



Upon the Map of China
Rests the Shrine and Our Lady of She-Shan
Through Whom We Pray
There may be one fold and One Shepherd

Homily

26th Anniversary of the Death of His Eminence, Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei

Delivered on 14th March 2026 by
Fr. James McCurry, O.F.M. Conv.

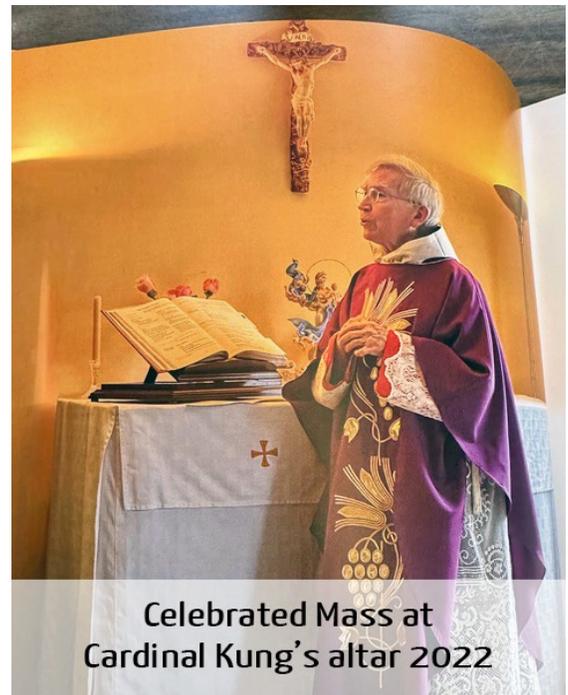
Basilica of St. John the Evangelist
Stamford, Connecticut.

Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei, died on the 12th of March 2000. Today we commemorate the 26th anniversary of his holy passage from here to Eternity. Providentially, his 26th anniversary, falling in the year 2026, coincides with the 800th anniversary year of the death of St. Francis of Assisi. Even though Cardinal Kung and St. Francis lived on different continents in different epochs of history, there are notably striking similarities between these two holy and stalwart Catholics. An early biographer of St. Francis, Julian of Speyer, called Francis a “*Vir Totus Catholicus et Apostolicus*” – “A Man Totally Catholic and Apostolic.” That same appellation can well be applied to Cardinal Ignatius Kung Pin-Mei.

At this very month in Assisi, the “Sacred Skeleton” of St. Francis is being publicly venerated by the faithful for the first time in 800 years. Two weeks ago, Fr. La Pastina, the rector and pastor of this Basilica, visited Assisi and paid homage to St. Francis’s remains. Last week I, myself, was privileged, on an express pilgrimage in Italy, to pray before the same sacred relics. I was praying so hard as I stood transfixed before St. Francis’s casket, that his holy bones nearly began to rattle.

Many of us had a similar experience one year ago in Santa Clara, California, when we prayed the Rosary before the tomb of Cardinal Kung. As we prayed, there was a moment when it seemed to me that the whole mausoleum vibrated a bit – It wasn’t an earthquake, thank God. Perhaps an airplane was flying over, or maybe it simply was the Cardinal responding to our prayers?!

As we give thanks to God this noontide for the gift of Cardinal Kung to the Church, now in 2026, the “Year of St. Francis,” I should like to draw some inspiring parallels between these two great men of the Church. One unmistakable and overarching similarity is the way that each one lived the virtue of humility, which is extolled in today’s Gospel reading from St. Luke: “*For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted*” (Lk. 18:14).



The young Francis in the 13th century became a soldier/knight, fighting in Assisi's army to support the Pope against Perugia's army, which supported the Pope's enemy, the Emperor. Francis was captured and imprisoned for two years in a Perugia dungeon. That was far less time in jail than the 33 years in which Cardinal Kung was imprisoned for his support of the Pope against the Communist enemy. Yet the prison experience of both had a profound, indelible impact on each man's relationship with God. Both Francis and Ignatius could well have died in their deplorable jail cells. Their humble recognition in jail of their own human mortality gave each one a new perspective on life. I call it the "perspective of Eternity."

Cardinal Kung, as a prisoner in isolation and deprivation, developed a profound sense of who he was in God's eyes. He was gifted to see himself from the vantage point of God in Eternity. St. Francis described this "perspective of Eternity" on oneself as follows: "*What a man is before God, that he is and no more.*" This is true humility.

Sustained by this humble perspective of Eternity, during the first 30 years of his imprisonment, Cardinal Kung was unbothered by deprivations like never being given a change of clothing. Cut off from all contact with the world outside, from family, from the Church, from the sacraments, his only contact was with God. For his sanity and survival, he needed to develop a program of daily life. God alone, the Almighty, was his metronome, pulsing the spiritual rhythm of his day. Cardinal Kung's cell became his "chapel" of daily prayer and penance. Cardinal Kung's brilliant mind had long before memorized the Latin words of Holy Mass. So, every day, without bread and wine, he raised up those words to our Heavenly Father, in solidarity with all the Masses being offered on Catholic altars throughout the world.

When occasionally provided paper and pen, Cardinal Kung wrote down those sacred Latin words of the Mass. Upon the regular confiscation of such notebooks by his jailors, the prisoner-Cardinal would later rewrite the sacred words in other notebooks provided, over and over again. Upon his exile from China in 1988, after 33 years under arrest, he managed to bring the last of those handwritten mini-Missals to Connecticut. I shall forever remember the first time that Joseph Kung showed this mini-Missal to me, and allowed me to hold that sacred book. Whenever I have the privilege of offering Mass on Cardinal Kung's home altar in Stamford, I request the Kung family to place that precious relic of his imprisonment on the Altar.

After the young St. Francis was released from prison, now living under this new "perspective of Eternity," the Saint of Assisi he experienced a vision of Christ coming to life on the Cross of San Damiano. Jesus's words to Francis from the crucifix became the mandate of his life: *Francis, go build up my Church.* The same words can be applied, *mutatis mudandis*, to the mandate which God gave to young Fr. Ignatius Kung in 1950, when the Pope chose him to become the Bishop of Shanghai: *Ignatius, go build up my church.* St. Francis was unsure how to do this work building up the Church. So, he opened the book of the Scriptures three times, and he found therein three passages which would serve him as a roadmap for the future course of his life and mission: 1) solidarity with the poor; 2) grasping nothing for oneself; 3) taking up the cross of Christ.

So too, Cardinal Kung, from the moment he became chief shepherd of the flock in Shanghai, during the five years of his episcopal ministry before his arrest, implicitly followed the same roadmap of life and

mission as St. Francis. He never stopped reaching out to the poor, with great generosity and self-sacrifice. He foresaw the persecution that his faithful Catholic flock would soon suffer. He taught them by example how to take up the Cross and follow Christ. He even fortified himself for this mission of the Cross by having all his teeth extracted, so that his future torturers could be foiled in their cruel methods of persuasion.

Cardinal Kung knew that his days of active public ministry in Shanghai were numbered. Yet, after his arrest, throughout his long imprisonment and finally in exile, he never forgot that he was the Bishop of Shanghai. He remained until death the Chief Shepherd of the faithful Shanghai flock, responsible for the upbuilding of the Church, even if temporarily it needed to go “underground.” His solidarity with the poor “underground,” his grasping nothing for himself, and his embrace of the Cross of Christ remained his mission and purpose for surviving. The Chief Shepherd could never abandon his Catholic flock. After his release and exile to America, the same principles of life still obtained for Cardinal Kung. He knew the names and faces of the faithful flock in their hidden, underground Catholic lives. He never stopped shepherding them even from here in Stamford, Connecticut, an ocean and a continent away. The Cardinal Kung Foundation, which he established here carries forward Christ’s mandate to Cardinal Kung: *Ignatius go build up my Church*. Today’s Mass is living proof that the Cardinal’s legacy as Shepherd of the Catholic Underground pastures in China is still vital.

The name by which St. Francis is commonly known in Italy is “*Il Poverello*” – meaning “the little poor man.” A forensic study of St. Francis’s sacred skeleton indicates that he was only 5’2”. Cardinal Kung was likewise small in physical stature. Yet his resemblance to St. Francis the *Poverello* goes much deeper than a measurement of his height. Cardinal Kung, like St. Francis, was fixated upon the humility of Jesus Christ – who, though he was God, condescended to be born in a poor stable and die on a poor cross. The humility of Christ evoked a humble response from little Cardinal Kung throughout his life. We can truly say that he, Kung Pin-Mei, became the “*Poverello* of China.” Neither the *Poverello* of Assisi nor the *Poverello* of China would die on a Cross, but they carried their crosses until death.

In the humble person of Cardinal Kung, the Underground Catholic Church in China glimpsed the poor Christ, referenced in chapter 25 of Matthew’s Gospel. Through all his years of suffering, Cardinal Kung, the *Poverello* of China, experienced being hungry, thirsty, naked, homeless, sick and in prison. Christ disguised himself in the hungry, thirsty, homeless prisoner Kung Pin-Mei. We can call those long years of his humble life a “white martyrdom. His was not the “red martyrdom” of blood and death at the hands of infidel communists, inimical to the true Catholic faith. Rather, his was the long, lonely, painful “white martyrdom” of daily suffering, persecution, and misunderstanding – a dry “white martyrdom” which the Cardinal gently offered up to God, lifelong, for the good of the Church. He remains now, even 26 years after his death, the “*Poverello* of China” – the little poor, long-suffering bishop who laid down his life day after day for his flock.

Like St. Francis, Cardinal Kung did not allow his life of “white martyrdom” to be sad. He was basically a joyful man. His face radiated a beatific joy. Cardinal Kung loved to sing – both in Chinese and in Latin. So too did St. Francis, who was nicknamed the “Troubadour of God.” St. Francis composed prayers and poems, and he would often sing them, such as his “*Canticle of the Creatures*”- the Canticle of Brother

Sun. St. Francis the “Troubadour” fancied himself the “Herald of the Great King.” Centuries later, when Cardinal Kung was dragooned by the Communist authorities to stand at a microphone before thousands of people in the Shanghai dog racing stadium, he confounded his captors by shouting over and over again: “Long live Christ”! With that musical lilt in the tones of his Shanghai dialect, Cardinal Kung, like St. Francis, was a “Troubadour” heralding the Great King – Jesus Christ!

After 30 years in prison, when Cardinal Kung was transferred from the jail to three final years under house arrest, an occasion arose when Cardinal Sin of the Philippines visited China. The communist authorities and Patriotic Church did not want him to speak with Cardinal Kung. So, the two were seated at opposite ends of the long banquet table, with communist-sponsored “Patriotic” churchmen separating them. At the end of the meal, Cardinal Sin suggested that the diners at table each sing a song. When the turn came for Cardinal Kung to sing, he chanted the Latin hymn “*Tu es Petrus*” – “You are Peter and upon this rock I will build the Church” – signaling in code to Cardinal Sin that the Bishop of Shanghai had never faltered in his allegiance to the Truth of the Catholic faith. Cardinal Kung was indeed a “Troubadour of the Truth.”

As many of you know, the Cardinal’s late nephew Joseph Kung invited me to visit Cardinal Kung in his death chamber a few days before the Cardinal passed. A little nobody like me had the undeserved privilege of administering the Last Rites of the Catholic Church, anointing the old Cardinal, using the Latin texts of Extreme Unction. He was weak but alert, sitting in his armchair. At the end of the ritual, we invoked the intercession of Our Lady, singing the “*Salve Regina*.” As I looked at the *Poverello* of China, his face glowed. This saintly, little, pain-wracked, fragile Cardinal had one final surprise for me, however – He mustered the strength to raise his right arm and confer upon me his priestly blessing. This turned out to be the last time that Cardinal Kung was able to raise his arm and bestow a blessing. His “white martyrdom” had sapped every ounce of his physical energy. Yet his eyes – a mirror of his soul – bespoke his witness as a stalwart priestly “martyr of love” for God, for China, and for the Truth. May the Church someday recognize and canonize the *Poverello* of China, Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei, as a “white martyr” for the Truth – a “*Vir Totus Catholicus and Apostolicus*” – a “man totally Catholic and Apostolic”! He’s our man! He’s our Saint!

Rev. Father James McCurry, OFM, Conv
Director, Cardinal Kung Foundation
Ex-Minister Provincial, Our Lady of the Angels Province

www.cardinalkungfoundation.org
cardinalkungfdn@gmail.com