Thus, 'People's power', a concept previously unknown in Hong Kong, won a victory that was unexpected, sensational and, up to now, unrepeated.

A city with two faces

Contemporary Hong Kong appears to be a 'two-faced' city. On one hand, it is free, wealthy, efficient, international and resource rich. It is a city that can count on many groups, associations



Fr. Francesco Conte at St. Francis Parish in Ma On Shan.

and political parties for its political and ethical progress. Alone in the world, it is a city in which the June 4, 1989 massacre in Tiananmen Square is commemorated every year without fail.

But Hong Kong also has a dark side. Even though it claims to be free, it is not a democracy but rather an oligarchy governed by a select group of political and financial leaders with virulent capitalist attitudes. The oligarchy is prospering thanks to its alliance with the Chinese central government. This often invisible power is quite real, effective and capable of stalling any political and social reforms requested by the population of Hong Kong. These leaders dutifully follow the unwritten law: "Do everything that Beijing wants." Added to the mix are the problems of severe pollution, widespread mental unease and economic hardship.



Presently Hong Kong is governed by Chief Executive Donald Tsang, a capable official who gained valuable experience in the civil service during British colonial rule. As Chief Financial Secretary he helped to make the civil service more efficient and improve the economy. Tsang is a devout Catholic who attends Mass daily at St. Joseph's Church in Central. The Catholic community has an instinctive sympathy for him, although his official position requires him to follow the official line. In October 2007, in a rare unfortunate remark, he managed to disappoint many by stating that introducing democracy in Hong Kong might lead to social disorder similar to that created by the Cultural Revolution.

Influence of education

Numerous government officials and leaders of the democratic opposition parties are Catholic and mostly well known in the Church community. Besides the already mentioned Donald Tsang and Martin Lee, other examples are the lawyer Alan Leong, a democratic opposition politician and the former Chief Secretary Anson Chan.

The number of cultural, political and social leaders who, regardless of their religious affiliation, were educated in Catholic schools is considerable. The influence of Catholicism goes, therefore, way beyond the contained

number of registered Catholics, who make up only 5 percent of the population.

This is largely the result of the commitment made to education and social services as envisaged by Bishop Timoleone Raimondi and continued by all of Hong Kong's bishops, Chinese and Italian. Today, thanks also to the leadership of Cardinal Joseph Zen, who is known as "the conscience of Hong Kong", the Catholic Church has significantly increased its relevance in the city.

Ecclesial events

Hong Kong's Bishops Zen and John Tong, three priests including Fr. Sergio Ticozzi of PIME, and two laypersons took part in a special conference on Asia during the Synod of Bishops in Rome from April 19 to May 14, 1998. This gave rise to great expectations among the Catholic community because Hong Kong was one of the three cities proposed to the Pope as a possible site for the proclamation of the apostolic exhortation at the conclusion of the synod. Those hopes were dashed because the political authorities would not allow the Pope to visit Hong Kong or Mainland China.

Another momentous occasion for the Church in Hong Kong and China was the October 1, 2000 canonization of 120 Martyrs of China by Pope John Paul II in Saint Peter's Square in Rome. Hong Kong's Catholics celebrated the event with a crowded Mass at the Cathedral. Among those canonized was Fr. Alberico Crescitelli, PIME, originally a member of the Roman Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul, who was martyred in Hanzhong, Shaanxi, on July 21, 1900. The celebration was saddened by the government of China's vehement opposition to the canonization. Cardinal John B. Wu courageously carried on with the arranged





solemn celebrations despite pressure from the Chinese authorities to keep them 'low profile'.

To prepare the Hong Kong Church for the new millennium, Cardinal Wu organized a Hong Kong synod, which was held from March 4, 2000 to December 30, 2001. Eleven PIME priests were among the 200 people involved. Its



Fr. Giorgio Pasini with priests and laity on 2007 Mission Sunday.

final deliberations provided new guidelines for diocesan pastoral work for the following decade.

As encouraged by the synod, the year 2005 was declared "Evangelization Year." It began on World Mission Sunday in October 2003 and ended on Easter Sunday, 2005. PIME members were actively involved in the endeavor.

And life goes on...

PIME missionaries continue to serve the diocese with resolve and trust, and remain deeply involved in pastoral work in the parishes, fostering in particular, the catechumenate, catechesis and liturgical life. Today, PIME is well regarded and valued by the bishops and the entire diocese.

PIME missionaries continue the tradition of getting together at PIME House every Monday, enhancing the sense of belonging to the group. Communal life finds other meaningful moments at the annual Regional Assemblies; at the annual week-long retreat and formation courses; at special celebrations marking important events; and at personal anniversaries. With the advent of the Internet, the issuing of the internal Newsletter was discontinued by the end of June 1998, but members are always in touch through email.

In September 1999, Fr. Dino Doimo was elected as the Regional Superior and re-elected four



The PIME community after the election of the new Regional Council on October 8, 2007.

years later. In October 2000, PIME held a special celebration to mark the 150th anniversary of its founding. Under persuasive insistence from Fr. Gabriele Moriguchi, in order to hand down in posterity this important event and to mark the Jubilee Year 2000, the 'Glorious Cross' was erected and blessed in the garden of the Regional House.

In October 2007, Fr. Franco Cumbo was elected as the Regional Superior. High on his agenda is the planning of suitable initiatives to mark the 150th anniversary of the arrival of Fr. Paolo Reina and the first PIME missionaries in Hong Kong, which occurs on April 10, 2008.

