

## **The Catholic Church in China in 2021: An Analysis**

This article gives an analysis of the events of the Catholic Church in China, the China-Vatican relations, and provides some statistics of the Church in 2021.

### **Church life in China**

On baptisms, the year 2021 began with a group of 50 new baptisms at a church of Wenzhou diocese (Zhejiang) on Jan 14, with which the catechumens underwent a five-month catechism class. More baptisms had taken place at Easter Vigil as the measures guarding against the spread of Covid-19 viruses were lifted right before the Holy Week, bringing another 38 new Catholics to Wenzhou diocese, as well as 16 baptisms in Tangshan, 11 in Hangzhou, 5 in Suzhou and 3 in Jinan dioceses. In Inner Mongolia, 4 baptisms took place in Tabius Banner and 19 in Hohhot. However, some churches indicated that their catechism classes were cancelled or postponed due to the closure of churches and suspension of religious activities imposed in January 2021 before the Lunar New Year, and their Easter Vigils took place without baptisms. Hundreds of baptisms and confirmations were administered sporadically in other months of the year, as scattered reports in *Faith Press* revealed, albeit the total number of baptisms could not be

obtained. The figure would include 10 baptisms at Otuoke Front Banner, Inner Mongolia, all from the same family on July 1, the day of burial of their mother, a Catholic.

At the onset of 2021, local dioceses started the year with specific themes to boost faith formation, such as Changzhi diocese focusing on family evangelization; Tangshan on love, a continuation of the year of faith in 2020; whereas Hangzhou, Jiangxi, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Jinan, Ningbo and Wenzhou chose St Joseph and the Holy Family, traditionally well received among the Chinese Catholics, as the model of learning. Other dioceses like Shuo Zhou, in Shanxi, promoted Bible study, and copying the Scriptures at home is a means favored by many Catholics in China. It has been a way widely used to sustain the formation of faith during lockdowns or suspensions of church activities. Some churches commemorated the Chinese biblical expert Father Mark Fang Chih-jung, a Jesuit who died in Taipei on March 2.

Again, citing pandemic precautions as the reason, Catholic pilgrims were deterred from visiting Our Lady of Sheshan shrine in the month of May for the special veneration of Mary Help of Christians. Instead, Catholics in other dioceses went on pilgrimages to other Marian shrines and churches. Young Catholics of Tangshan diocese went on walking pilgrimages, and Sisters of the same diocese walked for hours to a certain church for pilgrimage.

Raising the awareness of ecology among parishioners

is the activity of a social service group of Ningxia diocese, northwestern China, led by their bishop, Li Jing. Their actions included support for drinking water devices, encouraging organic farming, pesticide-free vegetables and non-disposable tableware.

Torrential rains have battered lowlands and urban cities in Henan since late July, and in Shanxi, Shaanxi and other provinces in China until September. Zhengzhou, the capital city, recorded the heaviest rainfall since 1951. Jinde Charities and parishioners of Weiqizhai of Zhouzhi diocese, Jinan and Xining in Qinghai were among supporters to deliver relief aids to the flood-hit areas in Henan and others. Catholics in Shandong held *Taize* prayers for the victims, especially Zhengzhou.

Braving difficulties in 2021, the *Faith Press*, a Catholic-run publication based in Shijiazhuang, struggled to operate. The *Faith Press* celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary on September 1 with a short article of 510 Chinese characters, expressing its gratitude and hope, thanking Catholics' financial support and prayers in its difficult moments in early 2021. The 30-year-old Catholic medium, now functions online, has served as a platform of news and information for Catholics in and outside China, for people to understand the lives of the Catholics in the vast country of China, and for mainland Chinese to know about the universal Church.

Since early 2020, innovations of nurturing formation of faith for Catholics in China via social media have been

popular. In 2021, certain posts, chat groups and online classes launched by Catholics in the social media in China were removed or unable to be posted. At the same time, regulations and laws on security of data, cybersecurity and information flow in China were passed during the year. Towards the end of 2021, such initiatives of online formation seemed to be sluggish and cautious, since the *Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services* were published on Dec. 21, 2021, which took effect on March 1, 2022. Such measures warn of spreading religious content online.

## **China-Vatican relations**

The Catholic population of China is estimated to be 10 million. Official figures of the Chinese government stand between 5 and 6 million.

There are 98 bishops in China, with 71 bishops in the official Church, and 27 in the unofficial Church at the end of 2021.

The ordinations of two new bishops in the official Church in 2021 “within the framework of the *Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement*”, and the passing away of three elderly bishops resulted in 71 bishops in the official Church, giving the number of bishops in China to be 98 bishops. There are 27 bishops in the unofficial Church, not recognized by the Chinese government.

In 2021, the ordination of **Coadjutor Bishop Anthony Li Hui of Pingliang**, Gansu province, northwestern China, took place on July 28, 2021 at the cathedral of the diocese. His election as coadjutor bishop by the local Church was held a year before, on July 24, 2020. Pope Francis made the nomination on Jan. 11, 2021. Coadjutor Bishop Li assists Bishop Han Jide of the diocese. Bishop Li, born in Mei County, Shaanxi province, in 1972. He entered the preparatory seminary of Pingliang, and later studied in the national seminary in 1992. He was ordained priest in 1996. He worked at the Secretariat of the government-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (CCPA-BCCCC) until he was elected coadjutor bishop. His consecration was presided by Bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin of Kunming (Yunnan), head of the national Church bodies. Bishop Li's consecration is in line with the *Sino-Vatican Agreement* on episcopal appointments in China. He is the third ordination after its renewal on October 20, 2020, and the fifth since the signing of the accord on September 22, 2018. (*AsiaNews*; *UCAnews*, July 28, 2021)

The second ordination was **Bishop Francis Cui Qingqi of Hankou/Wuhan**, a Franciscan, on September 8, 2021. He was the fourth bishop since the renewal in 2020 and the sixth since the signing in 2018. Bishop Cui filled the episcopal see left vacant since Franciscan Archbishop Bernardine Dong Guangqing died in 2007. Born in Xiangyuan (Shanxi) in 1964, Cui was ordained a priest in 1991. He was the

administrator of Wuhan diocese since December 2012. He worked as deputy secretary of the government-sanctioned bishops' conference. The new bishop, 57 years old, was elected “democratically” on Sept. 27, 2020 by the local Church. Pope Francis approved the appointment on June 23, 2021.

The first two since the renewal were Bishop Thomas Chen Tianhao of Qingdao (Shandong) and the second of Bishop Liu Genzhu of Hongdong/Linfen (Shanxi). The very first two since the signing of the *Agreement* in 2018 are Bishop Yao Shun of Jining (Ulangab) and Coadjutor Bishop Xu Hongwei of Hanzhong (Shaanxi).

In 2021, Pope Francis spoke about China in his address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See. Regarding the renewal of the *Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement* on October 22, 2020, he said, it “is essentially pastoral in nature, and the Holy See is confident that the process now begun can be pursued in a spirit of mutual respect and trust, and thus further contribute to the resolution of questions of common interest.”

In October 2020, the Holy See and China agreed to extend for another two years the *Provisional Agreement* regarding the appointment of bishops in China, signed in Beijing in 2018.

In October 2022, China and the Holy See will face the question again, as in 2020: should the *Agreement* be renewed

or not. The Covid-19 pandemic situations have slowed down the negotiation. Moreover, voices in the Church not in support of the accord exist, viewing the ordeals suffered by the bishops and priests of the unofficial Church under the measures of registration of religious personnel and related matters.

Three bishops emeritus, all from the official Church, passed away in 2021. All the elderly prelates had lived before the founding of the Peoples' Republic of China, and suffered in the Cultural Revolution. One of them was illicitly ordained in 2000 and was legitimized by the Holy See. Their lives reflected some parts of the development of the Catholic Church in China in the past decades.

**Bishop Joseph Zong Huaide of Sanyuan**, in Shaanxi province, was born on March 5, 1922 and passed away on Jan. 5, 2021. He was 100 years old. He was born on June 16, 1922 into a Catholic family in Sanyuan. Ordained a priest in 1949, he later became administrator of the diocese. In 1965 he was arrested and sentenced in 1966 to “reform through labour” in Sanyuan, Xi’an, Baoji, and Yan’an camps. In 1980 he was released and returned to work as a priest in Tongyuanfang, Sanyuan. In 1985 he was secretly appointed bishop of Sanyuan, and clandestinely consecrated in 1987. Bishop Zong affirmed seminaries and formation were paramount. Perhaps this is why he sought to be recognized as the official bishop of Sanyuan in 1992. In 1997 he managed to make a trip to Italy where he was received by John Paul II.

In 2003 the Holy See accepted his resignation. He ordained Father Han Yingjin in 2016 as his successor. (*AsiaNews*, Jan 7, 2021)

**Bishop Mathew Cao Xiangde**, bishop emeritus of Hangzhou (Zhejiang), died on July 9, 2021. He was 93 years old. Ordained a bishop in 2000 after he was “democratically” elected despite the Vatican’s opposition. In 2008 the Holy See granted him legitimacy but without jurisdiction over the diocese. He was one of the bishops appointed in 2000 without papal mandate during the crisis in relations between Beijing and the Vatican. In September 2004, the prelate asked the Holy See to be legitimated; this was granted on June 8, 2008 but without jurisdiction. Born in 1927 in Tongzhen, in Shanghai, he was ordained a priest only in November 1985 by Bishop Jin Luxian of Shanghai. During the Cultural Revolution, he was put through harsh experiences. Once he became a priest, he was able to perform his priestly ministry in Hangzhou cathedral and in the parishes of Xiaoshan and Jinhua. On June 25, 2000 he was “democratically” elected and ordained bishop by Matthew Yu Chengcai, the official bishop of Haimen, despite the Holy See’s exhortation not to proceed. Bishop Cao’s official obituary by the Church bodies states: “For all his life Bishop Cao always loved the fatherland and the Church, supporting the principles of Church autonomy, independence and self-administration, serving it with faithfulness and zeal in a humble and modest way. He fulfilled his duties with responsibility and served society.” A small number of participants attended his funeral



due to the epidemic. (*AsiaNews*, July 10, 2021)

**Bishop Stephen Yang Xiangtai**, bishop emeritus of Handan (Hebei) died on Oct. 13, 2021. Bishop Yang was born in 1923 into a Catholic family in the village of Gaocun, which was part of Weihui diocese (now Handan) and under the care of the Pontifical Foreign Missions Institute (PIME). In July 1966, during the Cultural Revolution, Yang was arrested. He was not tried until October 1970 and sentenced to 15 years in prison. Yang was rehabilitated and released on March 15, 1980, acquitted of all charges. In 1988 he became rector of the diocesan seminary and chaplain of the Congregation of the Consolation of the Holy Spirit. Bishop Chen Bailu then appointed him vicar general. On November 30, 1996, Bishop Chen consecrated Yang his coadjutor bishop. On September 17, 1999, upon Bishop Chen's retirement, Yang became the ordinary bishop of Handan Diocese. On June 21, 2011, in Feixiang Church, he consecrated Father Joseph Sun Jigen as his coadjutor bishop. He did this in secret, a few days before the official date: it was to avoid that the consecration ceremony, already approved by both the Holy See and the Chinese authorities, was presided over by an illegitimate bishop. Bishop Yang was not an "underground" bishop, but he never easily submitted to the "patriotism" of religious authorities linked to the Chinese Communist Party. For example, in 2015 he supported the courageous protests of the clergy of Wenzhou against the demolition of crosses in Zhejiang Province. (*AsiaNews*, Oct 13, 2021)

## Unofficial bishops

Since the *Regulation on Religious Affairs* took effect in February 2018, more and more bishops and priests in the unofficial Church have been forced to register with the government in order to work as recognized religious personnel, but they have to accept the conditions of following the principle of independence of the Church; for some, this is against their conscience and the principle of faith.

Gradually some clergy agreed to register and work openly in the Church, like Bishop Lin Jiashan of Fuzhou.

Others adamantly refuted are **Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou**. He has been brought away, missing for some time and returned. In 2021, a private chapel used by him to say Mass for the followers was identified as “illegal religious venue” used for “illegal religious activities” and given a notice of a fine of 200,000 yuan.

**Bishop Zhang Weizhu of Xinxiang**, together with 10 priests (some reports said 7) and 10 seminarians, were arrested on May 20, 2021. In a large police operation including a raid on the old factory building in Shaheqiao, Hebei Province, Bishop Zhang, his priests and seminarians were arrested. The factory was used as a seminary by the Apostolic Prefecture of Xinxiang, Henan Province, and made available for this purpose by a Catholic. (*AsiaNews*, May 20 and 21, 2021) Police arrested the 63-year-old

Bishop Zhang on May 21, a day after they detained the priests and seminarians for allegedly violating the country's new *Regulations on Religious Affairs*. Zhang, appointed by the Vatican, was ordained clandestinely the bishop of Xinxiang in 1991. (*UCAnews*, May 24, 2021) The priests and seminarians were released afterwards. The whereabouts of Bishop Zhang are unknown.

**Bishop Cui Tai of Xuanhua**, as well as their priests, have been brought away in late 2021, before the opening of the Winter Olympics in January 2022.

## **Priests, Sisters and Seminarians**

There are about 4,000 priests in China, in both official and unofficial communities. Regarding the registration, the number of registered priests from the unofficial side is not available.

The year 2021 saw a good harvest of **new priests**, with a total of 40 new priests in dioceses of China. Shanghai diocese recorded four new priests on June 5; and three in Chengde on April 11 and Nanjing on June 11. Two new priests are of Jingpo ethnic minorities, in Yunnan. The new priests are mostly in their 30s and educated.

About 350 **seminarians** in China are studying in major seminaries of the official Church. The data of formation communities in the unofficial Church is not available.

About 5,000 **Sisters** are estimated to belong to dozens

of congregations from official and unofficial communities in China. The profession of vows of Sisters took place in various congregations in 2021. Novices have joined the Sisters' congregations.

In 2021, 16 priests in China died, according to *Veritas Culture* and other sources. Half of the number of priests were below 60 years of age. The youngest was Father Li Shaofei of Guizhou, 32, died of a brain disease. Father Cao Junliang of Jiangxi, his sibling brother and a layperson died in a fatal traffic accident in Suizhou (Hubei). A priest died of Covid-19 disease in Manila when studying there. About 10 Sisters died during the year, with half below 60 years of age. The Health of the clergy and Sisters has raised concerns again.

## **Implementation of religious regulations**

More regulations on religion were released in 2021. Following the promulgation of the *Regulation on Religious Affairs* on February 1, 2018, the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Personnel* is a comprehensive administrative regulation for the supervision of religious clergy by the state. The measures were enforced by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) on Feb 9, 2021. *Global Times* states that the measures identify the responsibilities of religious clergies, improve the cultivation of religious talents and protect their legal interests in accordance with laws. It covers clergy's responsibilities, the qualification reorganizations and the administration of

them. Noting religious clergy should resist illegal religious activities, religious extremism or overseas forces' use of religion to infiltrate China, the measures remind religious personnel not to undermine national security and public safety or violate principles on independence from outside.

*The Measures for the Administration of Institutes for Religious Education*, issued by SARA on May 1, 2021. This is for the supervisions by the state of religious institutes, including Protestant and Catholic theological seminaries. It took effect on Sept. 1, 2021. It explains that institutes for religious education are for the training of religious personnel. These institutes do not belong to the state educational system, their academic degrees are only valid within the religion. They serve the purpose of training “patriotic young talents of the religions,” on religious education and training adhered to Sinicization.

Other regulations like the *Measures on the Administration of Internet Religious Information Services* is a new regulation published by SARA on Dec. 21, 2021 and took effect on March 1, 2022. The regulation applies to Masses, sermons, baptisms and all religious information services. To conduct religious activities online will require government authorisation in China.

## **Sinicization in the Centenary of the Communist Party**

The year 2021 was inevitably a year of dominance of the Communist thoughts, as the Party celebrated its

centenary and declared religion must adapt to socialism. Addressing a national religious work conference in Beijing on December 3-4, 2021, the first since 2016, Chinese President Xi Jinping warned that religious activities must stay within “the scope stipulated by laws and regulations.” China will further promote “Sinicization of religion”, with a focus on strengthening control of online religious affairs, a report of Xinhua said. “Religious activities should be carried out within the scope stipulated by laws and regulations,” Xi said.

Consequently, religions like Catholicism have been repeatedly called to be aligned with Sinicization, In the centenary year, the governing bodies of the Catholic Church in China, the state-sanctioned-Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops’ Conference of the Catholic Church in China (CCPA-BCCCC), had arranged patriotic education programs with the “two associations” (CPA and Church Administrative Commission) at provincial and local levels. Seminars, talks, study sessions, trips to revolutionary site, exhibitions, cultural activities were arranged to have Catholic bishops, priests, Sisters and lay leaders to participate and study. The history of the Communist Party and President Xi’s speeches on the Party were of prime importance. The issues of the official SARA-run magazine *Catholic Church in China* in 2021 published articles written by leaders of the CCPA-BCCCC focused on the contribution of the Party to the country and the Church.

The Sinicization of the Catholic churches was introduced in seminars, talks and study sessions on inculturation of church architecture and cultural practices, as the Chinese communist authorities implement in spirit and action as a policy of the Party that goes beyond the centenary year.