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In this image taken from a video footage run by TVB, Joseph Li, the head of the Catholic church in China, right, stands outside Hong Kong's Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Hong Kong on Tuesday, Nov. 14, 2023. Li has arrived in Hong Kong at the invitation of the city's pope-appointed Roman Catholic cardinal, marking the first official visit by a Beijing bishop in history. (TVB via AP)

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Hong Kong — November 14, 2023

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The head of the Catholic church in China began a trip to Hong Kong on Nov. 14 at the invitation of the city's pope-appointed Roman Catholic cardinal, marking the first official visit by a Beijing bishop in history.

Joseph Li, who was installed by China's state-controlled Catholic church as an archbishop, visited the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in the morning, public broadcaster RTHK said.

Li's five-day tour came after the city's newly installed Cardinal Stephen Chow invited him to visit Hong Kong during a landmark trip to Beijing in April — the first visit to the Chinese capital by the city's bishop in nearly three decades. Experts said the invitation was a symbolic gesture that could strengthen the fragile relationship between China and the Vatican.

Earlier this month, Chow said his job is to foster better communication between the sides, and underscored the importance of human connections when asked about the significance of Li's visit.

The Hong Kong diocese said Li would meet with Chow and "different diocesan offices to promote exchanges and interactions between the two dioceses." It said this is the first time a Beijing bishop has officially visited Hong Kong, without disclosing further details about Li's trip.

Li took part in an evening prayer service at a chapel on Nov. 13 and exchanged gifts with Chow, according to Sunday Examiner, a publication operated by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong. It added Li would visit educational organizations and the Holy Spirit Seminary.

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Beijing and the Vatican severed diplomatic ties in 1951 following the Communist Party's rise to power and the expulsion of foreign priests. Since the break in ties, Catholics in China have been divided between those who belong to an official, state-sanctioned church and those in an underground church loyal to the pope. The Vatican recognizes members of both as Catholics but claims the exclusive right to choose bishops.

The installation of Li in 2007, however, was well-regarded by the Vatican and church officials at that time said it was done with its approval.

The Vatican and China signed an accord in 2018 over the thorny issue of bishop nominations, but Beijing has violated it. Most recently Pope Francis was forced to accept the unilateral appointment of a new bishop of Shanghai.

Francis in September insisted that the Vatican's relations with China were going well but said work must still be done to show Beijing that the Catholic church isn't beholden to a foreign power. During his trip to Mongolia that month, he also sent a special greeting to China's "noble" people, giving them a special shout-out at the end of a Mass.

The 2018 agreement has been harshly criticized by Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen, who was detained in May last year on suspicion of colluding with foreign forces under a Beijing-imposed national security law that jailed or silenced many activists. He was released on bail and has yet to be formally charged, but he and five others were fined in a separate case last November for failing to register a now-defunct fund set up to help arrested protesters.