

A Chronology of Pope John Paul II's Spiritual Journey to China

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Translated by Purple Kwong

His Holiness Pope John Paul II has passed away and has returned to his Heavenly Father on April 2, 2005. In his 26 years as pontiff, China had always been on his mind. He regretted that he had not been able to pay a visit to China, but his heart was always with the Church in China. This article follows the spiritual journey of Pope John Paul II to China.

Pope John Paul II was born Karol Wojtyla on May 18, 1920, in Wadowice, near Krakow, in Poland. He was the second child in the family. His father was a retired lieutenant in the Polish army, and his mother was from Lithuania, both being devout Catholics. In 1929 his mother died. In 1939 the Nazis invaded Poland, and Karol joined the anti-Nazi underground.

In 1942, Karol was determined to become a priest. Under the Nazis rule, he underwent clandestine studies in an underground seminary. On November 1, 1946, Karol was ordained a priest in Krakow. He then studied at the Angelicum University in Rome, and returned to Poland after obtaining his doctorate in theology in 1948 with a thesis on the topic of faith in the works of St. John of the Cross.

On September 28, 1958, the young Fr. Karol Wojtyla was consecrated Auxiliary Bishop of Krakow Diocese, and was elevated to Archbishop of Krakow on January 13, 1964. Three years later, on June 26, 1967, Archbishop Karol Wojtyla was nominated Cardinal by Pope Paul VI.

On October 16, 1978, Karol Cardinal Wojtyla was elected the

264th Pope, and chose to be called John Paul II. He was the first non-Italian Pope in 455 years.

In his 26 years as pontiff, Pope John Paul II always sought ways to unite the Church in China with the Universal Church. Although even until the end of his days his wish to visit China had not been fulfilled, his concern for China had appeared throughout his papacy. The following highlights his “journey to China” in the 26 years of his pontificate.

In 1979, the year following his election as pope, John Paul II appointed more than 20 cardinals, including one *in pectore*. It was not until 1991 that he announced this to be Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pinmei of the Shanghai Diocese.

On February 18, 1981, in Manila during a pastoral visit to Asia, Pope John Paul II addressed the Chinese Catholic Church and expressed his wish to dialogue with China. On that same day, he beatified a Filipino Chinese Catholic, Lorenzo Ruiz, whose father was a Chinese and his mother a native Tagalog. Lorenzo Ruiz was martyred in Japan.

On May 13, 1981, a Turk shot Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square, which almost killed the Pope. The Pope recovered after surgery and a long rest. On June 6, 1981, during his recovery, the Pope appointed Bishop Dominic Tang Yiming Archbishop of Guangzhou.

On January 6, 1982, the Pope wrote to all bishops in the world asking them to pray for the Church in China.

The new *Code of Canon Law* was promulgated in 1983, and the Chinese version was much treasured in Mainland China. All priests and bishops wished to have their own copy, and copies were printed in Mainland China. On May 15 in that same year, Pope John Paul II announced the beatification of two Salesian martyrs in China, Bishop Luigi Versiglia, SDB and Fr. Callisto Caravario, SDB.

Also in 1983, the Pope secretly wrote to the Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping as a sign of friendliness, but got no response from China.

On February 28, 1984 when the delegation of Taiwan bishops visited the Pope for their *ad limina* visit, the Holy Father requested Taiwan and Chinese Churches elsewhere to act as bridge churches for their mainland compatriots.

On June 4, 1984, the Pope accepted the resignations of 29 foreign bishops from their former sees in China.

In June 1985, media in Europe reported that the Vatican intended to give the astronomical telescope in Castel Gandolfo, in the suburb of Rome, to Hefei University in Anhui Province. However, due to various reasons, the transfer eventually did not take place.

On October 19, 1987, the Pope proclaimed Lorenzo Ruiz, a Filipino Chinese Catholic, a saint.

On May 29, 1988, the Pope announced the elevation of 25 bishops to the rank of cardinal, among them was John Baptist Cardinal Wu of Hong Kong Diocese. He was the third Chinese cardinal known at that time.

On October 5, 1989, the Pope flew on his private plane to South Korea to preside at the Eucharistic Congress. He had asked China if his plane could fly over China's territorial space, but the request was rejected.

On June 29, 1991, Pope John Paul II received Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pinmei in the Vatican, and presented him with his red hat in the Consistory.

On May 16, 1993, the Pope beatified Fr. Maurice Tornay, a martyr in Tibet.

On September 25, 1994, at the commemoration of the seventh centenary of the arrival of Patriarch Joannes de Monte Corvino, OFM, in China, Pope John Paul II declared, "I wish to meet you soon," showing his love and care for Catholics in Mainland China and Taiwan.

In 1995 when the Pope visited Belgium, after presiding at a special Mass he received three priests from Mainland China who had concelebrated the Mass with him.

On June 2, 1996, the Pope canonized the French missionary Fr.

Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, CM, who went to China in the 19th century.

On January 18, 1998, the Pope announced the elevation of 22 bishops to the position of cardinal. They included Paul Cardinal Shan, SJ, of Kaohsiung Diocese, Taiwan. He was the fifth Chinese cardinal.

On April 19, 1998, Pope John Paul II proclaimed in the Vatican that he had invited Bishop Duan Yinmin of Wanxian Diocese, Sichuan Province, and his coadjutor Bishop Xu Zhixuan to the Asian Synod. Unfortunately they could not get passports from Beijing and therefore could not go to Rome to attend the meeting.

On November 10, 1998, Pope John Paul II appointed Monsignor Thomas Yeh Sheng-nan, whose ancestral home was Changhua County in Taiwan, as Apostolic Nuncio to Sri Lanka, and simultaneously Titular Archbishop of Leptsi Magna. He was the first Chinese appointed by the Vatican as Apostolic Nuncio.

In 1999, it was originally intended that the closing ceremony of the Asian Synod be held in Hong Kong. However, because the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region rejected the request of the Pope to come to Hong Kong, the closing ceremony was held in New Delhi, India.

In December 1999, the Pope composed a letter to the Church in China, entitled "And the Word was made flesh." In it the Pope once again extended his friendship to China.

On January 6, 2000, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association self-consecrated five bishops. The Holy Father was saddened at this news.

On October 1, 2000, the feast day of St. Therese of Lisieux, the Pope canonized 120 martyrs in China. Beijing was unhappy with the canonization, and articles poured forth questioning the personal integrity of those canonized. The Pope once again defended the canonized martyrs, but at the same time apologized for choosing a date that clashed with the Chinese National Day.

On October 24, 2001, at the symposium held at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome to commemorate the fourth centenary of the arrival of Fr. Matteo Ricci in Beijing, Pope John

Paul II delivered a speech reflecting on the significance and limitations of the missionaries' work in China. He asked forgiveness of the Chinese people for the wrongs committed by some missionaries while they were preaching the gospel in China.

On January 29, 2002, the Pope received the delegation of bishops from Taiwan for their *ad limina* visit. This was the last time during his life Pope John Paul II met a large number of Chinese bishops for an *ad limina* visit.

On September 28, 2003, Pope John Paul II announced the appointment of 31 new cardinals, including one *in pectore*. Many international media guessed that this unnamed cardinal might be from Mainland China.

On October 5, 2003, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Joseph Freinademetz, SVD (1852-1908) a saint. Fourteen days later on October 19, World Mission Sunday, he beatified Mother Theresa of Calcutta, who had visited China.

On February 1, 2005, Pope John Paul II had respiratory problems and was hospitalized for ten days. His health did not improve much after he was discharged from hospital. On April 2, 2005, Pope John Paul II died, returning to the heavenly kingdom at the age of 84. The Pope had always wished to visit China, but his dream did not come true. The unnamed Cardinal that the Pope kept in his heart in 2003 vanished along with his death.

Pope John Paul II longed to normalize the relationship with China but did not succeed, and this issue is left for the new pope to handle.

Some statistics about Pope John Paul II are worth noting. During his lifetime, he wrote 14 encyclicals, 15 apostolic exhortations, 11 apostolic constitutions, and 45 apostolic letters, and made 2,416 speeches during his overseas visits. Almost every year we can find among his speeches concern for the Church in China.

During his pontificate, the number of Catholics in the world rose from 720 million to 1.1 billion. The Catholic population in China rose from 3 million to approximately 12 million.

He elevated a total of 231 bishops (plus one *in pectore*) to the cardinalate, among whom were three Chinese.

He appointed thousands of bishops, plus more than a hundred Chinese bishops who were not included in the annual report of the Holy See.

He beatified 1,338 holy persons and canonized 482 saints, among whom were 122 saints from China.

He made 104 visits outside of Italy, which covered 129 countries and regions. Unfortunately, he did not have the chance to visit China.

In the 26 years of Pope John Paul II's pontificate, the Vatican established diplomatic relations with 81 countries, making a total of 174 countries with diplomatic relations. However, the Vatican still does not have diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China.