NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Synod Notebook: A plea for the church in China

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 18, 2012 NCR Today
Synod of Bishops 2012

During a synod of bishops in which there's been plenty of talk about Islam, there was a reminder today that the threats to religious freedom Catholics face today are hardly limited to Muslim-dominated regions.

Speaking to reporters at the midway point of the Oct. 7-28 synod on the "New Evangelization," Cardinal John Tong Hon of Hong Kong described as "pitiful" policies of the Chinese government which forbid bishops from the mainland from attending synods, and said he looks forward to a day when "the church in China will enjoy the full freedom of religious liberty."

Tong, 73, was named to Hong Kong in 2009 and made a cardinal in 2012. He's generally known as softer and less pugnacious than his predecessor, Cardinal Joseph Zen, but today he pulled few punches in describing the ways in which China's officially Marxist and atheist government seeks to hem in the Catholic church.

Tong said that both in 1998 and in 2005, for synods on Asia and on the Eucharist, "legitimate" bishops in China, meaning those officially recognized by the Vatican, were denied permission to attend synods. On other occasions, he said, they were offered permission to go, but only on the condition that they travelled with "illegitimate" bishops, meaning prelates ordained in defiance of the pope.

That, Tong said, is something the church in China "cannot accept."

He told reporters that if the Chinese government were to be more "open" to the church, "it would enhance China's reputation in the whole world."

"China is open for business, but it still restricts religious activity," Tong said.

Tong called for "dialogue between Beijing and the Holy See" to address the ability of the church to operate freely in the country.

Tong's comments were elicited by a question from a reporter about a letter sent to the synod by Bishop Luke Li Jing Feng, which was read aloud on Oct. 16. In it, the 90-year-old Chinese prelate wrote, "In churches outside of China, tepidness, unfaithfulness and secularism of the faithful have infected clergymen. In the Chinese church, lay people are more pious than the clergy."

"I believe that our faith as Chinese Christians can console the pope, Feng wrote.

As Tong addressed reporters today, Catholics in China were continuing to press for information on the whereabouts of Bishop James Su Zhimin, among the country's "underground" prelates who have refused to register with the Chinese government. He was arrested on Oct. 8, 1997, and has not been seen since, after spending 26 years in prison or forced labor camps.

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Speaking of Tong, he may be an early candidate for "nicest guy" at the 2012 synod. For one thing, he comes off as a quiet, beaming, humble figure, utterly free of the clerical pretense that some stereotypically associate with Catholic prelates.

For another, he seemed to suggest that the Synod of Bishops is open to outside critique.

During today's Vatican press conference, a question was raised about internal defects in the church. An Italian journalist said to the bishops, 'You've ticked off a lot of external reasons why people might have walked away, but what about internal problems?'

After a couple of other bishops spoke, Tong added a somewhat unexpected note.

"We're at the halfway point" of the synod, he said. "Our friends on the outside, and all those concerned, can still raise their voice, and we can use the rest of our time together to explore those issues."

It was the first time any bishop attending the synod openly invited people to push the bishops, or, for that matter, offered any indication they would pay attention.

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Another participant in today's press conference was Cardinal Lauent Monsengwo of the Democratic Republic of Congo, one of five bishops set to travel to Syria next week on an extraordinary peace mission on behalf of the synod. (Two Vatican officials round out the delegation.)

I asked Monsengwo, first of all, if he could tell us anything about their program, and in particular if the bishops were going to meet President Bashar Assad. He replied that the bishops haven't been told anything about their schedule, and that they'll be briefed shortly before they leave.

A colleague pointed out that a French newspaper has already written that the dates of the trip will be Oct. 22-28, and asked if someone could comment on that. No one did, though most observers expect a much shorter trip, perhaps no more than one or two days.

I also asked Monsengwo to comment on whatever hopes he has for the results of the delegation to Syria.

"In order to show his closeness to all those suffering in Syria," Monsengow said, "the pope decided to send a delegation." The idea, he said, is to show that the pope and "all the synod fathers" share the suffering of the Syrian people.

Monsengwo also said that the delegation will bring a financial offering from both the pope and the synod to assist relief efforts amidst the ongoing violence.

"It's a Christian gesture," he said. "We bring our sympathy, our commitment, to the people of Syria, and we hope they will appreciate our efforts."

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During a synod, the best way to detect who's made an impression often is by how often other bishops cite their comments. By that standard, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York was the clear winner in today's press conference, despite the fact he wasn't even there ? Dolan was en route to the States, in order to host tonight's Al

Smith Dinner.

Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine actually referred to Dolan twice. He referred once to Dolan's observation in the synod that the first word in the gospel is "come" while the last is "go," and then later to Dolan's argument that the sacrament of confession is an "instrument of evangelization."

Tong of Hong Kong quoted Dolan as saying that the sequence of evangelization is that first the gospel enter into one's own heart, and then one can "go out and preach."

Archbishop Jose Gomez of Los Angeles also referred indirectly to Dolan, noting that in the Archdiocese of New York there's a conscious effort to promote the sacrament of reconciliation.

Those references add up to a seemingly inescapable point: Among Catholic bishops around the world these days, Dolan is considered a big wheel.

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Carol Glatz of the Catholic News Service, an astute observer of matters Catholic both in the United States and in Rome, asked Gomez to comment on how Hispanic Catholics in America might help to energize the church.

"It's already happening," Gomez said.

He argued that Latino/a Catholics in America are distinguished by a "strong faith," a network of highly active Catholic groups, and an ability "to make connections between the faith and the culture."

"They're revitalizing parishes all over the country," Gomez said, calling the growing presence of Hispanics in American Catholicism "a blessing."

At the same time, Gomez said, these Hispanic Catholics "need to go deeper in their understanding of the teachings of the faith," calling catechesis and faith formation a "priority" for Latino Catholics.

Source URL (retrieved on *05/05/2015 - 07:04*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/synod-notebook-plea-church-china