

INTERVIEW/FATHER SIRICO

"Jimmy Lai, persecuted by China, abandoned by the Vatican"

WORLD

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"I flew to Hong Kong last January for Jimmy Lai's trial. He was held in a glass panelled dock guarded by three policemen. He saw me and I blessed him with the sign of the cross. It moved him to tears."

Father Sirico, founder of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty is speaking about his friend Jimmy Lai, 76, Hong Kong's most famous prisoner of conscience. **Lai's outspoken criticism** of China's totalitarian rule has cost him more than 1,500 days in solitary confinement in Stanley Prison. Jailed for convictions related to the management of his media firm and his involvement in a vigil to mark the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, Lai is currently serving a five years and nine months sentence.

Contemporarily, Lai is being charged with two counts of "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces" under the China-imposed National Security Act 2020, as well as "conspiracy to publish seditious publications" under a colonial-era sedition law. If found guilty, Lai could spend the rest of his life behind bars. This is the hearing Father Sirico attended to support his "old" friend.

The rags-to-riches maverick millionaire, Jimmy Lai, became Beijing's Public Enemy No. 1 after Hong Kong, a former British colony, was handed back to Chinese rule in 1997 under the "one country, two systems" framework meant to guarantee rights and liberties absent in the mainland. When China started to violate the agreement, Lai set out to defend Hong Kong values and hold Beijing to account through his newspaper, the *Apple Daily*.

The now defunct newspaper founded and funded by Lai in 1995, was named after the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden in the Old Testament. Its rhyming couplet jingle – "An Apple a day, no liars can hold sway", paid off. The newspaper was a success and circulation reached 500,000 at its peak.

It was not long after *Apple Daily* muscled its way into the tight-knit media market that Father Robert Sirico and Jimmy Lai first met, almost 30 years ago. The American Catholic priest and the media-mogul Lai, share a point of common interest: connecting moral theology with a sound understanding of economics. The *Daily Compass* interviewed Father Sirico when he was in Rome last week for a conference organised by the **conference organised by the Acton Institute**.

F. ed a bill to introduce its own version of the controversial National Security Act by expanding Article 23. How will this impact Lai's case?



I don't think it will effect the outcome of Jimmy Lai's trial. But, I think it could pose a threat to his friends, ex-colleagues, family members. The 2024 version of Article 23 with its ill-defined definitions of offences for treason, sedition and state secrets, gives the police rights to detain suspects for up to two weeks without charge and for trials to take place behind closed doors, punishable with life imprisonment. Lai is already behind bars. His biggest problem in my opinion is that he is too famous, too charismatic, too influential, a born leader. People respect him. They know he is an honest man who has given up everything to defend freedom. He could be living a life of luxury abroad if he wanted, instead, he has chosen to live by the values of his faith even at the cost of sacrificing his own freedom. China feels threatened by him.

Did you perceive that sense of "threat" when you attended Lai's hearing?

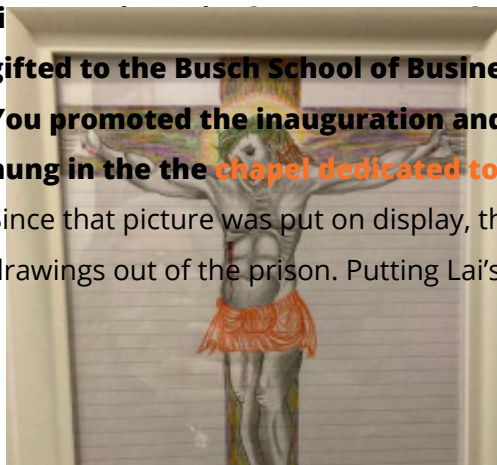
Yes. The security measures employed for the trial were almost frightening. As I approached the court house in Kowloon, there were policemen armed with machine guns every three metres. Then there were squadrons of riot police and vans. This was followed by a group of about 50 paparazzi who photographed attendees. Then there was more security to pass. In fact, I stayed in Hong Kong for the least time possible and was advised to wear clerical dress at all times. China is constantly monitoring its citizens. The government is anxious another wave of revolts could erupt. People are not happy, life was better before China took over Hong Kong and they know it.

Were members of Lai's family in court?

His wife Teresa sat next to me with her youngest son. She was very composed and fingered her rosary throughout the hearing. She is a devout Catholic and lives this situation like a vocation. The family are very close and Lai blew them kisses several times from the dock. Lai's daughter Claire is a lawyer. She is supporting the defence team. The oldest son, Sebastian, lives in Taiwan. He heads the international campaign to free his father, meets legislators, human-rights organisations, and heads of state around the globe. The younger son, Augustine, is a schoolboy. He really misses his dad. Teresa and Jimmy are good parents, the whole family is defined by the Catholic faith and democratic values, but it's hard for everyone.

Ji **when a crucifixion he drew in prison was gifted to the Busch School of Business at the Catholic University of Washington. You promoted the inauguration and said a few words when it was blessed and hung in the chapel dedicated to St Michael. How did that come about?**

Since that picture was put on display, the authorities have decided not to allow anymore drawings out of the prison. Putting Lai's work on display in public buildings gives him



visibility in the media. The Chinese authorities had probably hoped he would become one of the many forgotten prisoners around the world. That particular piece of art work was sent to and donated by Bill McGurn, Jimmy's godfather and senior editorial writer at the Wall Street Journal. The Catholic University of Washington was chosen for its destination because Tim Busch is very supportive of Lai's cause. It represents Lai's commitment to joining economics and the Christian faith, his rejection of a materialist mentality. That picture is almost a metre in size. People have asked why it is flanked by two lines of orange flowers. I'm not sure, but Lai likes flowers, there is a wall of orchids in his home. I keep a smaller one he gave me in my office (*photo on the left*). Mine is on simple lined note paper. They are both drawn with pencil crayons and are colourful despite the subject: Christ on the cross. Last Christmas, he drew a picture of Our Lady for a Christmas card.

Lai is in a maximum security prison kept in solitary confinement. Is he allowed visitors?

Lai receives weekly visits from his wife and children. Sebastian lives in Taipei so he doesn't see his dad. I know Cardinal Zen also goes to visit him. He is a close friend of Lai's and baptised him. Zen is fearless and speaks his mind. **He has also been arrested** and tried by the government. Despite his age, he knows in detail what is happening in Hong Kong.

Cardinal Zen is an outspoken critic of China's betrayal of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1997 and also the secret Vatican-China deal in 2018. What are your thoughts after visiting Hong Kong?

Hong Kong is a very different place now to what it was before the handover. There was always a buzz about Hong Kong, that's gone. Everyone is trying to find their own way to navigate through the web of restrictions imposed by China as best they can. But, the situation has divided the Catholic Church. There is considerable rancour between the poor and the rich. The middle class and influential are afraid of losing their wealth and positions, so they keep silent. The poor are very critical and want the church to speak out. As we know, the Vatican is forging ties with China but is silent about the persecution of faithful Catholics like Jimmy Lai. He's a major irritation to the Vatican. The Hong Kong diocese is silent too and clerics and religious have to attend sinicization courses in Beijing. Ironically, Lai's profound testimony of faith and personal sacrifice speaks much louder than their silence. Actions always speak louder than words or in this case no words.

You try to keep Lai in the spotlight even making a documentary on his life and struggle. How successful is the film and how can people abroad support Jimmy Lai?

The documentary "The Hong Konger" has been very successful. Too successful for China's liking. It has had more than 4,000,000 views, is available free on YouTube in multiple languages and has won 11 film festival awards. The Chinese police tried to have it taken down. They contacted Google which resisted the pressure but TikTok took down the three trailers until an editorial in the Wall Street Journal criticised Beijing's interference. TikTok put the trailers back on and issued an apology. But it's an indication of how closely China monitors and wants to dictate which information the public is allowed to read and view. The best way for people to support Lai is by circulating the film on social networks and posting messages about Jimmy's case. Social networks are very influential and information can travel from one side of the world to other in seconds, that's why China watches what's posted so closely. Of course, it doesn't need to be said, the family appreciates every prayer said for Jimmy Lai.