

The Catholic Church in China in 2020: An Analysis

This article analyses the events and news reports on the Catholic Church in China for 2020 and it also includes some statistics.

Pandemic and Flooding

In the year 2020, despite being a tough year for all people globally, the Catholics in China, both in the open and underground communities, have struggled to maintain liturgies, formation and social services in the face of the situation created by a nationwide suspension of churches and religious activities amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The religious authorities and the government-sanctioned Church bodies of CCPA-BCCCC (Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China) warned all churches to be disinfected, and observed the “Two suspensions and one postponement” measures on churches and activities as well as seminary classes. In late May of 2020, intense rainfall and severe flooding affected tens of millions of people in 11 municipality and provinces in southern China – Hunan, Jiangxi, Guangxi, Guizhou, Sichuan, Hubei, Chongqing, Anhui, Zhejiang, Fujian and Yunnan. Some church buildings were damaged and many Catholics helped the victims of the floods. After months of struggles, the churches gradually resumed activities.

Formation of Faith

The formation of faith and the fostering of religious vocations have always been the focus of many Catholic activities in China. Amid a general lockdown at the 2020 Lunar New Year, clergy, sisters and laypeople creatively and effectively used available resources in the Internet to continue prayers and formation activities. Families with young children prayed together and copied the *Bible*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and prayer books. During the lockdown, some priests in Hebei and Jiangxi reported that they offered Masses, shared the Bible and enjoyed family gatherings with their parents and families.

Several Catholics in northeastern China composed a song *When Covid-19 Sweeping* that expressed their “fears and worries” about the hard-hitting pandemic. The lyrics said, “People are struggling between life and death” and “the faith in our hearts has moved us to pray humbly and fervently to God for the graces to drive the illness away.”

Some clergy and sisters proactively launched formation activities for Catholics and others online. A virtual classroom was established on the Internet in China. A priest-scholar first gave lectures on Church history in China. More priests and sisters joined him and formed a team of teachers, in systematically giving online courses on biblical studies, catechism, liturgy, moral theology and spirituality. Sisters and the faithful shared their experiences of faith and their

vocation stories. Some laypeople helped with logistical matters. This virtual classroom held a prayer gathering for Covid-19 victims in Wuhan and worldwide.

With efforts organized by the Catholic-run *Jinde Charities* and local Church communities in China, shipments of surgical face masks, respirators and other necessities were sent to Wuhan and other affected places in China, and later overseas to the Holy See, Italy, Germany, Haiti, South Korea and the Philippines.

Restrictions faced by Church Communities

A group of migrant workers in a major city of China had worries and problems in relation to their meeting place. They were rural Catholics from a neighboring province, and gathered regularly for prayers, liturgies and activities. The group had been warned about “holding illegal religious gatherings.” They returned to their native villages for the Lunar New Year in 2020, but could not get together because of the lockdown. Last summer, most members, who were young adults, returned to the cities to look for jobs. Their priest of the unofficial Church had been pressured to be registered, or “transformed,” but since it was against his conscience he would not comply with the demand to register. He just hoped that his faithful would have the freedom to worship, and live a prayerful life according to the Catholic doctrine.

In the registration application, the priests of the unofficial Church were required to agree to abide by the state Constitution and laws; to obey the administration of the government; to implement religious activities in accordance with laws and regulations; to accept the principle of autonomy and self-administration of the Church as well as the CCPA's leadership and arrangement. However, some priests refused to register because they felt it was against their conscience and principle of faith, and with objections from their own families, and parishioners.

The banning of unregistered worship houses continued in 2020. *AsiaNews* reported Jan. 16 that at least five churches in the Funing/Mindong diocese, of whom the majority of the clergy and faithful originally belonged to the underground Church, were closed by the authorities. The places included Shuangfeng, Saiqi and Fu'an. Auxiliary Bishop Guo Xijin of the diocese, the former ordinary bishop, and some elderly priests were evicted from their building. The closure of the building was due to "fire safety protection" measures. Water and electricity were cut off from the premises. The elderly home run by the sisters was closed. Later, Bishop Guo announced his "resignation" from office on Oct. 4, but his resignation was not accepted by the Holy See.

In Hebei, Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding was taken away for some months, and some sisters from the diocese were also detained by security officials, *UCA News* reported in August 2020. Also in Hebei, Bishop Cui Tai of Xuanhua was taken away. On Nov. 2, three priests

along with more than a dozen seminarians and sisters of the unofficial community of Baoding diocese were forcibly taken away, *AsiaNews* reported Nov. 6. Bishop Su Zhimin of Baoding has been missing since 1997. His whereabouts are not known. His coadjutor Bishop An Shuxin was installed as the ordinary of the diocese.

On August 15, 2020, the celebration of the Assumption of Our Lady by unofficial communities were restricted or banned by local security officials, *UCA News* reported. *AsiaNews* reported July 8 that all the unofficial clergy in Yujiang Diocese, Jiangxi, were banned from preaching and carrying out Church activities. The diocese has been pressured with many of their meeting places closed.

Religious Measures

Since the revised *Regulations on Religious Affairs* issued by the State Council took effect on February 1, 2018, methods of administering different aspects of the *Regulations* were issued. Effective from Feb. 1, 2020, the *Measures for the Administration of Religious Groups*, issued by the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), gives detailed provisions for religious groups in China and how they should operate. The new measures oblige the religious groups to “educate and guide religious professionals and religious citizens towards supporting the leadership of the Communist Party of China and the socialist regime.” The *Measures* include an extensive list that the religious affairs departments require of religious groups.

Two other draft measures dated Nov. 18, 2020 were posted for a month-long public consultation. They were the *Measures for the Administration of the Religious Clergy* and the *Measures for the Administration of the Religious Activities of Foreigners in China*. The one on *Religious Clergy* was adopted by SARA on Jan. 8, 2021 and will take effect on May 1, 2021. By March 2021, the one on *Foreigners in China* was not issued.

In a meeting on seminary education organized by the CCPA-BCCCC, about 30 government officials and seminary officials attended. Their magazine the *Catholic Church in China*, in Issue 5 of 2020, reported that the Church officials saw the need to raise the standard of seminary education and the formation of religious vocations, and to resolve the crisis of religious vocations. Seminary representatives reported on the curriculum and the situation of their seminaries. An official from the authorities said that the seminaries had to train personnel in the direction of Sinicization and to have more exchanges between seminaries.

Several other seminars on Sinicization were held in the year for Church officials. Directions from the two assemblies of National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference were conveyed to the Church officials.

China-Vatican Relations

The Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and

the People's Republic of China (PRC) on the appointment of Chinese Bishops was renewed on October 22, 2020, and extended for another two years until October 2022. The contents of the agreement remain a secret. The Holy See “considers the initial application of the *Agreement* – which is of great ecclesiastical and pastoral value – to have been positive, thanks to the good communication and cooperation between the Parties on the matters agreed upon, and intends to pursue an open and constructive dialogue for the benefit of the life of the Catholic Church and the good of the Chinese people.” However, the Chinese side gave a shorter statement, saying: “After friendly negotiations with the Vatican, China on Oct. 22, 2020, decided to extend the interim agreement regarding the appointment of bishops for two years.”

Before the renewal of the Provisional Agreement, questions and speculations were raised in the media about the continuation of the bilateral document. According to *Reuters*, it received the consent of Pope Francis on September 15, 2020. The date of the *Agreement* aroused some confusion among believers and the media. It was renewed not according to the anniversary date of its signing in Beijing, September 22, 2018 but according to the date of its coming into effect a month later, on October 22, as agreed upon by both parties.

Then, two Chinese bishops were ordained within the framework of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and PRC. Fathers Thomas Chen Tianhao of Qingdao

(Shandong) and Liu Genzhu of Hongdong/Linfen (Shanxi) were ordained bishops on Nov. 23 and Dec. 22 respectively. Both were recognized by the Holy See and the Chinese Government.

On Feb. 14, 2020, the meeting of the foreign ministers of the Holy See and China - Archbishop Paul Gallagher, the Secretary for Relations with States of the Holy See, and Wang Yi, State Councilor and Minister of Foreign Affairs of China - on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany, was regarded as the first meeting of such high-ranking officials from both sides since the 1950s.

Statistics

The Catholic population in China is estimated to be 10 million. Figures of adult and infant Baptisms for 2020 were not available because of Covid-19 pandemic. There are 147 dioceses (116 dioceses and 31 ecclesiastical circumscriptions) recognised by the Catholic Church, while the Chinese government maintains 95 dioceses with seven dioceses and places administered by other dioceses.

There were 99 Chinese bishops in total, including 27 unofficial bishops, of whom 14 bishops are in office. The number of official bishops was 72, of whom 66 were in office.

It was estimated that about 4,000 priests were working in China, official and unofficial totals combined. In 2020, a total of 39 new priests were ordained in the official Church, with the largest group of eight being ordained for Beijing

diocese on Sept. 21; and four others for Hengshui diocese in Hebei on Jan. 6.

There were about 4,600 Religious sisters in 127 Religious congregations, official and unofficial totals combined. It was learnt that some sisters professed vows.

Deaths of Clergy and Sisters

In 2020, three elderly bishops died. Two of them were unofficial bishops - Ma Zhongmu of Ningxia at the age of 100 and Han Jingtao of Siping, Jilin province, aged 99.

Bishop Emeritus Zhu Baoyu of Nanyang (Henan) in the official Church was reportedly tested positive for Covid-19 virus in March, 2020. Bishop Zhu received medical treatment and later recovered. The authorities in China had named him “the oldest Chinese” recovered from the Covid-19 infection. His case was reported by state media. Weeks after his discharge from hospital, Bishop Zhu eventually passed away on May 7 at the age of 98.

At least 30 priests and sisters in China passed away during the year. Half of them were under 60 years of age, and some died of heart failure, stroke and chronic diseases. The two youngest deceased priests in 2020, born in 1981, died at the age of 39. Father Ma Zhaxi of Yunnan, a Tibetan who served Catholics in the mountains of Yunnan, died of liver cancer; and Father Wu Jian of Guangxi was killed in a traffic accident after a pastoral visit.

Responding to cases of sudden deaths of priests and sisters in local Churches, the CCPA-BCCCC issued a circular dated Dec. 4, 2020, asking dioceses to set up a medical checkup system and to strengthen the importance of physical exercises and awareness of good health among the clergy and religious. Observers attributed the causes also to pressure from pastoral work.