



# THE CARDINAL KUNG FOUNDATION



## Prayerful Support for China's Catholics

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What if one of your brothers or sisters told you they were being harassed just because of their faith? Wouldn't you want to help?

Tragically, our brothers and sisters in Christ in many parts of the world right now need our help. Religious minorities, especially Christians of late, often find themselves harassed and even attacked, simply because of their faith.



As the Second Vatican Council declared, "religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person." Religious freedom is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and is theoretically recognized by all nations. It certainly is a foundation of our American democracy.

But Christians throughout the world are suffering for their faith. In some societies they are discriminated against. In others they are not even allowed to meet for prayer, charity, or religious study. If they do meet, they may be harassed and beaten, their houses of worship assaulted. They may be detained, put in prison, tortured, or even

killed. According to a Pew study, Christians face some form of harassment or persecution in two-thirds of the countries around the world!

One area where this is happening is in China. Our Catholic brothers and sisters who refuse to register with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the official body sanctioned by the People's Republic of China, form part of what is known as the "underground church."

As difficult as it is for most Catholics to understand, Chinese government officials want a Catholic Church that is not in communion with the Holy Father, which, of course, is an oxymoron. They insist on independence from Rome and seek to control the religious activity of all Catholics in China. This includes where Catholics worship, how priests and religious are trained, and even who is ordained as bishop.

For a few years, there appeared to be some progress in the dialogue between the Holy See and the government of the People's Republic of China. Some bishops were happily ordained with the agreement of both the Vatican and Chinese authorities. Back in 2007, Pope Benedict wrote a moving letter to the Catholics in China—who, while many are "underground," were said to number close to 12 million—expressing not only love and solidarity, but much hope for progress and even cooperation and peace with civil officials.

However, recent illicit ordinations of three bishops by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), often taking place over explicit Vatican objections, have reversed that progress. To make matters worse, coercion was used.

Some bishops, who are in communion with the Holy Father, went into hiding to avoid these illicit ordinations, but other bishops were not so fortunate. They were taken by police and forced to attend and participate in the ordinations.

No wonder the Holy Father has expressed "pain and concern" over this turn of events. The Vatican has said such acts are "contrary to the unity of the universal Church."

The three bishops just ordained by the CCPA are of course considered excommunicated by their actions. Lacking communion with the Universal Church and the Holy Father, they have no authority to govern dioceses. Imagine the dilemmas this will create for local Catholics striving to be faithful. As the heroic Cardinal Joseph Zen, the former archbishop of Hong Kong, just bluntly stated, the Chinese government is forcing the Catholics in China into schism. "Why should our brothers not be allowed to live peacefully their normal life of faith?"

So what can we do to support our brothers and sisters in Christ in China?

First and foremost, we can pray.

Pope Benedict XVI had designated a World Day of Prayer for the Church in China in his 2007 letter to Catholic Church in China. In that historic letter, Pope Benedict XVI expressed his closeness to Catholics in China and affirmed that the Church in China is part of the universal Church. Prayer strengthens our communion.

We can also speak out.

China is a big player on the world stage. There may be opportunities to engage Chinese officials in economic, academic, political, and social circles.

What's our message? The Catholic Church is not a threat to the Chinese government. Catholics simply want to live out their faith and make their contributions to the common good of China. We can ask our government and the many U.S. businesses that operate in China to urge Chinese officials to dialogue with the Holy See.

In his 2007 letter, Pope Benedict expressed hope for "concrete forms of communication and cooperation between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China" and for a "dialogue [that] would make it possible for us to work together for the good of the Chinese People and for peace in the world."

The Holy Father continues to leave the door open for dialogue. Let us respond to that initiative by encouraging Chinese officials to walk through that door, not slam it shut.