

A good man to lead the flock

BY naming Monsignor Joseph Zeng as the eventual successor to Cardinal John Baptist Wu as the next Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, the Vatican has made an excellent choice.

Like Bishop Wu, Shanghai-born Monsignor Zeng is a man of great learning, deep human sympathy, and outstanding pastoral and administrative gifts.

But Monsignor Zeng, whose appointment as bishop will take effect 3½ years from now, will bring something else to the position: a long association with the mainland. He has spent a considerable amount of time in monasteries across northern and inland China.

While the new bishop will, of course, be more concerned with caring for his own flock than with looking across the border, it is good that he has had experience on the mainland.

There is a general expectation that the Catholic Church hopes to use this appointment to extend its influence in China.

Pope John Paul II has never kept secret his wish to visit China, where the state's Catholic Patriotic Association boasts a flock in excess of three million while more than four million other Catholics worship without official blessing and remain faithful to Rome.

It is clear that religion is far from dead in China.

To repair the economic and social ill-effects of the Cultural Revolution, Beijing has put the class struggle on the back burner. Capitalist techniques are being used in industry. And the reins on religion and the arts have been loosened.

But as Li Shoubo, a prominent Protestant layman in Shanghai, has said: "We say 'no' to foreign missionaries who wish to return. We want our churches to develop as Chinese churches."

The future Bishop Zeng may well have an important role to play in that development process.