



NEWS REPORT

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Msgr. Gao Kexian, martyred Bishop, killed by five years in prison

by Fr. Bernardo Cervellera

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The Press Office of the Holy See announced yesterday the death of Mgr Gao Kexian, Bishop of Yantai. Bishop Gao, who was in prison since October 1999, died at the end of August.

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Rome (AsiaNews) - Bishop John Gao Kexian, 76, a reserved and timid man, died in an unknown prison in northern China. His remains were sent to his relatives at the end of August without any explanations. He joins the ranks of the martyred who gave their lives for Christ in China.

Little is known of this witness who lived underground for most of his life. Only now, after his death, has his ordination by the Vatican been made public. At the time of his arrest, news reports said that he was either a layman or at best a priest. This was done to avoid him any further legal persecution by China's security apparatus. Just three years ago his status as a bishop in Shandong province was finally made public.

In his 2002 China trip, US President George W. Bush urged Jiang Zemin to free him. Instead, Bishop Gao died in prison as did one of his colleagues, Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyan, who died in custody as a result of torture on April 13, 1992.

Bishop Gao was raised in the Catholic faith among underground Christians living in China's largest Catholic community, in Hebei province. Today, there are an estimated 1.5 million Catholics in this province, most of them belonging to the underground Church, guilty in government eyes of exercising what in theory is a constitutionally-guaranteed right, namely the right to practice their religion without the regular and wearisome control of the security apparatus and the official Catholic Patriotic Association.

For decades Bishop Gao lived as an underground priest dodging arrest, frequently changing places. For some time he taught in one of Hebei's rural underground seminaries where poor students and teachers meet unbeknownst to the security apparatus surviving on the meager charity provided by equally poor local Christians.

Gao Kexian was ordained bishop in 1993. For some time he worked in Hebei province. Eventually he was appointed as bishop to the neighbouring diocese of Yantai in Shandong province, a region that is so poor that an increasing number of peasants are forced to leave for the cities in search of work. It was here, with the assistance of very few priests, that Bishop Gao was able to carry out his evangelisation work till October 1999. His refusal to join the breakaway, national Church under the Catholic Patriotic Association led to his arrest.

The Franciscan Order was in charge of the Diocese of Yantai from 1894 till 1949. In 1949 the Diocese had 12,000 faithful, a number that has risen to 30,000 today. Currently, three Shandong dioceses are without bishop: Yantai, Weihai, Heze.