



A Brief Biography of His Eminence Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei (Gong)

Citation from Sacred Heart University

December 1996



It was a simple song, a hymn sung by the faithful around the world. But, its message revealed the undying devotion and steadfast love of a shepherd for his God and for his people. After spending nearly a third of his life in prison for refusing to renounce God and the Roman Catholic Church, this man delivered a statement of faith through song.

Since his imprisonment by Communist China in 1955, Bishop Kung had not talked to anyone but his captors and members of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, a government sanctioned organization that renounced the Pope and appointed its own bishops. But when Bishop Kung was released on "house arrest" in July of 1985 --30 years after his incarceration, he was granted an "audience", so to speak, with Cardinal Sin of the Philippines, who had stopped in China with the hope of contacting Bishop Kung.

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and members of the Chinese government arranged for a banquet with five large tables fastened together. Cardinal Sin and Bishop Kung were seated on opposite ends of the tables separated by more than 20 Communists. They were not allowed to greet each other or to speak. After awhile, Cardinal Sin suggested that each man sing a song to provide a little stimulation for an otherwise silent gathering. So each man sang a song of his choice. When the time came for Bishop Kung to sing, he chose a song of faith that would convey to Cardinal Sin that in all his years of captivity he never renounced his God or his Church.

After Bishop Kung sang just a few bars, in Latin, of the beloved hymn, "Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam mean. (You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church)", a member-Bishop of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association informed his superiors of Kung's ruse. Bishop Kung was told to be silent, but he looked at Cardinal Sin and finished the song.

Cardinal Sin carried Bishop Kung's message to the world: this man of God never faltered in his love for his church or his people despite unimaginable suffering, isolation and pain.

Ignatius Pin-Mei Cardinal Kung was born August 2, 1901 in Shanghai to a Catholic family of at least five generations. When Ignatius and his siblings each reached the age of 12, they were educated in Chinese classics and religious instruction by their Aunt Martha, a homebound religious sister. It was his aunt who encouraged Ignatius to consider priesthood - an option that he would embrace as he pursued his education at St. Ignatius High School in Shanghai. He began seminary studies at the age of 19. Following his ordination on May 28, 1930, he was named head of a primary school, then moved on to a diocesan high school for three years. Though he was a diocesan priest, Kung was appointed Headmaster of Aurora High school and later, Gonzaga High School, both run by Jesuits. When the Communists took over Shanghai in 1949, Father Kung was appointed Bishop of Soochow on June 9, 1949, and consecrated Bishop on October 7, 1949, feastday of Our Lady of Rosary. Later, Bishop Kung was named Bishop of Shanghai and apostolic administrator of Soochow and Nanking on July 15, 1950.

In just five short years, Bishop Kung would become one of the most feared enemies of the Chinese Communists -- a man who would command the attention and devotion of the country's three million Catholics and who would inspire thousands to offer their lives up to God. In defiance of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Bishop Kung, who led the diocese of three large cities in China, invigorated the Legion of Mary. The government declared the Legion of Mary an illegal society that was engaged in espionage under the cloak of religion. It demanded that all members either register in the Public Security Bureau and acknowledge that the Legion was counter-revolutionary, or risk imprisonment.

The Bishop told his followers not to comply, that God would reward them and that they must, under any circumstance, uphold their faith. Because of their trust in Bishop Kung, the members of the Legion of Mary obeyed. With the exception of very few, ninety-nine percent of the Legion refused to sign the registration. All chose to risk arrest in the name of their Bishop, their God and their Church. Hundreds of members, including many students, were arrested and sentenced to 10, 15, 20 years of hard labor.

In New Year's greetings to their Bishop, Shanghai students and members of the Legion of Mary said: "Bishop, in darkness, you light up our path. You guide us on our treacherous journey. You uphold our faith and the traditions of the Church. You are the foundation rock of our Church in Shanghai."

Bishop Kung knew that things would get worse and that his freedom was nearing an end. So, he began to prepare the priests in his diocese for the struggle and persecution that loomed ahead.

In 1953, in defiance, he organized a special evening of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for young Catholic men in Shanghai. But, four days before the event, the Communist government took over the Jesuit house in Shanghai and arrested many Jesuit priests. Bishop Kung held his evening of devotion, anyway. Over 3,000 faithful young men gathered while police surrounded the Cathedral. A thousand ladies sat in the square outside the Cathedral reciting the rosary. Seemingly oblivious to the huge police presence, the faithful chanted, "Long live Bishop. Long live Holy Father. Long live the Church." After the devotion, representatives from all the parishes

carries a huge wooden cross followed behind by Bishop Kung. The Chinese Catholics openly showed their willingness to follow their Bishop all the way to Calvary.

On September 8, 1955, Bishop Kung, along with several hundred priests and church leaders, was arrested and imprisoned. He was sentenced five years later to life imprisonment.

During his years of captivity, Bishop Kung was asked to denounce the Holy Father and to cooperate with the Patriotic Association. He was told it was not necessary to say the words; a nod of his head would release him from prison. His answer was: "I am a Roman Catholic Bishop. If I denounce the Holy Father, not only would I not be a Bishop, I would not even be a Catholic. You can cut off my head, but you can never take away my duties."

Cardinal Kung was 86 years old when finally released. In 1987, he came to the United States with his nephew and settled in Stamford, Connecticut.

Within a year, he was well enough to travel to Rome for a private audience with Pope John Paul II. During the meeting, the Holy Father told Bishop Kung that he had elevated him to Cardinal, in pectore, in 1979. He asked that the Chinese prelate keep it a secret until it was announced by the Pope Himself, if ever. Cardinal Kung, ever obedient, did not even tell his own family. On May 29, 1991, the Pope announced to the world that Bishop Kung was in fact a Cardinal since 1979.

When Pope John Paul II presented Cardinal Kung with his red hat in ceremonies on June 28, 1991, at the Consistory in the Vatican, the wheelchair-bound, ailing Kung raised himself up from the wheelchair, threw aside his cane and walked up the steps to kneel at the foot of the Pontiff. Visibly touched, the Holy Father lifted him up, gave him his cardinal's hat, then stood patiently as Cardinal Kung returned to his wheelchair to the sounds of an unprecedented seven-minute standing ovation.

Now 95, Cardinal Kung's health is failing, but his devotion remains steadfast. As he said so many times during his years of imprisonment, he faces his future undaunted with trust in God his greatest support.

The story of Ignatius Pin-Mei Kung is the story of a hero -- a man who refused to renounce God and his church despite dire personal consequences; a man who inspired millions of his countrymen to follow his example and preserve the Roman Catholic Church in a Communist country, a man who kept the faith though confined in solitary cells for 30 years; a man who became a symbol for world leaders in their fight for human rights in all countries.