



NEWS REPORT
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Chinese Underground Bishop Yao Dies at 87

by Christopher Bodeen

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BEIJING - Leon Yao Liang, a bishop in China's underground church who was imprisoned for more than 28 years under the communists, has died, a U.S.-based Catholic group reported Monday. He was 87.

Yao died on Wednesday in the northern township of Xiwanzi, where he had been auxiliary bishop since 2002, the Cardinal Kung Foundation said in an e-mail.

Yao had held the position in defiance of the government-sanctioned Patriotic Catholic Association, which has no official relations with the Vatican and does not recognize the pope's right to appoint bishops.

Born in a farming village in the northern province of Hebei in 1923, Yao was ordained a priest in 1946 and assigned as assistant pastor, said the Kung foundation, based in Stamford, Connecticut.

Yao's religious activities came under increasing restrictions after the 1949 seizure of power by the officially atheistic Communist Party, which reviled Catholicism both as a religion and as a reminder of China's past weakness in the face of expansionist European powers.

As the political climate worsened, Yao was forced into a labor camp in 1956, and two years later, sentenced to life imprisonment for refusing to renounce his loyalty to Rome, the foundation said.

His release came in 1984, eight years after the death of communist China's founder Mao Zedong, although, like other released priests, his activities remained tightly restricted. According to France's Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture, Yao was held for a further 2 1/2 years beginning in 2006. The group said Yao attracted about 1,000 parishioners to his weekly masses.

Yao's death was also noted on blogs maintained by Chinese Catholics, with photos showing him in his bishop's robes, posing for photos with nuns, and meeting students at a church camp last summer.

The Kung foundation said Yao's death was being kept secret by authorities and said it had no information on funeral arrangements. A man who answered the phone at the government's religious affairs bureau in Zhangjiakou, the municipality overseeing Xiwanzi, said he had no information about the bishop's death. Like many Chinese bureaucrats he would only give his surname, Guo.

A man who answered the phone at the Xiwanzi township government also said he had no information about Yao and refused to give his name or title.

China forced its Roman Catholics to cut ties with the Vatican in 1951 and worship is allowed only in state-backed churches, which recognize the pope as a spiritual leader but appoint their own priests and bishops.

Millions of Chinese, however, belong to unofficial congregations that are loyal to Rome, such as those presided over by Yao.

That leaves the Chinese church divided between government-sanctioned congregations and those loyal to Rome, although, in many places, there is a considerable degree of overlap between the two communities.

Pope Benedict XVI has made improving often-tense relations with Beijing a priority of his papacy and has sought to unify the country's faithful under his wing. But there has been little tangible evidence of progress in his four-year effort, and the Vatican recently denounced a new wave of arrests of underground priests and bishops and accused Beijing of mounting obstacles to a dialogue with the Holy See.

Numerous elderly priests in the underground church remain in detention or under house arrest, including two bishops from dioceses in Hebei, Su Zhimin, 76, and Shi Enxiang, 85.

The Kung foundation said it had also recently learned of the detention of three priests from Xuanhua, also in Hebei, last June. It said the local underground bishop, Zhao Kexun, was in hiding, while other priests were under increasing pressure to join the official Catholic association.

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