

# South Korean Catholics: Kim's visit to Chinese church not a message

SEOUL, South Korea – A whistle-stop visit by North Korean leader Kim Jong Il to a church in China is not a sign that the secretive communist regime's stance toward religion is softening, South Korean Catholics say.

Kim visited a Catholic church in Jilin, in northeastern China, during his Aug. 26-30 trip to the country.

The church visit immediately sparked speculation that North Korea might relax its rigid stance toward Catholicism and other religions.

"It could be some kind of message related toward religion, including Catholicism," the Korean Hankyoreh daily quoted an anonymous government official saying.

But Catholics in South Korea were quick to dismiss such speculation, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

It goes too far to say his visit has a hidden message, Father Baptist John Kim Hun-il, who works at the Korean bishops' conference, told UCA News Sept. 1. "It seems the visit was just part of his trip."

"North Korea has not given any sign of improving its relationship not only with the Catholic Church but with other religions in South Korea," he added.

Peter Park Chang-ho, secretary of Seoul Archdiocese's Korea Reconciliation Committee, agreed.

"It's all guess work. His church visit was a part of a personal 'pilgrimage,'" he said.

During this trip, Kim visited several places where his father and predecessor, Kim Il Sung, had stayed.

Church sources in Jilin told UCA News that Father Nicholas Liu Wenhui, the parish priest, escorted Kim around the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church Aug. 26.

Kim spent only five minutes in the church but told the priest that his father once stayed there during the 1937-45 Second Sino-Japanese War, the sources said.

Built in 1926, the Gothic church was a former Jilin diocesan cathedral. It was declared a historical monument by the Jilin provincial government in 1999.