

HONG KONG

Why campaign for Jimmy Lai's release?

LIBERTÀ RELIGIOSA

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"Freeing Jimmy Lai is now a humanitarian issue, and I hope international pressure will convince the Chinese authorities to release him or expel him from Hong Kong." This appeal was made on Saturday 25 October at the *Bussola/Daily Compass* annual conference, held at Cascina La Lodovica in Oreno di Vimercate, in the north of Italy. It was launched by Sebastien Lai, son of the famous Catholic entrepreneur and publisher

who has been held in prison in Hong Kong for the last five years for defending freedom and democracy in the former British colony returned to Chinese authority in 1997.

This case several times over the years, including his latest trial for 'colluding with foreign powers', which ended in August and for which a verdict is pending. No one has any illusions: 'it will be a guilty verdict, as Sebastien told us. This would mean life imprisonment — a certain death sentence. Jimmy Lai will turn 79 in December. He suffers from diabetes, lives in solitary confinement, in a windowless cell that heats up like an oven in summer. He is granted 45 minutes of fresh air a day in the cement prison courtyard, so one can imagine how much care and attention is paid to his health.

Although US President Donald Trump and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer have promised to demand his release, other governments — including Italy's — must also play their part, as must public opinion in Western countries. Thanks to the *Bussola/Daily Compass*, which invited Sebastien Lai to Italy, all the most important national newspapers in Italy came to interview him and publicise the story of a man we consider a 'martyr for truth'.

However, we cannot be satisfied until he is released from prison, even if it that means he has to leave his homeland Hong Kong. This is no small matter, since, as we have always reported, Jimmy Lai wanted to stay in Hong Kong, even though he knew the cost was certain imprisonment.

We spoke to Sebastien about this apparent contradiction, to understand why his father would accept exile today when he could easily have left Hong Kong five years ago. We know from Jimmy Lai himself the basis for his decision to stay: 'If I left, I would not only be giving up my destiny, I would be giving up God, I would be giving up my religion, I would be giving up what I believe in'.



“Things have changed a lot in these five years,” replied Sebastien. 'Back then, my father felt responsible for all his journalists and for those who supported him in his fight for freedom. If he had left, he would have endangered them; they would have become the focus of the regime's 'attention'. Today, however, the situation is very different. If Jimmy Lai were to leave Hong Kong, no one would be in danger as a result.’ Indeed, one must remember that, in 2020, Hong Kong was still experiencing large-scale demonstrations in favour of democracy. Jimmy Lai and his *Apple Daily* newspaper, which the authorities forcibly closed down in 2021, were a kind of lightning rod for the tens of thousands of demonstrators.

However, Sebastien Lai's participation in the *Bussola/Daily Compass* Conference highlights the crucial reason why we are particularly interested in his father.

Jimmy Lai is not only a symbol of the fight for freedom and free journalism against power. He is certainly not alone. For example, on 24 October in Vienna, Jimmy Lai was honoured as one of the '**heroes of the free press**', alongside six other journalists from various countries.

There is no shortage of heroes; people who sacrifice themselves for a noble cause are plentiful. However, Jimmy Lai's case is different. The difference is found in the motivation for the 'Made for Truth' award that was instituted this year and awarded to him: 'From the moment of his conversion to the Catholic faith, his battle for democracy and freedom became a testament to the truth, even accepting imprisonment. This is a martyrdom that he accepted knowing that freedom does not primarily lie in escaping totalitarian power, but in bearing witness to and being faithful to the truth.

In **inating and exemplary** is that Jimmy Lai testifies, however just they may be, that ideals only find their true dimension and consistency within a broader horizon that opens up to the eternal. He shows that courage is not the fruit of a heroism for the few, but fidelity to the Truth of one's self that anyone can embody, and that freedom is not simply a political objective, but the outcome of belonging to Christ. Sebastien explained this in his testimony during the conference — which will be available to watch again on **our YouTube channel** in the coming days — how these years in prison had made his father's relationship with God more intense and profound through prayer, reading the catechism, and the lives of the saints.

For Jimmy Lai, the battle for freedom and democracy — which began as gratitude for what he had received in Hong Kong after fleeing Communist China as a child — was transfigured into participation in the cross of Christ. It is no coincidence that the crucifix



is the main theme of Jimmy Lai's drawings in prison which, until he was stopped, he gifted to friends and supporters. It is also no coincidence that the crucifix is the subject of the ceramics by Rimini artist Paola Ceccarelli that constitute the 'Made for Truth' prize awarded to him.