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China

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Catholic News Service has reported that two U.S. cardinals and several bishops are among a group of religious leaders who have asked Clinton to urge China to grant religious liberty to its citizens.

"The right to free expression of religion in China is still being severely restricted, and those Chinese who have attempted to express their religious beliefs, especially in the unregistered church, often endure various forms of persecution," said a letter signed by the religious leaders, including Cardinals John J. O'Connor of New York and Anthony J. Bevilacqua of Philadelphia.

The letter was to be delivered June 10 to Clinton.

The letter's sentiments echo those of Ho and her Catholic husband whom she married while imprisoned. The two were released by Chinese authorities in 1979 and allowed to emigrate to Hong Kong.

Fearing communist rule of Hong Kong — which began last year after Great Britain returned the territory to China — Ho and her spouse left Hong Kong in the late 1980s, and have become U.S. citizens. They live in Stamford, Conn.

She added that the estimated 8 million underground Catholics in China are still suffering today for their faith, facing persecution from a government that is increasingly gaining favor with the United States. Yet, even as the West opens to China and China opens to the West, Ho said she wants those who enjoy religious freedom to remember those who don't.

"The real heroes are in China who are still suffering for the faith," she said.

Plea to the president

Trinitarian Father Stan DeBoe, a spokesman for the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, which authored the letter given to President Clinton, said the group has been promised time with Clinton before he leaves June 24 for China.

The letter asks Clinton to urge that Chinese leaders:

- Release all religious prisoners of conscience and guarantee their safety and freedom to practice their faith without restrictions.
- Ratify all international covenants guaranteeing the freedom of religious belief and expression.
- Rescind any decrees that limit the free functioning of religion, including those that limit worship, education and charitable activity.



Greg Francis/Staff photographer
Catherine Ho, who spoke at St. Thomas the Apostle Church's parish hall, Irondequoit, June 5, was imprisoned in Chinese labor camps from 1958 to 1979 for belonging to the Legion of Mary.

• Engage in more open dialogue on the issue of religious freedom.

• Open dialogue with the Dalai Lama, Tibet's exiled leader, in regard to Tibet's future. Tibet is currently occupied by Chinese troops.

• Invite international human rights organizations to visit China and guarantee access to prisons and to meetings with the detained Panchen Lama. The Panchen Lama is considered second in importance to the Dalai Lama in Tibetan Buddhism, and plays a major role in picking the Dalai Lama's successor.

Among the letter's signers are representatives of Orthodox, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim and Tibetan organizations.

U.S. religious leaders have used the religious liberties issue in the past in an effort to deny Most Favored Nation trading status with China. But China currently enjoys MFN status, which guarantees low tariffs on goods imported from China.

Meanwhile, the Clinton administration has said that it would seek greater normalization of trade relations with China on the upcoming trip.

To kill a church?

Catholic Chinese critics of their homeland's current rulers claim that its government is bent on destroying the underground Catholic Church forever.

One such critic is Joseph Kung, whose uncle, Cardinal Ignatius Kung Pin-Mei,

was Bishop of Shanghai when he was arrested Sept. 8, 1955 — the same day Catherine Ho was first jailed for her faith.

The cardinal eventually spent 30 years in prison before he was allowed to come to the United States in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, his nephew, who left China in 1949, founded the Cardinal Kung Foundation in Stamford, Conn., to publicize the plight of the underground Catholic Church.

"There is freedom of religion in China only if you do whatever you are told in China," said Kung during a phone interview from his Stamford office.

Kung pointed to a document on his foundation's Web site (www.cardinalkung-foundation.org) as proof of his contentions. Titled "The Procedures Legally to Implement the Eradication of Illegal Activities/Operations of the Underground Catholic Church," Kung claimed he obtained the document from a source in China whom he declined to identify.

Reportedly written in 1996, the document outlines an apparent plan to suppress Catholic activity in China not approved by the government. Suggested measures include the elimination of underground seminaries, the break-up of religious assemblies, and various types of "re-education" and indoctrination designed to turn people against the church and join the Patriotic Association, which currently claims 3.4 million members.

"Eradicating the illegal activities of the underground Catholic Church is a decisive and critical political work," the document says.

The *Courier* contacted the Chinese embassy in Washington for a response to Kung's claim that the document was authentic, but was unable to get a response.

Kung called on U.S. Catholics and citizens to ask their government to view its relation to China in the light of human rights issues. He noted, for example, that he hopes citizens will support a bill that has already passed the U.S. House of Representatives called "The Free the Clergy Act" (HR 967). The bill bans Chinese officials who have repressed religious worship or who work with the government-approved church from entering the United States.

Voices for reconciliation

Catholics in China are polarized into camps of official and underground churches. But in the face of government restrictions some bishops from both sides are managing to cooperate, a Hong Kong bishop has said.

According to Catholic News Service, Auxiliary Bishop John Tong Hon of Hong Kong told the Synod of Bishops for Asia

April 22 that despite persecution, the number of Chinese Catholics has grown significantly in recent decades. What the church needs is reconciliation, he said.

Bishop Tong related a story about two bishops — Bishop A who was recognized by the government and Bishop B from the underground church — who found a way to outmaneuver authorities and give a small witness of teamwork.

Last year, before the annual retreat for all the priests in his diocese, authorities told the government-approved bishop he could not allow the underground bishop to preach the retreat.

"But where there is a will there is a way. Bishop A preached a short homily, just a few sentences, then asked: 'Are there any questions?' Bishop B stood up and asked a long string of questions," he said.

"After a minute, everyone realized if they merely changed those questions to statements, they could hear a well-prepared sermon by Bishop B," he said. Government officials were unhappy about it but could do nothing.

Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun of Hong Kong, who taught in Chinese government-approved seminaries from 1989 to 1996, told the synod April 25 that the division between the patriotic association and the underground church was not created by the Catholics; "it was caused by external pressure."

"Facing the will of the government to isolate Catholics from the rest of the church and from the pope, a section of the community stood firm and uncompromised — ready to be crushed mercilessly — while another section chose the way of compromise. That compromise didn't spare them suffering, either," he said.

Most bishops and priests in the patriotic association are dedicated ministers, respected by the faithful and harassed by the government, Bishop Zen said.

"It is unfair to disqualify them indiscriminately," he said. "The Holy Father magnanimously has legitimized a good number of those bishops," by secretly giving them official letters of appointment.

At the same time, Bishop Zen said, Catholics outside the mainland must "proclaim that the primacy of the successor of St. Peter is an integral part of our Catholic faith. Don't say that this ... is a secondary truth: Our brothers and sisters are giving their life for that."

"Never pretend that everything is all right and normal when it is not so," he told the synod. "Only truthfulness earns us respect, even from our persecutors, and telling them the truth is the best act of charity we can do them."

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