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HONG KONG STANDARD

# 1997: Church concerned

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By Shirley Hui

THE Basic Law should guarantee that the Catholic Church in Hongkong was allowed to maintain its ties with the Pope after 1997, a priest urged yesterday.

Father Peter Barry, a member of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, was speaking at a forum on the relationship between the Hongkong Catholic Church and its Chinese counterpart.

He said the latest draft of the Basic Law — Hongkong's post-1997 constitution which will be promulgated in 1990 — only said the Hongkong church could in future "maintain relations" with religious organisations abroad.

Fr Barry said he thought it would be "safer" if the Basic Law specifically stated that ties with the Pope could be maintained.

"We cannot rule out the possibility that China may say the Vatican is not a religious body but a state and that our ties (with

the Vatican) must be severed," he told the seminar.

Fr Barry said some Catholics were wondering whether after 1997 Hongkong would have to follow the policy of the Chinese church which did not recognise the Pope as its leader.

"Under the provisions of the one country two systems policy, things might be different (in Hongkong and China)...but some people would like an assurance," he said.

Another speaker at yesterday's seminar, Father Anthony Chang, said he was optimistic that the local church would be allowed to maintain links with the Vatican after 1997.

Fr Chang, who is director of the Centre for the Re-search of Faith, said he believed the local church could maintain these ties as long as it did not become "anti-communist".

He said the existing provisions in the Basic Law draft, which stated that local churches may "maintain relations" with religious bodies abroad, were an adequate guarantee.

Fr Barry also expressed concern that religious leaders had little opportunity of expressing their views about the Basic Law.

He said there were only two religious leaders on the Basic Law Drafting Committee — one Buddhist and the other Christian.

Catholics were not represented on the drafting committee although one Catholic priest was on the Basic Law Consultative Committee, he said.

Fr Barry said it appeared the drafting committee did not seek the views of the consultative committee.

He said religious leaders were briefed last month for the first time about the Basic Law provisions regarding post-1997 religious practices.

The provisions presented were already the "final revision", he said.

"I think this is very strange," he said. "How can we give an opinion when we did not get the material? The consultation doesn't seem enough."