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The Hong Konger brings Catholic freedom hero Jimmy Lai to cinemas

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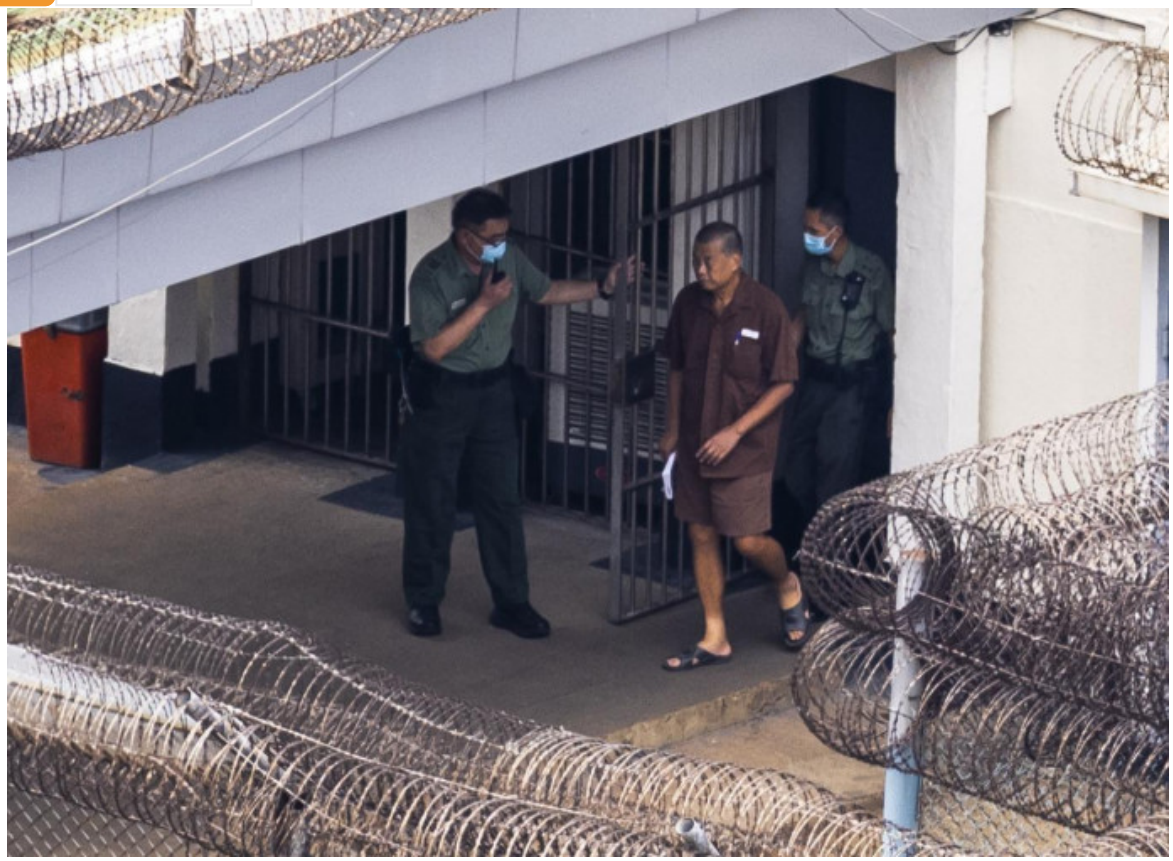

Speaking at the Rome premiere of the documentary *The Hong Konger,* about the high-profile struggle of pro-democracy advocate and now-jailed Catholic billionaire, JimmyLai, executive producer Rev. Robert Sirico calls out Vatican's diplomacy with Beijing.

"I am profoundly disappointed by the Vatican's diplomatic position. I interpret it only as a return to the past of dealing with communist regimes, during the Soviet Union, and its various entities. We have seen... how it has gone for over 50 years," said Fr. Robert Sirico, president emeritus of the Acton Institute and executive producer of *The Hong Konger*. Sirico made his comments to a sold-out theatre while recounting the plight of the film's protagonist, Catholic Chinese billionaire and media mogul, Jimmy Lai. This is Lai's third year in prison after being sentenced for five years and nine months on trumped up fraud charges levelled by Communist officials.

At age 75, Lai now finds himself in solitary confinement, following an international outcry for his release, while awaiting a second trial with a possible life sentence for new charges of violating Beijing's national security law and colonial-era anti-sedition legislation.

Fr. Sirico, raised in an Italian Catholic family and as street-smart resident of Brooklyn, has never stopped advocating for the liberation of his friend whose legal woes with the Beijing government escalated, following his arrest in 2020 and after Beijing banned a Tiananmen Square vigil Lai organised in 2020. That year, the peaceful event was banned for the first time in 30 years, according to a BBC report, as Beijing began imposing social distancing measures during the Covid pandemic. Lai served a 13 month-sentence.

"I have never taken the gloves off," said Sirico resolutely after reiterating that there is a sense of despair for Lai's case. Sirico said he isn't "lobbying" the Vatican in Rome, but bringing international attention, to a film "taken down by (Chinese-owned) TikTok, for reasons of violence." He said he has known this good man for over 25 years and can vouch for the inhumane injustice he and his family now face, as Lai is back in prison.

In addition to launching a web page (freejimmylai.com), Sirico executively produced the artistic documentary, *The Hong Konger*, released privately in 2022 and now available for public viewing on YouTube. Sirico is showing the film in theatres with continuing requests for international screenings.

The award-winning, dramatic 75-minute film is dedicated to Lai's inspiring rags-to-riches journey from a Maoist child refugee to a billionaire pro-democracy activist in

Hong Kong and eventual religious convert now jailed for publicly expressing his resistance to Beijing's encroachment on fundamental natural rights. The film was showcased in Rome for the first-time on16 October during the month-long synod of the Catholic Church's bishops.

***The Hong Konger* Rome premiere took place at the Institut Française Centre Saint-Louis cinema**. "We chose this particular venue on purpose," highlighted Michael Severance, director of the Acton Institute's Rome office during his introduction, "because it is the very cultural centre founded by renowned French intellectual Jacques Maritain, author of the anti-collectivist treatise of political philosophy, *The Man and the State."* Severance added, that during his tenure as French Ambassador to the Holy See, following France's liberation in 1944 and toward the end of the Second World War, Maritain began discussions "right here in Rome, where he eventually led the French delegation's final drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by United Nations at the very end of his diplomatic service in 1948."

The film powerfully traces Lai's remarkable rise to personal success from a poor family in Canton, China, where he was forced to work as a porter at the tender age of nine at the Guadong railway station. Sent away by his mother at age 12, with a nugget of gold sewn into his clothing and hidden in the hull of fishing vessel, Lai joined hundreds sea-sick stowaways longing for freedom in Hong Kong. Lai started out as a factory floor sweeper, then became a textile merchant and invested his modest earnings in the stock market where he earned huge sums which he used to launch a hugely profitable clothing chain, Giordano, in Hong Kong and mainland China. As recounted in the film, Lai's indulgent rich and famous lifestyle was brought to a solemn conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1997 and his baptism into the Church by Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun.

Appalled by China's repressive actions in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Lai begin giving away pro-democracy T-shirts at his Giordano stores and then founded the weekly *Next Magazine* and Hong Kong's most widely read newspaper, *Apple Daily* "since information means freedom." Both media outlets were ultimately forcefully shut down after Beijing officials froze his corporate accounts.

The film not only captures the authentic voice of Jimmy Lai with various private and public interviews, but also those of many of his friends and colleagues, with some audio recordings altered for their personal protection. *The Hong Konger* exposes the brutal crackdown imposed by Beijing on the former British colony starting with the 30 June, 2020 enforcement of the CCP's National Security Law, which led to an onslaught of democratic activists being arbitrarily arrested and convicted by unfair trials, "in clear

violation of articles 9 and 10 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", according to Severance.

Sirico, co-founder of the Acton Institute, a U.S.-based think tank which advocates the promotion of the moral and theological foundations of free enterprise, told the audience that his support of markets and entrepreneurship, was profoundly influenced, just like Jimmy Lai, by Nobel laureate Friedrich von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*.

In a provocative debate ensuing the film's screening, the American priest said regarding the Vatican's tepid diplomatic stance, but also concerning the faith of believers in general, "I think our greatest weakness is that we do not believe in our greatest strength."
"Our greatest strength is the truth. It's bearing witness to the truth. You see it emblematically in Jimmy Lai," he said. "We saw this," Sirico continued, "when Saint John Paul II, who deeply understood the dynamics of totalitarian regimes...courageously opposed the power of evil by bearing witness to the truth. He made tyrants tremble", like General Wojciech Jaruzelski who had greeted the pope while nervously sweating before the Polish successor of Peter.

"All that remains for us to do, is to join our voices in support of the true, the good, and the beautiful, in support of a life of joyful freedom, creative adventure, and unyielding faith, like Lai's", said Severance in an post-event interview. "This is the calling exemplified by Jimmy's steadfast Catholic faith. And so we too are duty bound, as his brothers and sisters in Christ to band together as family to #FreeJimmyLai", concluded Severance.