

## *Remembering Bishop Melchior Zhang on the 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his death*

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*It seems only fitting in an issue of Tripod dealing with the underground church to remember one of its best loved leaders whose 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of death in November was remembered by thousands of his followers. The story has been edited for Tripod. The Chinese version appeared in Tripod No. 108.*

It was the winter of 1985. And it was also the middle of the night. The foreign visitor to China was not expecting anyone. He was suddenly surprised when he heard a knock at the door. He opened the door and there before him stood an old man, all bent over and badly dressed. Seeing the foreigner, the old man's face suddenly broke out in



a beautiful and peaceful smile. He said nothing but indicated that he wanted to come in. Once inside, he said in a barely audible whisper, "I am Melchior Zhang, the bishop of Xiwanzi." The stranger was not sure whether to believe him or not. For days, the old man had tried in every possible way to meet this foreigner, but each time authorities had blocked his way. "Yes, it's me, really, it's me, Zhang Kexing," the old man insisted, "I have come to ask you for a favour; please bring this package to the Pope." The old man opened the little package and took out an old worn out pair of pants, now completely faded and patched and an equally worn out undershirt with a printed number. "Say to the Pope that I wore these through all my years in

prison. They are the witnesses of the love that Jesus Christ has put into my heart and the peace that he has given me. Throughout my whole life, I have loved Christ alone and his church." Melchior Zhang died three years later without ever being able to meet any foreign visitor again.

Many Chinese Christians have spent the best years of their lives buried in prisons and labour camps. Today many of us look to these men and women as precious witnesses, who in the midst of their passion, never lost hope and even found joy in their long years of suffering. Such a man was Bishop Melchior Zhang, described even his enemies as virtuous and saintly, a man of faith and hope. Last November in China, thousands remembered Bishop Zhang, the faithful servant of God, on the tenth anniversary of his death.

Bishop Zhang Kexing was born on the feast of the Epiphany, January 6, 1914 into a prosperous family in Congli County, the village of Xiwanzi, Hebei Province. His baptismal name was Melchior. He was intelligent and fervent. In the fall of 1925, Melchior entered the Xiwanzi Seminary. He was an outstanding scholar. He entered the major seminary in Datong in 1932, and one year later Bishop Leo De Smedt selected him to go to Rome to study at Pontifical Urban University. Melchior was ordained a priest in Rome on March 18, 1939. After returning to Xiwanzi, Melchior worked both as a pastor and a teacher. Melchior was arrested in Haojia in 1950, and imprisoned in Zhangjiakou.

In order to leave a successor behind, Bishop De Smedt asked all the pastors of the diocese to elect one of their number to become local bishop. Everyone chose Melchior Zhang, who was still in prison. The Holy Father approved of the nomination.

With the land reform program and the suppression of the anti-revolutionaries campaigns in 1951, religious activities in the diocese came to a halt; all the charitable institutions were gradually taken over by the government and churches were closed. Members of the clergy were arrested, and the activities of the foreign missionaries were severely curtailed.

In March 1951, the government released Father Zhang and he returned to the Zhangjiakou church where in the presence of three Belgian missionaries and several local priests, Bishop De Smedt happily announced that Father Zhang Kexing was to become bishop of the Xiwanzi Diocese. When Father Zhang heard the news, he began to cry. His tears were tears of gratitude for the trust that the

clergy and Catholics of Xiwanzi had placed in him, and also because he felt unworthy. He tried to refuse the appointment. One of the Belgian Fathers, who had been rector of the seminary when Father Zhang was a student there asked, "Melchior, are you refusing to accept the will of God?" On hearing this, Father Zhang finally agreed.

The political climate was not very good, but Bishop De Smedt had decided that May 24, 1951, the feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, was to be the ordination day. Several weeks later, Bishop De Smedt was arrested. He became sick and died the following November. Bishop Zhang succeeded him.

Bishop Zhang Kexing, who vehemently opposed the Three-Self Renewal Movement, was arrested again and sentenced to 10 years in prison as a counter-revolutionary. He served his sentence in the steel mill belonging to Zhangjiakou's No. 2 labor camp. Everyday he had to carry heavy steel rods, and this caused him great suffering.

In 1957, the government began to promote the movement to self-elect and self-consecrate bishops. Bishop Zhang Kexing was released on parole but he continued to support the unity of the Church, and soon found himself back in prison. In 1958, Bishop Zhang was given a life sentence. He eventually was sent back to the No. 2 Labor Camp in Zhangjiakou City where he spent his days breaking up rocks. For three years, Bishop Zhang depended on subsidies from Father Ren Yuru, the CICM procurator in Shanghai, for survival.

In 1965, Bishop Zhang was transferred to the prison in Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province. During the Cultural Revolution, he was subjected to many trials and humiliations. Even while eating, his hands were manacled behind his back, so that he could only eat by lapping up his food. In 1979, Bishop Zhang was assigned to a translation company in Baoding City, Hebei Province. There his living conditions improved greatly. He was released from prison in February 1985 and went to stay with his younger sister, Zhang Kefeng's family, in Xuanhua.

In Xuanhua, the authorities put many conditions on Bishop Zhang: he was not permitted to meet Catholics, not permitted to administer the sacraments, and not permitted to accept Mass stipends. Someone near the house where he was staying was assigned to watch over him night and day. After two years, the clergy and Catholics were finally able to make contact with Bishop Zhang. But

now, the bishop was seriously ill. In September 1987, the doctors diagnosed that he had three months to live. He was dying of esophageal cancer. However, God granted him more than a year of life.

Catholics came from all over to see him hoping he would recuperate. They took turns night and day sitting by his bedside. When the bishop needed a blood transfusion, over a hundred Catholics volunteered to donate their blood. Lying on his sick bed, Bishop Zhang never uttered a complaint. He prayed continually, and kept encouraging the Catholics to love and serve the Lord. On November 6, 1988, in the presence of two priests and several Catholics praying by his bedside, he quietly closed his eyes and died. He was 74 years old.

On November 7, the clergy and Catholics of Xuanhua escorted the bishop's body back to his hometown, Xiwanzi. On November 9, ten priests concelebrated the funeral Mass. Several young Catholics, using bamboo poles on their shoulders, carried the bishop's casket to the Xiwanzi Catholic cemetery, located on a high mountain. The road was difficult to walk, but several thousand Catholics with white flowers in their lapels marched in procession to the cemetery. The Catholics of China will long remember the man who was such an inspiration to them during his life.

