

# The Church *in pectore*:

## The persecution of the Catholic Church in Communist China



The program of the Communist Party of China (CPC) guaranteed freedom of religion and the right to practice religion to all Chinese citizens

### Mao Tse Tung, patron of the "1968 Generation"

The year is 1968. Mass student protests against a "system of coercion and deceit" (i.e. western democracy). In Paris the youth take to the streets. Riots and demonstrations become daily occurrences on university campuses throughout the United States. Next to portraits of Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara the demonstrators carry portraits of China's Communist leader, Mao Tse Tung. In their upraised hands they clasp copies of Mao's revolutionary program known as the "Little Red Book."

We know now that many of these mass protests by a spoiled and pampered youth (whose "revolutionary" fervor finally burned itself out in the so-called sexual revolution, i.e. in practicing the principle of "doing what you want with who you want") were discreetly backed and

controlled by foreign Communist agents. Perhaps this is why we are no longer so surprised that these same people who clamored for "More freedom!" should have chosen as one of their idols the architect of one of the world's bloodiest totalitarian (Communist) regimes. As one who brought about the deaths of tens of millions of his own countrymen, Mao Tse Tung can only be compared with his counterparts in Russia (Stalin) and Germany (Hitler).

In its relations with the Catholic Church, the Chinese Communist government followed models all too familiar to observers of other so-called "people's democracies." In 1949, after a bloody civil war, the Communists announced the rise of the Chinese People's Republic. (This is still the country's official name.) Ratified in September of the same year, the program of the Communist Party of China (CPC)

guaranteed freedom of religion and the right to practice religion to all Chinese citizens. Such was the official declaration, but just as in other Communist countries, it remained a dead letter.

Soon after the CPC declaration, the Party's chairman, Mao Tse Tung, made it abundantly clear that one of the priorities of the Communist authorities would be to "free" China from all forms of foreign domination, not only political and economic, but spiritual as well. To the last of these categories belonged the Christian religion, and particularly Catholicism, which the Chinese Communists branded as a "western religion" (i.e. foreign to Chinese culture) and a form of "spiritual colonialism." What the Chinese Communists really sought was the total subjugation of the society to their totalitarian ideology, which tolerated "competition" from no quarter – spiritual and moral domains not excepted.

The missionary work of the Church in China had its own long tradition. The Franciscans began proclaiming the Gospel to the "Inner Realm" as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Society of Jesus launched its own dynamic missionary activity. The spreading of the faith gained fresh momentum in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, when China began opening up to the world at large. (True, this opening up was to a large extent forced upon it by the western powers – principally Great Britain, which sought to draw China into the orbit of its colonial politics.) This period saw an increase in activity not only by Catholic missions but also by other Christian, mainly Protestant, denominations.

### Rapid expansion and revolution

In China it is numbers that speak most eloquently. In 1900 there were just over 740,000 Catholics in China. By 1912 there were already twice that many (over 1,431,000). In 1926 that number reached 2,394,962. By 1948, a year before the Communist takeover,



Mao's portrait at Tianamen Square

the number of “reformer priests” dropped from around 500 to under 100.

## Patriotism vs. the Universal Church

The response of the Communist authorities was two-pronged. On the one hand, they increased their repressive measures against the Church loyal to Rome. In 1956, 70 priests and almost 3000 lay Catholics were imprisoned. These repressive measures decimated the church hierarchy. Only 2 bishops and 14 priests remained inside China. At the same time, plans went ahead for the creation of a “patriotic Chinese Church free of imperialist influences” This meant a Church that was totally docile to the Communist authorities and severed from the Roman Pontiff (union with Rome being of course the necessary condition of remaining in the Catholic communion).

The decision was taken in 1956. On 15 April 1957, the Congress of the National Catholic Church began its deliberations under the watchful eye of the Communist Party. 241 delegates took part in it, including 11 frightened bishops and 70 priests. These numbers show, however, that a decided majority of Chinese Catholics remained loyal to the Pope and the bishops in union with him.

August 1957 saw the creation of the state-controlled “Patriotic Union of the

China had 4 Catholic universities, 3768 Catholic primary schools, 101 Church-run secondary schools, over 200 hospitals run by religious orders, and 29 printing houses publishing Catholic materials.

The Holy See noticed and attached due importance to this rapid expansion. In 1926, in the Basilica of St. Peter, Pope Pius XI personally consecrated China's first six native bishops. Twenty years later, his successor, Pius XII, would institute a full ecclesial hierarchy for the whole of China. By the terms of his Apostolic Constitution of April 11, 1946 (*Quotidie Nos*), the Holy Father established 104 Chinese dioceses along with 20 metropolitans and 79 diocesan bishops.

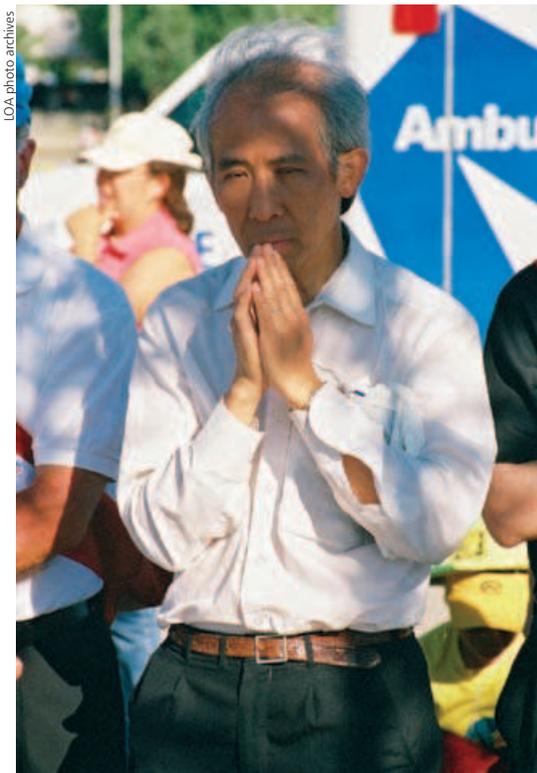
Yet only a short while after this, in 1949, the Church in China would enter into a period of great trials. By the end of 1951, after denouncing Christianity as “a tool of western imperialism,” the Chinese Communist authorities had expelled 1136 Catholic missionaries and 14 bishops. Twenty-six bishops were stripped of their freedom; two of them were thrown into prison.

In their bid to destroy the Church, the Chinese authorities, like the Communists of the “people's democracies” in Europe, tried to break her up both from the inside and through external repression. Their tool for this purpose were the so-called “patriot priests.” First, the State demanded that the Chinese Church institute certain “democratic reforms” (i.e. deprive the bishops and the Pope of control over the formation of their members and their

right to make personal appointments) and break all ties with “western centers of imperialism” (read: the Apostolic See). They left the Church authorities under no illusion: “Either the Catholic Church in China institutes these reforms, or we will destroy it.”

Since the pastors of the Chinese Church would not hear of these “reforms,” the Communist authorities set about the task of realizing their goal. On 13 December 1950, they created the first “reform group” within the Church. St. Michael's Church in Beijing was taken away from the Catholic faithful, renamed the “Reform Committee Bureau,” and placed at the group's disposal. The interior décor of this profaned sanctuary left no one in doubt as to the intentions of these state-backed “reformers.” The red flags, the banners bearing slogans like “Long live Communism!” “A United Christianity Free of Imperialism, Long Live Mao!” and the red star mounted next to the cross were enough to persuade the faithful that the “reformers” had nothing in common with Catholicism. They were confirmed in this conviction by calls from the pulpit to strike the Pope's name from the prayers of the canon of the Mass, because Catholics “cannot abide making petitions to the Pope” (sic!).

The vast majority of the faithful saw through these state-backed appeals for “internal renewal” in the Chinese Church. After 14 months of intense reformist activity, the number of new adherents did not exceed 2000. By the same token,



Catholic Church.” “Democratic elections and the consecration of bishops” – in open disobedience to the Holy See – took place at the behest of the authorities. In March of 1958 two bishops brought forward for this purpose were consecrated.

Clearly, the Holy Father could not put up with such and other similar acts of usurpation. In his encyclical *Ad Apostolorum Principis* of June 29, 1958, Pope Pius XII condemned the attempt by Chinese Communists to destroy the Church in China. He excommunicated the perpetrators, including those priests and members of the faithful who joined the “Patriotic Union of the Catholic Church.”

This so-called “patriotic Church” enjoyed the full support of the Chinese authorities. All the Catholic churches were handed over to the “patriots,” as was all church property that had not yet been plundered by the authorities. In the meantime, running the risk of the most severe repression, the real Catholic Church, the one loyal to the Holy See, went underground. This was the state of affairs in the late 1950s, and so it remains to this day.

Anti-Catholic repression (in fact not just anti-Catholic, for Chinese Protestant communities also have their “patriotic” counterparts) has never abated in Communist China. The “patriotic Church” became the mouthpiece of Communist propaganda aimed at persecuting the Universal Church. In 1963, China’s “patriots” were ordered to call the Pope a “devil worshipper.” They characterized him as “a former friend of Hitlerite Fascism and now a tool of American imperialist aggression.” “Patriotic” pulpits became the channel through which the Communist bosses appealed to the Chinese people to free themselves from “Vatican control, the dangers of its inherent imperialism, and [the Vatican’s] conspiracy to enslave people throughout the world.”

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), which Mao Tse Tung unleashed largely with a view to eliminating opposition within the Communist Party, Christian churches along with numerous Buddhist and Tao temples and other “relics of the old culture” fell under the ban of the puritanical revolutionaries. The “Red Guard” (fighting squads of communized youth) even destroyed churches that the authorities had handed over to the “patriotic Church.” Crucifixes

were publicly defiled, copies of the Holy Scriptures were burned. Even “patriotic” bishops and priests were thrown into prison. People found wearing crosses under their clothing were tortured.



LOA photo archives

## The Church of the Catacombs

As already mentioned, the persecution of the Catholic Church in China continues to this day. The Communist authorities still regard loyalty to the Pope and remaining in union with the Universal Church as proof of “subjection...to foreign influences.” According to the new constitution of the Chinese People’s Republic of 1982, “religious organizations and religious affairs may not be subject to foreign control.”

This constitutional norm provides the justification for ongoing persecution of Catholics in China. Even now, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the “Iron Curtain,” Chinese Catholics continue to be persecuted, as, for example, in the case of the faithful in Hebei province (Baoding diocese). In May of 1996 they were forbidden to make a pilgrimage to a Marian shrine in the village of Donglu.

Nor is it just the lay faithful who suffer repression. In 1996, two bishops loyal to Rome were arrested: 76-year-old Bishop Zeng Jingmu of Yu Jiang, whose faith had already cost him almost 20 years in Communist prisons; and 64-year-old Su Zhimin, auxiliary bishop of Baoding, who had likewise endured 15 years of imprisonment for his loyalty to the successor of Saint Peter.

Holy Mass celebrated by any other than a “patriotic” priest is considered illegal in the eyes of the Communists.

In January of 1996, Catholic priest Guo Bo Le of Shanghai, was arrested and condemned to 2 years of “education through work” (i.e. 2 years of hard labor in the Chinese Gulag). His crimes were that he had celebrated Holy Mass on a boat for 250 fishermen, administered the Sacrament of the Sick, and called for the boycott of the “patriotic Church.” Because of his faith and ministry, the 58-year-old priest had already spent 30 years of his life in Communist prisons.

Until 1999, the only patches of Chinese soil where Catholics could freely practice their religion were Taiwan (since 1949 ruled by the Kuomintang anti-Communist Party), Hong Kong (a former British colony), and Makao (a Portuguese colony). In 1997, Communist China took control of Hong Kong. Two years later, it took control over Makao. Currently, then, Taiwan remains the only place in China where the Catholic Church can operate openly and without constraint. To this day, the Chinese authorities see the Pope as an “imperialist lackey,” and the Church loyal to him continues to operate in the catacombs.

## The Church in pectore

Every time the Pope appoints cardinals and makes public the names of these new princes of the Church, he holds back one or more names. These are known only to the Holy Father “in pectore” (i.e. in his heart). They belong to churchmen who come from countries where religious persecution continues and where revealing their names might bring on more repression. We may suppose, then, that, as in the last appointment of cardinals which took place in October of 2003, these include at least one cardinal *in pectore* from China. Such appointments remind us of the entire Church *in pectore*, in the heart of the Pope, a Church that should also remain in the mind and heart of every one of us.

Grzegorz Kucharczyk ■

Sources: W. Bar OFMConv, *Na krwawym szlaku, Sendero Luminoso – przesładowca*, Lublin 1999, pp. 145-163; G. Fiorentini, “The Heroism of the Chinese Church” in *L’Osservatore Romano* 17 (1996), issue no. 10 (Polish ed.); N. Shea, *In the Lion’s Den: A Shocking Account of Persecution and Martyrdom of Christians Today*, Nashville 1997, pp. 57-67.