

Three Cases: Challenges to the Church during the Cultural Revolution

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The Catholic Church was deeply wounded during the Cultural Revolution. Among the many tragedies, the Taiyuan execution was one of the most heartbreaking. For many years few historians dared to mention it. It is worth reporting, so 50 years after the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, we turn the spotlight of history upon it.

In 1970, around the middle period of the Cultural Revolution, there was a food crisis in Shanxi. The citizens of Taiyuan protested on the streets, but were suppressed by the local government. It is not known how the Catholic Church got involved, but some church leaders were blamed for this unrest. They included the self-elected and self-consecrated Bishop Li Dehua. Also implicated were Bishop Lei Zhenxia of Fenyang Diocese and the first Administrator of Taiyuan, Father Hao Nai. Both had been sentenced to prison back in 1955. Their biographies are presented below.

Bishop Lei Zhenxia, Simon, was born in Haohejiazhuang, Fengyang city in 1915. He entered Fengyang Minor Seminary at a young age, and was ordained a priest on January 15, 1939. He did further studies at the Fujen Catholic University in Beijing (then Peking) and was appointed Bishop of Fengyang on June 9, 1949. Archbishop Celso Riberi consecrated him a bishop in Shanghai in 1951. In 1955 he was arrested and sentenced without trial to 12 years in prison. Later the term was extended to 20 years.

Administrator Fr. Hao Nai, John Baptist, was born in Taiyuan City on May 30, 1914. Bishop Agapitus A. Fiorentini of Taiyuan ordained him a priest on December 31, 1936. In 1948 he was appointed Vicar General of Taiyuan. Following the detention of Msgr. Dominicus L. Capozzi in September 1951, he became the

administrator of the diocese. The local government authorities arrested him on September 26, 1955.

Bp. Li Dehua, Paul, was born on December 5, 1910 in Taiyuan City. Bishop Agapitus A. Fiorentini ordained him a priest on February 3, 1935. In 1946, he served as the Parochial Vicar of the Taiyuan Cathedral. Since 1949, he worked under the Vicar General Fr. Hao Nai. Li became the administrator of the Taiyuan Diocese after Fr. Hao Nai was arrested. In 1961, he accepted the government's arrangement and became the self-elected, self-consecrated bishop of Taiyuan.

As Bishop Lei and Administrator Hao had already been imprisoned since 1955, they escaped the mass criticism-struggles of the Cultural Revolution. Bp. Li Dehua, who had long compromised with the government, was arrested in September 1966, and became the main target of criticism. In a precious photo kept by a Shanxi Catholic, we can see Li standing in the middle of a group of church leaders, a placard announcing their "crime" dangling from each one's neck (see p. 68). Li's crimes were "Western influence" and "Traitor." Li was a man of no power. What could he have done to betray his country?

According to interviews during my visit to Shanxi province in the early 1990s, the three were sentenced to death at the same time. Bishop Lei and Fr. Hao were executed first. But the exact time of Li's execution varied according to different sources. According to a priest of the Datong Diocese, "Lei Zhenxia, died on February 26, 1970; Hao Nai, died on February 26, 1970; Li Dehua, the self-elected and self-consecrated bishop of Taiyuan, died on March 16, 1970."

An elderly nun who grew up with the CICM Sisters recorded this event in her diary. She had a very different version. She also mentioned the death of Fr. Hao's elder brother. She wrote:

Hao Nai was executed by a firing squad; so was his elder brother. Li Dehua was to be shot the following day; but he died of fright during the night. The next day two or three persons, discovering that Bp. Li was already dead, lifted his body up, and fired three or four shots into it.

According to Fr. Li Yuming (a Hong Kong diocesan priest who was from Shanxi), the case was even more complicated. He wrote:

Bishop Li Dehua died in prison in the spring of 1970. On March 16 of the same year, he was sentenced to death by the Military Control Commission. It was announced that he would be executed by a firing squad. However, Li Dehua died in prison before the sentence could be carried out. Nevertheless, the Military Control Commission announced to the public that Li's death sentence was carried out. In reviewing the case of Li Dehua, the High People's Court of Shanxi Province declared that "Li Dehua had died in prison (of natural causes), so it was wrong to say that his death sentence was immediately carried out afterwards. Such a practice is inappropriate, and does not accord with the law. We should take a lesson from this." Thus the case of Li Dehua was terminated.

Perhaps Fr. Li's record best explains why there were so many different versions. It is traced throughout the unfolding of the tragedy.

It is still a mystery today why the three church leaders were implicated in the Taiyuan riot. According to some Catholics in Fenyang, the local authorities accused Bishop Li of:

- (1) communicating with foreign enemies, and acting against the people;
- (2) organizing a reactionary organization in prison known as the "China Religious Party" which had a programme, and of which he had appointed himself chairman;
- (3) attempting to cause a riot and explosions in the prison, with the intent of robbing banks and ration-stations upon escape; it was alleged that reactionary letters were found on him.

All these accusations seem today to be totally unbelievable. Did the local authorities try to find some scapegoats? The Shanxi government has the obligation to investigate, and reveal the truth. During the Cultural Revolution, and even from the 1950s through to

the 1980s, quite a number of priests and church leaders died in prison, but we believe that only these three were formally executed.

A painful decision amidst chaos

For those clerics who felt totally lost during the Cultural Revolution, quite a number of them repudiated their priestly vows and got married, either voluntarily or under duress. After the Revolution, when they reflected on their lives, many lamented: “during the Cultural Revolution, we gave up all hope; we did not believe that the Church could survive and one day recover.”

We are saddened by the matrimonial cases involving priests, in particular the complex case in Hohhot, the capital city of Inner Mongolia. The head of the Church was Archbishop Wang Xueming whom Pope Pius XII had appointed to the post in 1949.

Archbishop Wang Xueming, Francis, was born in Xiaonao Village, Dulita, Inner Mongolia on October 4, 1910. Wang was ordained a priest on July 28, 1935. In 1951, Archbishop Ludovicus Morel, CICM consecrated him bishop of Hohhot. He was imprisoned from 1955 to 1957, and underwent forced labour from 1966 to 1970. He resumed leadership of his diocese in 1980, and was elected vice-chairman of the government-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference that same year. He died on February 10, 1997 at the age of 87 (see p. 71).

According to Archbishop Wang, in 1951 when the Belgian CICM missionaries withdrew, he was appointed bishop. According to Fr. Yao Zhengyi of Datong, Shanxi Province, “There were some 40 priests in Xueyin (Hohhot), and Morel chose him (Wang) to be bishop.”

In Wang’s recollections, his first detention was from 1955 to 1957. “It had to do with contact with foreigners.” That was the time of the “Rectification and the Decline of Party Norms” movement. He was a member of the Political Consultative Conference in Inner Mongolia for 10 years. During the years 1966 to 1980, he “stayed away from the Church” for 10 years, and spent four years as a labourer in the city (Hohhot). In 1968 during the campaign of “clear out class groups,” he was jailed for six months. (He was the only one jailed because he was the leader.) Afterwards he lived in

Hohhot. He was in some kind of a training class. It was a bit freer than prison, and they also paid him a salary.

According to Fr. Li Ying of the same diocese, however, during the Cultural Revolution Bishop Wang and a few dozen priests from nearby dioceses were jailed together. They suffered endless beatings and hard labour. Only when Bishop Wang agreed to “get married” to a Sister, did the tortures end for the group.

As to what kind of torture Archbishop Wang faced, and whether he really got married or not, different people in the Church in Northern China have different viewpoints.

The late Archbishop Zhang Xin of Taiyuan and a priest there had a rather negative impression of Archbishop Wang. They told me: “The wife of Wang Xueming arranged marriages for other priests and Sisters. They sidelined those priests who refused to get married. Wang was already married in 1966. It was said in 1963 that Wang had joined the Patriotic Association from the very beginning. Some of his priests married and divorced, and married again.”

Other people also raised the issue of non-married priests being marginalized. Archbishop Zhang mentioned two names, “Fr. Wang (Xixian) and Fr. Guo (Zhengji) did not get married. But they did not want to work openly.” Fortunately, in 1997, Pope John Paul II appointed Fr. Wang to be Archbishop of Hohhot. Fr. Guo was appointed even earlier (1990) as Bishop of Shaanba. Below are their biographies.

Archbishop Wang Xixian, Joseph, was born in 1926. Archbishop Wang Xueming ordained him a priest in 1953. From 1958 to 1979 he was jailed because of the government’s Anti-Rightist Campaign. He was sentenced to work in the fields as a rice-farmer. After being rehabilitated, he returned to work at the Cathedral of Hohhot, mainly teaching at the Hohhot Seminary. In 1997 he was made Archbishop of Hohhot. He passed away on May 25, 2005.

Bishop Guo Zhengji, Francis Xavier, was born in 1914, and ordained in 1941. He did further studies at the Catholic Fugen University in Beijing in 1946. One of his classmates was Paul Cheng who later became the Bishop of Tainan in Taiwan. He graduated in 1950 and started working at different parishes. In 1958 he was jailed in Tangshan City. He was released and returned to

Sanshenggong, Shaanba in 1978. The government rehabilitated him in 1980. In 1990, he was appointed Bishop of Shaanba. He passed away on May 3, 2004.

Bishop Guo told me that “All the pastors here (in Shaanxi) who care for the faithful had spent time in prison. Those who had not been imprisoned got married. But the Catholics do not want to have any contact with them.” Regarding the case of Archbishop Wang Xueming, however, he showed understanding. “The pretend-marriage of Bishop Wang was done under pressure. During the Cultural Revolution, Catholics dared not host him, nor did the priests. So he deserves our forgiveness.” Bishop Guo concluded his comment with these words, “Anyway, he (Wang) enabled the Church to survive the Cultural Revolution.”

According to Fr. Yao Zhengyi of Datong, “Nobody knows whether Wang Xueming was married for real or not. He was under pressure during the Cultural Revolution. But the laity did not take it very well.”

In 1990 I had the good fortune to interview Sr. Lucia Ji Ruizhi, who was then 84 years old (see p. 71). She was ethnically Han, but her hometown was Hohhot, Inner Mongolia. She received formation at the CICM convent when she was young. She lived in Jining from 1954, and during the Cultural Revolution. She told me, “All the married priests in Jining were not really married. They suffered and contributed more than we did to the Church.”

Sr. Ji was the classmate of the elder sister of Archbishop Wang Xueming when they were at the convent. Sr. Ji said, “In 1979 when Bishop Wang was rehabilitated, and celebrated the first mass, he announced: ‘I made a mistake and was a bad example. But about my marriage, only God and I know (the truth).’”

According to Sr. Ji, the Sister who married Wang was about 20 years younger than him. She had died at the convent of Hohhot Diocese in 1987.

Wenzhou Diocese: recovering in the face of difficulties

Despite all the difficulties during the Cultural Revolution, positive examples of living the faith were never lacking. Wenzhou Diocese in Zhejiang Province was one such bright spot. Based on

“A Short History of the Wenzhou Diocese,” written by a team of diocesan priests shortly after 1980, we get a glimpse of their situation during the Cultural Revolution.

In 1948 the Holy See established the Wenzhou Diocese (then Yongjia Diocese) and appointed Fr. Su Xida as Vicar General to take care of the diocese. But before the diocese could have its own ordinary bishop, the Holy See appointed Bishop André Jean-François Defebvre of Ningbo to be the administrator of Wenzhou.

In June 1953 when Bishop Defebvre was arrested and expelled, the power of jurisdiction over Wenzhou (except for the power of Orders) passed into the hands of Su Xida. In 1954, when government people repeatedly interrogated Fr. Su, he knew that he would soon lose his freedom. So he assembled all the priests of the diocese and openly appointed Fr. Francis Wang Yijun as his first successor and Fr. Matthias Chen Xizhi as the second successor. On September 10, 1955, the authorities arrested Administrator Su. Fr. Wang Yijun immediately and faithfully stepped in as administrator. But he and Fr. Chen Xizhi were both arrested only 18 days later.

After the arrest of Fathers Wang and Chen, Fr. Fang Zhigang was illegitimately consecrated in 1960 in Shanghai as bishop of Wenzhou, with the government’s support. In 1961 the government in Wenzhou posted the “13 points” on the main entrance of the Wenzhou Cathedral and imposed severe restrictions upon the Church. The Church then became submerged in silence.

In 1966 when the Cultural Revolution began, Fang Zhigang openly married. In the second half of that year during the campaign of “Dismantle the four olds,” churches were converted into factories. All the statues, sacramental articles, and scriptures were either burnt or sold, and all religious activities stopped.

In 1969, Fr. Wang Minggao and Fr. Lin Longqi were sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment, and Fr. Chen Xizhi to 20 years. Wenzhou entered into its darkest period.

In 1970, Administrator Wang Yijun was sent from labour camp back to his hometown, Zhangjiazhuang in Cangnan County. He was still labeled anti-revolutionary and was subject to local government surveillance. He was not concerned about his own safety, and immediately took up his responsibilities as Administrator. He visited all around the diocese, celebrated the Eucharist, and

administered the sacraments. He also convened a diocesan synod, and led the other priests and the faithful to devote themselves to evangelization (photo on p. 71). They ran catechumen classes, gave religious formation to the youth, printed Scriptures and holy books, and manufactured religious articles. Church life in Wenzhou was gradually recovering.

In 1976, after the overthrow of the “Gang of Four,” the Wenzhou Diocese developed even more rapidly. Catechesis for youth, women and the elderly was instituted. Classes for baptism and confirmation, for catechists and choir formation were springing up. Administrator Wang visited everywhere and administered the sacrament of Confirmation. He also initiated the celebration of the Year of Our Lady, the Year of the Stigmata, and the Year of the Holy Family to raise the quality of the lay Catholics and their piety. He attracted many new people to the faith, and brought back many lost sheep. In 1980, he exercised his authority as Administrator and recommended two seminarians, Wang Zhongfa and Chen Nailiang to go to Shaanxi Province, where Bishop Zhou Weidou of Fengxiang ordained them as priests. This raised the ministerial strength of the Wenzhou Diocese.

Having read the above extract from “A Brief History of the Wenzhou Diocese,” we now understand how important the contributions of the two Administrators Su Xida and Wang Yijun were to the recovery and development of the Wenzhou Diocese. In the early decades since the 1980s, the number of Catholics in the Wenzhou Diocese increased steadily. At the turn of the 21st century, the Catholic population there already reached 100,000. It is one of the most populous and vibrant dioceses in China. All this can be attributed to the legacy of the two administrators.

In the early 1990s I visited Longgang Town of Cangnan County in Wenzhou. I am grateful to have had the chance to talk with Administrator Wang for almost half a day. We visited most of the parishes and new diocesan developments. I was deeply impressed with his simplicity, pragmatism, wisdom and piety. These Church leaders who did not give up their mission during difficult times deserve to be models to all the Catholics.

Conclusion

The Cultural Revolution turned everything upside down in China. It destroyed the hope of many passionate Communist youth. It pushed the country into unprecedented killings and exterminations; it almost strangled the church communities in China. Even after the Cultural Revolution, the local authorities in Wenzhou still used Fang Zhigang to hinder the activities of Administrator Wang. Administrator Wang died in peace on January 16, 2004. Meanwhile, the authorities in Taiyuan are still reluctant to disclose anything about the execution of the Church leaders there in 1970. But Catholics can never forget all that these leaders have done for the survival of the Church. The Church in China, having walked through the valley of the shadow of death, received the gift of vitality granted by the Holy Spirit. The Church in China quickly came to life again within a very short time.

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