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S.C.M.P.

14 May 1984

Appeal for Church freedom

By HALIMA GUTERRES

The Roman Catholic Bishop of Hongkong, the Most Rev John Baptist Wu, has raised the question of religious freedom in post-1997 Hongkong with the leader of the Catholic church in England and Wales, Cardinal George Hume.

In a recent letter, Bishop Wu appealed to Cardinal Hume to use his influence on Catholic members of parliament.

The hope is that the MPs can be persuaded to take up the cudgels and fight for "appropriate safeguards" on religious freedom to be included in the final agreement on Hongkong.

The letter underscores the Catholic Church's unease about its future role in a Hongkong that will come under Chinese sovereignty.

It was sent in the wake of the Good Friday press conference by the Foreign Secretary, Sir Geoffrey Howe, which made clear Britain's intention of withdrawing from Hongkong after the treaty expires.

The official spokesman for the 270,000-strong Catholic Church, Fr Michael Yeung, told the SCM Post: "We are really very concerned about freedom of religion and the rights of Catholics in Hongkong to exercise their worship and beliefs."

"We are also concerned about the right to maintain links with the Pope as well as with fellow Catholics in the rest of the world."

In the past, the church has made it clear that it will not join China's "official" Catholic church which enjoys the blessing of the Chinese Government.

And whatever happens after 1997 it will remain loyal to the Vatican.

The pro-Government Chinese Catholic Church — known as the Patriotic Catholic Association — broke with Rome in the late 1950s and it nominates its own bishops.

Fr Yeung said that although the letter dealt explicitly with the concerns and fears of local Catholics, there was no attempt to seek any special privileges for the church.

And he was confident that concern for the maintenance of freedom of religion was a sentiment shared by other religious groups here.

"We are anxious that Cardinal Hume should be made aware of our very real worries and to see if he can help to influence Catholic MPs," Fr Yeung said.

In the days immediately after Sir Geoffrey's announcement, Chinese officials in Peking had told a visiting group of Urban Councillors and district board members that religious freedom would be maintained after China regains sovereignty.

Churches would be able to maintain their links with their counterparts in the rest of the world.

In particular, the group was told, the Catholic Church would be allowed to retain its links with the Vatican.

Fr Yeung said this was the first time Chinese leaders had singled out the Catholic Church for mention.

But "notwithstanding this and other verbal assurances

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Freedom of Church plea

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there is still deep concern about whether religious freedom can indeed be maintained in the future.

"We want something more concrete to ensure that they are not just empty promises."

He supported the call made by Umelco for the essential elements of the basic law on post-1997 Hongkong to be enshrined in the Sino-British agreement.

This was realistic and a reasonable reflection of widespread concern that despite their pledges the Chinese side may later renege on these promises, Fr Yeung said.

And in the same way, the Catholic Church is hoping that the right to practise religion freely will be embodied in the agreement.

Fr Yeung said the church must also consider the future role of the more than 300 priests working here of whom 268 belong to various religious communities based overseas.

These include the Jesuit

brothers, the Salesian Fathers, the Maryknollers and others.

They play a vital part in the running of the many schools, social welfare bodies and hospitals administered by the Catholic Church in Hongkong.

Fr Yeung said that while he did not know of any religious community wishing to pull out of Hongkong at this stage, the possibility could not be ruled out entirely.

A situation might arise in the future which makes it impossible for clergymen to continue their work here.

In this case the religious clergy might receive orders from their superiors overseas to pull out and this in turn would have a very damaging effect on the services which they now help to run, Fr Yeung said.

Moreover, in the shorter term it is conceivable that many groups will be reluctant to push forward with major development until a clearer picture of the future emerges, he said.