



## THE DEATH OF BISHOP ZHANG KEXING

It was officially announced in Beijing on November 21st that Melchior Zhang Kexing, Bishop of Xiwanzi, had passed away two weeks previously in Huanhua, Hebei.

Bishop Zhang had studied in Rome from 1933 to 1939 before returning to his native diocese in Xiwanzi to take up pastoral duties under Bishop Leo De Smedt, CICM. It was while working as the pastor of the church in Hojiadi that he was arrested on July 1st, 1949 by the Communist government and put in prison. For nearly two years, he served time in the prisons of K'angpao, Dehua and Zhangbei, and he did not come to know of his appointment by Rome as Auxiliary Bishop of Xiwanzi until his release in 1951. Consecrated a bishop in May of 1951, he subsequently succeeded Bishop De Smedt when the latter died in November of the same year. Soon after, he was re-arrested. Bishop Zhang would spend the next 36 years of his life in labour camps, until he was finally released in March of 1985.



After his release, he was not allowed to return to his diocese but lived with his younger sister in Xuanhua, where he was kept under government surveillance. Bishop Zhang was highly respected and greatly loved by the priests and catholics of the area, who beat a steady path

to his door. They visited him in his illness and offered their blood for transfusions when the need arose.

During his final years, several foreign visitors also requested permission to see him, but their requests were always refused by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association authorities in Beijing. As recently as October 14, Fr. Jerome Heyndrickx, CICM, on a visit to China with a group of Belgian priests and catholics, among whom were two old China missionaries who knew the Bishop intimately, asked permission to see him. They had heard that the Bishop was dying and they applied on humanitarian grounds. However, all their requests were denied by the same high level CCPC authorities in Beijing, who gave as a reason that the area is "not open to foreigners". This came as a great disappointment to the visitors, and also to Bishop Zhang, who when he heard the bad news wrote on a piece of paper the four Chinese characters "Tai Ke Xi Le"... "What a great pity."

After the Bishop's death, Father Heyndrickx received the following message, which had been dictated by the Bishop to a mutual friend and entrusted to him to be given to Father Heyndrickx personally. The letter reads:

"I know that in a very short time I shall say farewell to this world, which is so full of sin and suffering, and go to meet our Heavenly Father. In truth, I am reluctant to leave behind the many good priests, sisters and catholics, who have remained so faithful to the Lord, to His Church and to the Pope through so much suffering and so many trials.

While I lay sick in bed and unable to rise, I yearned to see Father Heyndrickx for I had much to tell him. Then I was told that he had come to China with a group of priests and catholics for a friendly visit, and he had applied with two other priests to come and see me, a sick and dying man, but was refused permission by the Patriotic Association. It makes me very sad. And while it may clarify for us the real purpose of this group, it does make me wonder what function it really serves.

Please bring my greetings to Father Heyndrickx. I wish to thank him from the bottom of my heart for his continual concern for me."