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In this photo taken from video and released on Nov. 17, 2023 by Hong Kong Catholic Diocese, Beijing Bishop Joseph Li Shan, at left, and Hong Kong Bishop and Cardinal Stephen Chow during a ceremony at Hong Kong's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Hong Kong's newly appointed Roman Catholic cardinal said he dreamed of bishops and faithfuls from different parts of greater China praying together one day during a historic visit by the head of the Chinese Catholic church, a publication affiliated with the city's diocese reported Nov. 17. (AP/Hong Kong Catholic Diocese)

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Hong Kong — November 17, 2023

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Hong Kong's newly appointed Roman Catholic cardinal said he dreamed of bishops and faithfuls from different parts of greater China praying together one day during a historic visit by the head of the Chinese Catholic church, a publication affiliated with the city's diocese reported Nov. 17.

Joseph Li, who was installed by China's state-controlled Catholic church as an archbishop, arrived in Hong Kong on Monday at the invitation of cardinal Stephen Chow, marking the first-ever official visit by a Beijing bishop to the city.

His five-day tour was a reciprocal visit following Chow's landmark trip to Beijing in April — the first visit to the Chinese capital by the city's bishop in nearly three decades. Experts said Chow's invitation was a symbolic gesture that could strengthen the fragile relationship between China and the Vatican.

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.

Li and Chow took part in a Mass with Hong Kong's cardinal John Tong and other church officials from mainland China on Nov. 15, the Kung Kao Po newspaper said.

"One of my dreams ... is to have bishops, fathers and faithfuls from four cross-strait societies to pray together," Chow said, referring to Hong Kong, Macao, mainland China and Taiwan.

In a seminar on Nov. 15, Chow affirmed the Hong Kong church's role as a "bridge church," the report added.

The Vatican and China signed an accord in 2018 over the thorny issue of bishop nominations, but Beijing has violated it. Most recently, Pope Francis was forced to

accept the unilateral appointment of a new bishop of Shanghai. The agreement has been harshly criticized by Hong Kong cardinal Joseph Zen.

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Francis in September insisted that the Vatican's relations with China were going well but said work must still be done to show Beijing that the Catholic church isn't beholden to a foreign power.

The installation of Li in 2007, however, was well-regarded by the Vatican and church officials at the time said it was done with its approval.

During his trip to Hong Kong, Li joined an evening prayer service with Chow, exchanged gifts with the cardinal and visited various religious sites, including the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception and the Holy Spirit Seminary, Kung Kao Po said.

Li told the publication that he learned about the development of the Hong Kong diocese and pledged to make the China church better. "This opportunity allows us to learn a lot of things," he said.

Lo Lung-kwong, an honorary senior research fellow at the Divinity School of Chung Chi College at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, said the two trips involving Li and Chow this year helped strengthen the relationship between China and the Vatican.

Lo said there are restrictions for the highest-level officials to have "concrete exchanges," pointing out that Francis and Chinese President Xi Jinping will not visit each other's home turf.

"Concrete things must be built upon the grassroots level. There's no other choice and there's just one place — Hong Kong," he said.