



An Interview with Cardinal Ignatius Kung of Shanghai

The Persecution in China Continues

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Cardinal Kung, can you tell our readers something about your life?



I was born in Pudong, on the eastern outskirts of Shanghai. My family has been Catholic for many generations. I am the oldest of four children. Our village has an uncommonly large and beautiful church, Our Lady of Lourdes. It can accommodate more than two thousand people.

Until the age of twelve, my brothers, sister and I were educated at home by my Aunt Martha, a "home-bound" religious sister, in Chinese classics and Catholic doctrine. During that period, there were women who stayed at home, took a vow of celibacy, and dedicated themselves to apostolate works. Aunt Martha played a very important role in fostering my vocation.

I also remembered very well my other religious teachers. A Marist brother prepared me for my first Holy Communion. In high school, I was educated by the Jesuits in Shanghai. I am grateful to both the Marists and the Jesuits who taught me the knowledge of God and inspired me to pursue the priesthood.

I began seminary studies at the diocesan seminary at age nineteen after completing high school. After my ordination at the age of 29, I spent many years in education. I taught Latin. I was also the headmaster of two Jesuit high schools in Shanghai Aurora High School and Gonzaga High School.

China turned Red in 1949. In October of that year, I was consecrated Bishop of Soochow. A year later, in 1950, the Holy See appointed me as the first Chinese Bishop of Shanghai. I continued to administer Soochow. In the following year, Nanking was included in my administration. Shanghai is one of the largest commercial and industrial cities in China. Nanking (Nanjing) was the former capital of China until the communist government moved the capital to Beijing. Soochow is a famous scenic city, not too far from

Shanghai, known as the Venice of the East.

At that time, bishops in China fully realized the very difficult journey ahead of them because of the new Communist government. Before my ordination, I made a thirty-day retreat to ask for strength and God's guidance to take up my responsibilities and follow the will of God and the Church. I was also happy to accept the appointment as the first Chinese Bishop of Shanghai as Shanghai is my hometown.

On September 8, 1955, together with many of my priests and people, I was arrested by the Chinese Communist government and put in jail where I would spend the next thirty years. I was sentenced to life imprisonment under the pretext of "treason". This "treason" consisted of my refusal to renounce the Holy Father, my refusal to sever ties between my diocese and the Holy Father, and my refusal to give leadership of the establishment of a "Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association" in China, which would be completely under the control of the communist government.

On July 3, 1985, I was released from prison and put on "parole." I was placed in the custody of the "Patriotic Association" which I had steadfastly opposed. I had no freedom of movement during my "parole." I was not allowed to go out alone.

On January 5, 1988, the Chinese government suddenly announced the termination of my parole term and restored full civilian rights to me.

With the help of Bishop Walther Curtis of Bridgeport and Sr. Daniel Marie, President of St. Joseph Medical Center in Stamford, Connecticut, I landed at JFK Airport in New York in May 1988.

One year after my arrival in the United States, I was well enough to go to Rome where I was warmly received by Pope John Paul II. During that meeting, I was told by the Holy Father that I had been elevated in 1979, in pectore, to the College of Cardinals. I kept this a secret until our Holy Father announced it to the world on May 29, 1991.

Can you give us a brief history of the Church in China?



The Catholic Church in China has a very long history, dating back probably to the seventh century. Many missionaries contributed significantly to the evangelization of China. Some of the early missionary communities were the Franciscans, Jesuits and Vincentians. Among them were the famous Jesuit priest, Matthew Ricci and Fr. Vincent Lebbe.

When China turned Red in 1949, she began a long and brave history, full of heroic sacrifices and martyrdoms. From the beginning, the Communist government wanted to crush religion. They regarded religion as the opium of the people.

The Communist government systematically and continuously attacked the Roman Catholic Church: levied heavy taxes on the Church, forbade religious instruction in Catholic schools and restricted or terminated the activities of the lay apostolate including the Legion of Mary. Chinese bishops, clergy, religious sisters and Catholic laity were arrested in the tens of thousands. All foreign missionaries, including the Pro-Nuncio, were expelled. Some were imprisoned.

The government hoped that by imprisoning the clergy, crushing the Church financially, and isolating the Chinese Church from the Universal Church, it would bring the Catholic Church to its knees. On the contrary, most the clergy and faithful were ready to take up their crosses to Calvary. Many Catholic faithful followed the great heroic examples of the priests and religious sisters, and chose imprisonment rather than betray their faith. Others bravely took on responsibilities and helped in the many works of the dioceses. When the government failed to crush the Church, it formed the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association which was meant to replace the Roman Catholic Church.

Those who refused to join the patriotic Association and remained loyal to the Holy Father were given jail sentences of ten, twenty, thirty or more years. After the jail sentence, it was common for them to be sent to a labor camp. Torture, extreme hard conditions in jail and long hours of hard labor were common for the Roman Catholics. Thousands died as witnesses of Christ.

On September 8, 1955, I was arrested together with over two hundred priests and lay persons in Shanghai. Five years later in 1960, I was sentenced to life imprisonment for treason, for refusing to cut off my ties and loyalty to the Holy See, and for refusing to give my leadership to the Patriotic Association. I was finally released and put on parole (house arrest) in 1986 under the scrutiny of the Patriotic Association. During the thirty years in prison, I was never permitted to have visitors, nor to receive any correspondence whatsoever, not even from my own family.

Can you explain the difference between the Catholic Church and the Patriotic Church?



The official name of the Patriotic Association is the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. This was formed by the Chinese Communist government in the early 1950's under the control of the government Religious Bureau. It rejects the Pope's authority as the head of the Catholic Church. It also appoints and ordains its own bishops without the Pope's authorization. It is schismatic and is not in union with the universal Roman Catholic Church.

The Chinese government confiscated all the properties of the Roman Catholic Church and transferred them to the Patriotic Association leaving the loyal Roman Catholic Church penniless.

The Roman Catholic Church in China belongs to the Universal Roman Catholic Church in union with the pope, the successor of Saint Peter. It firmly and openly accepts the Holy Father as the head of the Church. It is regarded as illegal in China and has gone underground since the establishment of the Patriotic Association. The Roman Catholic Church has been persecuted for over forty years and this persecution continues today.

The above differences are extremely important. Jesus founded the Church upon the rock of Saint Peter. Anyone who claims to belong to the universal Roman Catholic Church, yet does not recognize the Supreme Pontiff as the head of the Church, actually does not belong to the universal Roman Catholic Church. It was exactly on this ground that I chose the road of imprisonment rather than belonging to the Patriotic Association and cutting off my allegiance to the Holy See. Let me explain.

I was imprisoned for five years without a trial until 1960. Before the trial, the prosecutor told me that I would be free if I were to cut off my allegiance to the pope and to give my leadership to the Patriotic Association. My answer to the prosecutor was a flat no. He then asked me if I would reconsider. I told the prosecutor that I could not even consider.

If I were to consider, it would have meant in my mind that perhaps it might be possible to leave the Holy Father and still remain as a Catholic. My better judgment told me that this was impossibility.

I told the prosecutor that I was a Roman Catholic bishop. If I had left the Holy Father, not only would I not be a Catholic bishop, I would not even be a Roman Catholic.

I told the prosecutor that he could cut off my head, but he could never take away my duties.

Well, you know what happened then. I was sentenced to life imprisonment and stayed in prison for thirty years.

What is the status of the Catholic Church in China today?



China has made great strides in economic progress. People have much greater freedom in their choice of work and even in starting small private businesses. However, contrary to the economic movement, there has been no improvement in religious freedom. One can practice the religion which is established and controlled by the Communist government, but one cannot worship according to one's conscience and faith.

The Roman Catholic Church is regarded as illegal by the Chinese Communist government. Even as I am speaking to you now, many bishops, clergy and Catholic faithful continue to be persecuted. Many are in jails or under house arrest and are harassed by constant investigations by public security police and confiscation of personal properties.

In spite of the continuous persecution for over forty years, the underground Roman Catholic Church is very strong. A majority of the Catholic chose not to belong to the Communist sanctioned Patriotic Church, not to attend Mass, and not to receive sacrament, from the Patriotic priests. Even under this oppressive climate, religious vocations for the underground church continue to flourish. They choose to carry on the work of the Roman Catholic Church instead of joining the Patriotic Association's seminaries, in spite of great hardship and risk of personal safety.

Along with this subject and for the benefit of the many American clergy and visitors to China, I wish to let them know the directive from the Holy See regarding Roman Catholics visiting China. Roman Catholic clergymen visiting China may not celebrate Holy Mass in Patriotic Association churches. They may not concelebrate Holy Mass with Patriotic Association priests. Roman Catholic visitors in China should not attend Mass or receive sacraments in Patriotic churches, as this would give the wrong impression to the Chinese government that the visitors are recognizing the Patriotic Association (which does not have the recognition of the Holy Father); thereby indirectly dealing a blow to the loyal persecuted underground Church.

How bad is the persecution, and what forms does it take?



The Chinese Communist government issued a decree in late 1991 ordering intelligence agents and police to start a nationwide crackdown on "illegal" religious activities. The strongest group of "illegal" religious activities is, of course, the underground Roman Catholic Church.

I, too, know that many bishops and priests either have been arrested, are under house arrest, or have been relocated away from their dioceses by force - all methods aimed to suppress the heroic apostolic efforts of the underground church. Some bishops were tortured and died. An underground bishop in Shanghai, eighty years of age, was recently subject to continuous surveillance and daily interrogations by public security police.

Last year, an open letter written by a group of underground Catholics was received. They pleaded to the free world to "save the Chinese bishops." They wrote: "We hope that all persons of peace throughout the world who support justice, human rights, and human life all persons of compassion, and all the mass media will become mobilized to use their mouths and pens to speak out for justice"

Since November 1991, three loyal bishops have died in jail. One of them was Bishop Peter Fan of Boarding. There was evidence reported by *Avvenire*, an Italian Catholic newspaper, that Bishop Fan was tortured before he died at the age of eighty-five. In short, the persecution of the Roman Catholic Church in China is not history. It is very much alive today.

It has been said that the blood of martyrs is the seeds of the future Church. What do you see in the future for the Church in China?



One of the symbols of the Roman Catholic Church is the cross. Starting from the Roman Empire to the present days, the entire history of the Roman Catholic Church in the last 2000 years is filled with crosses in the form of persecution and martyrdom. As the Catholic youth in Shanghai said forty years ago, "We are greatly honored to have been born and lived at this important time, able to bear witness to Christ." Forty years of continuous persecution did not cripple the Roman Catholic Church in China. On the contrary, the Roman Catholic Church in China has doubled its members with many vocations for priesthood and religious life. "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit." (Jn. 12:24)

I am very optimistic about the Roman Catholic Church in China. I am confident that the martyrdoms, sacrifices and prayers will not only protect and foster the Roman Catholic Church in China, but also the Universal Church.

As the Roman Catholic Church is a church established by God, no human effort can possibly abolish God's Church. The government should understand from history that every time the Church was persecuted, the Church has always survived and grown out of the persecution. The Roman Catholic Church will never vanish in China. I hope that the government will recognize this and give China true religious freedom and human rights in accordance with international standards.

When the Holy Father invited all the bishops of the world to join with him on March 25, 1984 to consecrate Russia and the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I was in prison, isolated from the world. I had no knowledge of His Holiness's instruction.

Last year on May 30, 1992, accompanied by retired Bishop Walter Curtis of Bridgeport who first welcomed me to the United States and by the Chinese clergy and Catholics in the tri-state area, we came to the Shrine of the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Washington, New Jersey to consecrate ourselves to our Holy Mother. I particularly consecrated my three dioceses - Shanghai, Nanking and Soochou - to Mary's Immaculate Heart.

I am confident that in her own time, Our Lady of Fatima will save China just as she has saved Russia and Eastern Europe from religious persecution. We will continue to say the Rosary and beg for mercy from our Holy Mother to save China.

Could you relate one or two incidents of heroes or martyrs of the Church in China in recent years?



One summer morning last year, Father Liao of Jiang Xi was saying his Eucharistic Prayer during his celebration of Sunday Mass on the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There were some two hundred underground Catholics in attendance at the Mass. About twenty officers from the Religious Bureau, the Patriotic Association and Public Security rushed into the house in the midst of the Mass and demanded that Father Liao come down from the upstairs chapel. Having heard Father Liao's answer that he would come down after he finished celebrating his Holy Mass, the government officers rushed upstairs to the chapel, pushing down the faithful on their way.

At that instant, Father Liao was distributing Holy Communion. The Communist agents snatched the Holy Eucharist from Father Liao. Witnessing this sacrilegious act of grabbing the Holy Eucharist and forgetting their own personal safety, the faithful spontaneously fought back and tried to get back the Holy Eucharist, but failed. The government officers took the Holy Eucharist, the chalice, and the missals; smashed the glass enclosures of holy statues; and took father Liao away like a criminal.

At present, we do not know the whereabouts or the condition of Father Liao. He had already been arrested for his faith three times in the past and had spent a total of twenty three years in jail. This is his fourth arrest. Father Liao is a pastor to about thirteen hundred Catholic families.

During the years 1991-1992, three bishops died in captivity.

In 1990, a group of underground bishops in China, after a very long period of preparation, managed to come together and hold the first bishop's conference. However, in comparing this conference with other bishops' conferences worldwide, the similarity stops at the gathering of the bishops. For soon after the end of the conference in China, all attending bishops and their assistants were arrested in various parts of China by the government. Most of them were in their seventies and eighties. Some of them have since been released.

In a village of Hebei Province, more than four thousand police and soldiers attacked over one thousand Catholics while they were attending a Holy Mass.

Two persons were killed, a few hundred were wounded and dozens were arrested. No medical treatment was allowed to those wounded.

This incident was reported in the August 1991 issue of Reader's Digest.

What can our readers do to assist our brothers and sisters in the Church in China?



Yes, Chinese Roman Catholics are very familiar with Our Lady of Fatima and her promises. There has always been a strong devotion to the Rosary in China. One of the spiritual preparations in the Shanghai Diocese during the early Communist days was the continuous round the clock recitation of the Rosary for one year in front of a special statue of Our Lady of Fatima. This holy statue traveled to all the parishes of Shanghai. When we were in jail, we had no Holy Mass, no sacraments, and no religious books. However, we had our fingers to recite the Rosary which gave us strength and grace during the ten, twenty or thirty years of imprisonment.

Is the Fatima message known among Catholics in China? Has it had an impact on the Church in China?



The most effective help for our Chinese brothers and sisters in Christ is prayers. Without the prayers of the Universal Church, I and thousands of others would have found it very difficult to survive the ten, fifteen, twenty or even more than thirty years in lonely prisons. Ten, fifteen and thirty years represent a very long period of suffering without freedom, Holy Mass, sacraments and religious books. It is not our strength and merit that help us to endure these sufferings. We survive by the grace of God and your prayers. I hope that your readers will pray to our Holy Mother to protect the bishops, clergy and the faithful of the underground Church. I also hope that your readers will pray for those brothers and sisters who choose to be separated from Our Lord, so that they will return to the one Fold and one Shepherd.

Your readers can also assist our Chinese brothers and sisters by supporting the loyal underground Church financially. It is difficult for Catholic in America to imagine the extreme poverty of the underground Church. All their properties were confiscated by the government. Many seminarians have never owned a Bible. They have to hand copy the Bible page by page. Many loyal priests and bishops are over seventy-five years of age. They are living on subsistence unless they compromise their faith and join the Patriotic Association.

Because the government has transferred all the properties of the Roman Catholic Church to the Catholic Patriotic Association, and confiscated many personal properties of the bishops and priests, the underground Church desperately needs money to support the priests and their apostolic work. Any amount of donation will be gratefully accepted. The Cardinal Kung Foundation is a non-profit and tax-exempt foundation working exclusively for the Roman Catholic Church in China. You may contact the foundation to obtain more information or to make donation at P. O. Box 8086, Ridgeway Center, Stamford, CT 06905 or call (203) 329-9712.