

Cardinal Tong Urges Prayers for China-Vatican Relations

XUAN LOC, Vietnam – Cardinal John Tong Hon of Hong Kong has urged fellow delegates at the 10th Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) to support and pray for the successful resolution of strained relations between the Holy See and the government of mainland China through dialogue.

"May I ask for your prayers to bring us help to resolve the difficulties encountered in China-Vatican relations?" Cardinal Tong asked during his homily at a Mass on Dec. 13, the third full day of the assembly.

The cardinal remarked that it is "a blessing for the FABC and for the universal Church" to hold an "important" assembly of the regional Church body in Vietnam. "This is a breakthrough in relations, and the result of much promising dialogue between the Church in Vietnam and the Vatican, and between the Vietnamese government and the Holy See," he said.

This Plenary Assembly is the first such FABC event to be held in a communist country.

"I hope one day that the FABC assembly can take place in mainland China," Cardinal Tong added. But "before reaching this goal," he noted, the issue of the appointment of bishops in China must first be resolved because some bishops in China are still illegitimate. Thus a dialogue between China and the Holy See is urgently required."

The recent ordination of bishops without Vatican approval and the assignment of Holy See-recognized bishops to government posts have led to deteriorating China-Vatican relations.

More than 100 cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, nuns and lay Church workers from 22 Asian countries are taking part in the assembly at Xuan Loc Pastoral Centre, part of a large compound of the Catholic diocese of Xuan Loc in Dong Nai Province, east of Ho Chi Minh City. With help from invited experts and representatives of funding agencies and other organizations, they are discussing issues and concerns centered on the theme "FABC at Forty Years: Responding to the Challenges of Asia."

Since the assembly opened, the massive Xuan Loc complex that accommodates the local bishop, more than 300 seminarians, their college, a theologate and various offices has served as a stage for marching bands, cultural dances, local music and dress, as well as native cuisine. On the assembly's first full day, government officials and representatives of various religious groups in Vietnam joined a ceremony to welcome the Asian Church leaders. Local Catholics have also taken part in some daily Masses.

"The prosperity in the Church and society in Vietnam," Cardinal Tong pointed out, brought to mind the Church in China. "Since the 1970s, I have visited Catholics in China over a hundred times. The last time was this past March, after I became a cardinal. I see similarities between the Church in Vietnam and that of China. Catholics in both countries are fervent and dedicated."

The cardinal noted that the Church in Hong Kong has been conducting dialogue with the poor, with local culture and among religions as advocated by the FABC. He said leaders

of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Confucianism, Protestantism and Catholicism meet regularly to discuss problems in their society. "This leads to the development of mutual respect and understanding among us, contributes to the development of a harmonious society," he said, and it also "has helped become a positive force among citizens."

Nonetheless, Cardinal Tong added, "We cannot permit dialogue with a quasi-religion, namely communism in mainland China. For them, atheism is their faith, their religion." No representative from the Church in mainland China is attending the FABC assembly.

According to the cardinal, some 7 million people now comprise cosmopolitan Hong Kong society and about 7 percent are Catholics. He provided background about the Church's development in Hong Kong since it started 170 years ago, and also elaborated how its evangelization efforts are currently expressed through three kinds of service.

First, he said, the diocese has 51 parishes in which about 1,000 volunteer catechists are helping 300 priests, 500 sisters and 100 religious brothers along with seminarians and lay leaders to minister to local Church members. He also spoke of education as another area of service in Hong Kong – the diocese has 242 Catholic schools. Finally, the diocese also is significantly involved in the broad dimensions of social services, particularly through Caritas Hong Kong. Hong Kong, he added, has the world's largest diocesan Caritas service because it hires more than 5,000 staff.

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