News



In this image taken from video footage run by TVB, Hong Kong Bishop Stephen Chow, center, takes part in mass at the Wangfujing Church in Beijing, Friday, April 21, 2023. Hong Kong's Roman Catholic bishop on April 21 said he had invited a leader of the Communist Party-controlled group for Catholics in mainland China to visit his city, in a high-profile gesture aimed at improving strained Vatican relations with Beijing. (TVB via AP)

Kanis Leung

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Associated Press

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Hong Kong — April 21, 2023

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Hong Kong’s Roman Catholic bishop on April 21 said he has invited the state-appointed archbishop of Beijing to visit his city, a symbolic gesture that experts said could strengthen the fragile relationship between China and the Vatican.

Bishop Stephen Chow said Joseph Li, who is the leader of the mainland's Communist Party-sponsored version of the Catholic church, appeared to be "quite positive" about the invitation. He gave no indication when Li might visit.

Chow announced the invitation on the last day of a five-day trip to Beijing, the first by a bishop of Hong Kong in nearly three decades. Chow’s trip followed a year of strained relations in which Beijing unilaterally appointed two church leaders and Hong Kong arrested a cardinal.

Hong Kong's diocese "is affiliated with the Vatican, so implicitly, it can be said that this strengthens Vatican-Sino ties," said Lo Lung-kwong, an honorary senior research fellow at the Divinity School of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

Last month, Chow said his trip to Beijing at the invitation of Li underscored the mission of the Hong Kong diocese as a bridge church.

Beijing and the Vatican severed diplomatic ties in 1951 following the Communist Party's rise to power and the expulsion of foreign priests. Since the break in ties, Catholics in China have been divided between those who belong to an official, state-sanctioned church and those in an underground church loyal to the pope. The Vatican recognizes members of both as Catholics but claims the exclusive right to choose bishops.

In 2018, the two sides announced that they had reached a private accord which regularized the status of several Chinese-appointed bishops and paved the way for future nominations.

The exchange of visits adds substance to the high-level ties created by the agreement, said Professor Kung Lap-yan of the divinity school at Chinese University.

"When (a relationship) is fragile, then it must need some building works in the lower level," he said.

The agreement on Catholic bishops has been renewed twice, most recently in October for two more years. But in November, a feud broke out over the installation of an auxiliary bishop in Jiangxi province, which the Vatican does not recognize as a diocese. Two weeks ago Vatican News, the news portal of the Holy See, tersely reported that China had unilaterally appointed a new bishop of Shanghai.

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The agreement has been harshly criticized by Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen, who was detained in May on suspicion of colluding with foreign forces under a Beijing-imposed national security law that jailed or silenced many activists. He was released on bail and has yet to be formally charged, but he and five others were fined in a separate case in November for failing to register a now-defunct fund set up to help arrested protesters.

When Chow led a prayer on April 21, he said people should both "love the country and love the church," Hong Kong public broadcaster RTHK reported. He later told reporters that everyone should learn how to do these two things at the same time.

"If someone lives in Hong Kong and China, then they should love their country," he said.

Estimates of the total number of Chinese Catholics run between 6 million and 12 million, worshiping in both the recognized Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the underground church.

Kung said the visits show that the church in Hong Kong is growing closer to the mainland.

"The bilateral invitations show that the concept of 'China and Hong Kong is a close family' ... has been extended to ... religion," he said.

These changes also raise questions about the fate of Chinese Catholics who are not part of the Catholic Patriotic Association, he added, and might call into question the Vatican’s diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. Only 13 governments, including the Vatican, recognize Taiwan instead of China.

But Professor Tobias Brandner from the divinity school said he would not read too much into Chow’s invitation, noting that it was a normal exchange and that the Hong Kong church is a bridge builder.

He said the development would not be seen as a sign of improving ties, adding it was "offensive" that China had appointed a bishop against the spirit of the 2018 deal shortly before Chow's visit.

Chow visited churches and the tomb of Matteo Ricci, one of the first Jesuits to live in China, who died in Beijing in 1610.