

# Report linking crucifixes, Chinese sweatshops denied

NEW YORK – There is no “conclusive evidence” to back up allegations that crucifixes sold in the gift shop at St. Patrick’s Cathedral and other religious goods stores were made in Chinese sweatshops, the Archdiocese of New York said in a Nov. 21 statement.

“The gift shop still does not know that these claims are true,” the statement said.

“In fact, it would have been virtually impossible to verify the facts,” it said, since Charles Kernaghan, director of the National Labor Committee, called a news conference “without any attempt whatsoever to contact either the gift shop or the company that imports the items ... to raise his concerns and investigate their truthfulness.”

At the Nov. 20 news conference on the steps of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Kernaghan released a 74-page report alleging that crucifixes sold at the Catholic cathedral, Trinity Episcopal Church in New York and stores belonging to the Association for Christian Retail were produced at the Junxingye Metal and Plastic Products Factory in Dongguan in southern China.

St. Patrick’s and Trinity removed the crucifixes from their shelves pending an investigation.

The report said workers at Junxingye are paid only 26.5 cents an hour, less than half of China’s minimum wage, and are routinely forced to work 100 hours a week or more. Because the workers also are forced to pay for company dorms and food, their take-home wages drop to 9 cents an hour, the report said.

In addition, the workers have no paid sick days, no paid maternity leave, no paid holidays and no health insurance and those who miss a day of work are docked 2.5 days’ wages, the report said.

“I don’t believe that St. Patrick’s Cathedral or Trinity Church had any idea of the

abusive and illegal conditions under which their crucifixes were made, but I feel certain they will now respond immediately and with compassion,” Kernaghan said.

The Junxingye factory also produces licensed collegiate goods for several universities, including Rutgers, Auburn, Brigham Young and others, according to the National Labor Committee.

The Archdiocese of New York’s statement said the press coverage of Kernaghan’s claims was another example of “what can only be deemed hostility and bigotry toward religion” by the news media.

“In an age when it sometimes seems that virtually everything sold in this country is made in China, it is difficult not to wonder what Mr. Kernaghan’s motivation was in focusing on crucifixes and releasing his allegations to the media without addressing his concerns to those in a position to investigate them and make whatever adjustments or changes that might be necessary once they arrived at the truth of the matter,” the statement added.

Bill Anderson, president and CEO of the Association for Christian Retail, said in a statement that the approximately 2,000 retailers and 570 suppliers belonging to the industry trade group “would never knowingly offer products made in an environment that harms the workers.”

Although even ongoing monitoring and frequent inspections “cannot provide 100 percent guarantees, our suppliers are confident they are offering products made in factories in which workers are treated fairly,” Anderson added.

The National Labor Committee report specifically charged the Singer Co. in Long Island City, N.Y., with buying products from the Junxingye factory and reselling them in the United States.

“Gerald Singer of the Singer Co. has assured us that he does not and has never contracted with the Junxingye factory as alleged by the National Labor Committee,” Anderson said.

“The manufacturers he deals with in China have signed off on a high standard for labor practices consistent with Chinese law,” he said. “When I spoke with him, he

was seeking to contact those Chinese manufacturers to make sure they have not subcontracted any manufacture of goods for his company to any companies that do not meet the same standards. To his knowledge, they have not.”

But Kernaghan said in a follow-up news release Nov. 21 that for the Singer Co. to ask its suppliers “whether or not they used child workers or workers employed under sweatshop conditions” is equivalent to “asking Jack the Ripper if he respects young women.”

“In other words, the company’s effort to monitor factory conditions has been ridiculous,” he said.

Kernaghan praised as “an excellent first step” the removal of the crucifixes from the gift shops at St. Patrick’s Cathedral and Trinity Church, but said the churches’ “responsibility does not end there.”

“Following a thorough investigation, St. Patrick’s and Trinity should work together with the Association for Christian Retail to clean up the Junxingye factory in China and implement concrete steps to guarantee that the legal rights of the young workers will finally be respected,” he said.

“Pulling production from the factory would only further punish these young women, who have suffered enough already,” he added.