

Ten Persecuted Catholic Bishops in China

BY NINA SHEA, SENIOR FELLOW AND DIRECTOR, CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



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Cover: The Chinese national flag flies in front of St Joseph's Church, also known as Wangfujing Catholic Church, in Beijing on October 22, 2020. (Greg Baker via Getty Images)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For their dedicated reporting and deep expertise on the Catholic Church in China, I express my appreciation to the various sources that are cited throughout this study, in particular the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, the Cardinal Kung Foundation, and others who requested confidentiality.

I am grateful for the long funding support that allowed me to undertake this study from the Sarah Scaife Foundation, the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation, and the Achelis and Bodman Foundation.

I thank my Hudson colleagues who have worked on diverse areas of scholarship concerning China and have broadened my understanding. A special thanks is due to Christopher Mee for his research assistance.

I am fortunate in having had the benefit of Hudson's fine publications staff for their editorial, graphical, and production support. I'm particularly grateful for the careful stylistic editing, copyediting, and proofreading work by Managing Editor Mark Melton and Assistant Editor David Altman, as well as freelance editor Hannah Skaggs. My gratitude extends to designer Ian Maready.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report shows that religious repression of the Catholic Church in China has intensified since the 2018 China-Vatican agreement on the appointment of bishops. It identifies and discusses the ongoing cases of 10 Vatican-approved Catholic bishops in China whose persecution has continued or worsened since September 2018. The suppression of the ministries of a significant part of that church's faithful leadership also denies religious freedom to millions of Chinese Catholic faithful. It represents a repression of the Chinese Catholic Church at large.

The Chinese government's persecution of the Chinese Catholic Church is targeted against the hierarchs who resist Chinese Communist Party control over religious matters. For this reason, the CCP has subjected the 10 bishops in the report to indefinite detention without due process, disappearances, open-ended security police investigations, banishments from their dioceses, or other impediments to their episcopal ministries including

threats, surveillance, interrogation, and so-called reeducation. Seven of these bishops have been detained without due process, with some of them having been under continuous detention for years or decades, while others have been detained repeatedly, up to six times since the agreement's signing. This report does not include persecuted bishops who have died over the last six years or bishops on whom there is little information. Other persecuted Catholics, including priests, other religious leaders, and laity, are also not covered.

Beijing targeted these 10 bishops after they opposed the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), which requires its members to pledge independence from the Holy See. China has been trying to sever the Catholic Church in China from the

Photo: A prayer book at Dali Catholic Church in western Yunnan on December 10, 2015. (Zhang Peng via Getty Images)

pope since the 1950s, when the Chinese Communist Party expelled the papal envoy and imprisoned Shanghai's Cardinal Ignatius Kung for 30 years after he refused to renounce papal authority. For their conscientious objection to the CPCA, several currently persecuted bishops on this list also suffered lengthy imprisonment and torture during the early decades of CCP rule. Since the 1990s, Beijing has employed more covert and less bloody measures against noncompliant Catholic bishops to evade Western criticism and sanctions.

The CPCA was established within the Chinese bureaucracy in 1957. It came under the direct control of the CCP's propaganda section, the United Front Work Department, in 2018. The Vatican has never recognized the association as legitimate. In a 2007 papal letter to the Chinese Catholic Church, Pope Benedict XVI established principles that address the issues with the CPCA and its affiliate, the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops, which was established in 1980. He stated that "the declared purpose of the aforementioned agencies to implement 'the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church' is incompatible with Catholic doctrine."¹ But Beijing began increasing pressure on bishops to join the association immediately after China and the Vatican signed the 2018 agreement. The Holy See then issued guidelines in 2019 clarifying that the Vatican permits conscientious objection to the CPCA while accepting membership as the new normal.

The CPCA, by submitting its members to lifelong surveillance and indoctrination, ensures compliance with the government's new, strictly enforced Sinicization of religion rules—such as keeping children out of churches, basing sermons on Xi Jinping Thought, and reinterpreting the Bible according to party values. The nine mainland bishops on this report's list rejected CPCA membership as conscientious objectors. Seven of them have been in detention without due process for years. One bishop on the list is from Hong Kong, a historically semi-autonomous region that is not subject to CPCA jurisdiction. This

bishop, Cardinal Joseph Zen, had been a prominent critic of the association.

Since Beijing officially announced the Sinicization policy in 2015, which impacts all faith traditions, the Chinese Catholic Church has seen its greatest repression since the Mao Zedong era. The China-Vatican agreement makes no accommodation for the conscientious objectors to the CPCA, who are often called the underground church. Nor does the agreement address religious persecution. The Vatican states that the pact, the contents of which are secret, is narrowly focused on a power-sharing arrangement for episcopal appointments. Yet Beijing has used it to pressure Catholic bishops into joining the CPCA.

The Vatican backs the agreement with Beijing because the Holy See is anxious to fill some 30 episcopal seats, about a third of China's Catholic dioceses, that the officially atheistic CCP has kept vacant. Since the agreement, these episcopal appointments have been slow in coming; about 10 have been made so far. Beijing has unilaterally announced several of these appointments, including an episcopal transfer to the important Shanghai Diocese, in an apparent violation of the China-Vatican agreement. For the sake of Chinese Catholic Church "unity," Pope Francis approved these appointments after the fact. But Beijing's persecution of the 10 bishops in this report is the real threat to the Catholic Church's unity.

Without a faithful Catholic underground, the 400-year-old Chinese Catholic Church faces an unprecedented challenge in forming the next generation of faithful Chinese bishops. The Holy See is in a race against time to shore up its ties with the bishops within the CPCA before the Chinese episcopacy becomes wholly indistinguishable from the rest of the United Front Work Department. Pope Francis has made repeated requests to visit China, which Beijing has ignored. Holy See negotiators have sought in vain to establish a diplomatic office or some other stable mainland presence. The Vatican expressed hope that it could create a bridge between itself and the mainland Chinese Catholic Church when,

in 2022, the CPCA initiated direct relations with Hong Kong's Jesuit Cardinal Stephen Chow. But it was inauspicious that the first meeting centered on enlisting the diocese in the CPCA's project of reinterpreting the Bible to align with Chinese communism.²

In over 30 years of dialogue with China, the Vatican has kept silent or publicly downplayed China's denials of religious freedom. This resembles the Holy See's no-criticism policy of *Ostpolitik* toward Eastern European Communism. Religious freedom and human rights, however, play an important role in American foreign policy, and for this reason it is important for the United States government to recognize that China's Catholic Church, as with all religious minorities in China, is repressed, though the methods vary. It is apparent that the CCP aims to suppress all religions—including Christianity—and replace them with the dogma, values, and images of the party.

American policymakers and public figures should recognize Beijing's tactics against the Catholic Church in China for the religious repression it is. Below are seven steps that should be United States policy:

1. The next president should use the bully pulpit to highlight the suffering of these 10 persecuted bishops. This would bring more attention to their cases and could help protect them from further abuse and restrictions. The president should follow the example of President Ronald Reagan, who frequently raised the names of the persecuted in the Soviet Union, personally intervened with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev on behalf of prisoners of conscience, and met with their family members when possible. Jewish refusenik Natan Sharansky, Lithuanian Catholic cleric Father Alfonsas Svarinkas, and Russian Orthodox priest Vasilii Shipilov are among those who credit Reagan with freeing them and saving their lives. The president should give a major address to the American people about China's religious repression against Catholics as well as other Christians, Turkic Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong.
2. The secretary of state should raise these bishops' cases and other religious freedom concerns in every bilateral meeting with China. The State Department International Religious Freedom Office's annual reports should include religious persecution against these bishops and others in the Catholic Church in China. The American embassy in China should seek meetings with the seven detained bishops on the report's list and visit their dioceses. US statements before the United Nations General Assembly, Security Council, and Human Rights Council should regularly raise the issue of China's religious persecution and share details on Beijing's treatment of these 10 Catholic leaders.
3. Radio Free Asia and Voice of America should provide frequent Chinese-language information on these 10 cases of persecution, as well as on persecuted members of other Chinese religious and spiritual groups. These services should also find other ways to disseminate this information digitally inside China. This information should also be translated into other languages and disseminated worldwide. As the United States competes with China for allies and trading partners, it should make better known the ugly coercion undergirding the CCP's political system. American broadcasting played a crucial role in this regard during the Cold War. In China, only the CCP's version of history is permitted, and the party routinely conceals its human rights violations. Therefore, the US should disclose the facts and shed light on religious persecution, including of Catholic bishops.
4. The State and Treasury Departments should impose Magnitsky sanctions against the CCP and security officials responsible for detaining without due process the bishops detailed in this report.
5. The Justice Department should continue to prosecute Chinese agents who interfere with religious freedom on

US soil. In one case, the Federal Bureau of Investigations identified a Chinese spy who was fraudulently acting as a Catholic priest in the Church of the Transfiguration in the New York Archdiocese.³ In another case, the Justice Department brought charges against Chinese agents who threatened violence against a Christian pastor running for Congress.⁴ The department should publish a report on the status and disposition of each of its cases involving the harassment by Chinese agents of Catholics, Protestants, Falun Gong, Uyghur Muslims, and Tibetan Buddhists within the United States.

6. The next president should issue an executive order that prioritizes advancing religious freedom in China. And the White House should include advancing religious freedom in China as a priority in the next National Security Strategy.
7. The next president should issue an executive order to ban all public and private American cooperation with and support for China's organ transplant sector. In 2021, 12 UN human rights experts asserted that they had received credible evidence of forced organ harvesting in China that targets all religious minority groups.⁵



INTRODUCTION

This report profiles 10 Catholic bishops currently living in China whom the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has persecuted for their religious belief since the China-Vatican agreement of 2018. Nine are in mainland China, and one is in Hong Kong. The 10 are all Vatican-approved bishops. The nine from the mainland are known as “underground” bishops because they refuse to affiliate with the CCP-controlled church. They form a significant part of that church’s faithful leadership who serve and inspire many of China’s 10–12 million Catholics.

This is the first public report to collect documentation on the current persecution of this many of the Catholic Church’s top leaders in China. It is not a comprehensive list; other Chinese bishops who have been persecuted within the past six years are not listed because either they died before this report was published or little published material about them is available. An example is Bishop Stephen Li Side of Tianjin, who died in 2019

at the age of 92 years. The CCP detained him in a house in a remote mountain village for 27 years after imprisoning him for 24 years. Additionally, Bishop Andrew Han Jingtao of Siping, Jilin Province, died in 2020. After having spent 27 years in forced labor camps,⁶ he lived his final years under tight police control. Clergy and faithful were barred from his funeral, and the government did not allow his tombstone to include the title of bishop or any other religious sign. Bishop Stephen Yang Xiangtai, bishop emeritus of Handan, died in 2021 at 99 years old after serving 14 years in prison before being rehabilitated under Deng Xiaoping’s reforms in 1980.⁷ In his last years, he protested the demolition of church crosses. Bishop Joseph Gao Hongxiao, who died at 77 years old in 2022, was the bishop of the Archdiocese of Kaifeng, Henan Province, though “it was hard for him to carry

Photo: A delivery man rides his bike in front a Catholic church on Duolun Street in Shanghai on September 11, 2016. (Fred Dufour via Getty Images)

out his ministry.”⁸ At least three more underground bishops imprisoned under Mao Zedong have died since the agreement,⁹ with little known about how they may have been persecuted in recent years.

The CCP’s persecution of these Chinese Catholic hierarchs has received scant international attention. Even American Catholics and other Christians are largely unaware that repression of the Chinese Catholic Church continues today and has intensified under the Holy See’s pact with China, signed on September 22, 2018. This report aims to shed light on this neglected religious persecution in the hope that it will help bring justice, free these bishops so that they can carry out their episcopal ministries, inform churches worldwide, contribute to a better understanding of China’s religious freedom and human rights record, and prompt religious and political initiatives on their behalf.

The agreement made the Catholic bishops in China its focus, and at the time of its signing, the Vatican celebrated it as a “historic breakthrough.”¹⁰ The “Message of Pope Francis to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church,” which the Vatican issued on September 26, 2018, describes the agreement as serving “specific spiritual and pastoral aims,” namely “to support and advance the preaching of the Gospel, and to reestablish and preserve the full and visible unity of the Catholic community in China.”¹¹ The pontiff emphasizes that for the sake of these goals, “it was essential, before all else, to deal with the issue of the appointment of bishops.” By entering an agreement to share the power of episcopal appointments with China’s government, the Vatican hoped to fill vacant episcopal seats in some 30 percent of China’s Catholic dioceses. This is an urgent problem for the hierarchical Church, which depends on bishops to perpetuate the Catholic faith by training and ordaining priests as well as ensuring the faithful preaching of Christianity, in communion with the pope.

As the Vatican has confirmed, however, the agreement does not address China’s persistent persecution of Vatican-approved

bishops who resist joining the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. The CPCA comes under the jurisdiction of the CCP’s United Front Work Department—the officially atheistic propaganda arm that President Xi Jinping called his “magic weapon.”¹² Membership in the CPCA requires a pledge of “independence” from foreign influence, such as the pope. For this reason, the Vatican has not yet legitimized it, and, for many decades, the Vatican denied approval of bishops who did join it unless they, at least secretly, pledged fidelity to the pope. Both Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics,¹³ and Pope Francis, in guidelines for the Chinese Catholic Church that the Holy See issued in 2019,¹⁴ approved of conscientious objection to the CPCA and its 1980 affiliate, the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops. Yet its agreement with China is silent about the accommodation and protection of these conscientious objectors, who are now facing persecution as the CCP strengthens its control over Chinese civil society.

Because of their conscientious objection to the CPCA, the Chinese government has persecuted all nine of the Chinese mainland bishops listed below. It has barred them from carrying out their episcopal ministries and from publicly identifying as bishops. Since the agreement, it has indefinitely detained seven of them without trial or due process. Typically, Beijing has subjected them to frequent detentions for months or years, often at a secret location in a government or residential building, hotel, or police cell. It periodically subjects them to interrogation and indoctrination and isolates them from their diocesan communities, though it may allow family visits occasionally. The government has forced two of the nine mainland bishops to resign from their episcopal seats.

None of these nine bishops has received a trial or sentence in recent decades, though the government did prosecute some of them after prior arrests in the early period of CCP rule. Beijing hides its open-ended repression of them, eschewing the public drama and bloodshed of the Mao Zedong era, as China seeks to develop a benign image internationally. In addition, open brutality is unnecessary when memories of past political trauma

remain raw. “The Chinese communists, after they have killed hundreds of thousands, maybe they don’t need to kill so many nowadays. But the ‘state of violence’ reigns, total denial of most basic human rights,” Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium of Hong Kong wrote in an open letter in 2016.¹⁵ Cardinal Zen told this author at an April 2011 meeting in Washington, DC, that, rather than using the attention-grabbing show trials and bloody torture methods of prior decades, the CCP now opts for measures to control the Catholic Church that are incremental, more insidious, and calculated to evade Western economic sanctions.

Cardinal Zen himself is the tenth persecuted bishop listed here. The CCP has silenced him through politically motivated lawfare and threats to the Hong Kong church. It has targeted him for his criticism of its encroachment on religious freedom and human rights on the mainland and in Hong Kong and for championing the cases of the other persecuted bishops.

Ten Persecuted Bishops

Repeated stints of indefinite detention—which require no official record, due process, or independent oversight—remain the instruments of choice for coercing mainland Catholic bishops to join the CPCA. The government has detained some of these nine persecuted bishops for years while providing little further information about where they are or what they are suffering.

Bishop James Su Zhimin has been in continuous secret detention for 27 years since he led a religious procession to a Marian shrine in his diocese. The CCP had previously imprisoned him in labor camps and severely tortured him.

Most recently, on January 2, 2024, government officials took Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin into secret custody, where he remains as of this writing. They have detained him without due process at least six times since the signing of the China-Vatican agreement.

The police have taken Bishop Augustine Cui Tai into custody and detained him four times since the agreement’s signing,

continuing a pattern of persecution against him dating from 1993. At this writing, he remains in secret indefinite detention without due process following an arrest in April 2021.

After spending much of the past 30 years in detention, Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo was under house arrest when the two parties signed the agreement. In 2020, the police took him from the house and detained him in a hotel, where his supporters believe he remains. Since 2018, police have dismantled his orphanage for disabled children.

Chinese authorities had long prevented Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu from entering his Henan diocese of Xinxiang, and they arrested him in May 2021 while he was convalescing from cancer surgery. They have detained him ever since then without due process. At the same time, police also raided and shut down his seminary, which the government deemed “illegal.” The last report of him was in March 2023 when a pontifical mission media outlet confirmed that local police were still holding him at a secret location.

Shanghai’s Bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi, at age 48 and having served as a bishop for six years, mysteriously went missing sometime in late 2011. The government claimed he resigned and offered no further information. In a tacit acknowledgment that the Chinese government is persecuting him, in 2023 the Holy See expressed hope for a “just and wise solution” to his case as well as to that of Bishop Ma, his successor.¹⁶

Authorities have detained Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin at a seminary since 2012. In 2016, after he recanted his 2012 declaration against the CPCA, they continued to keep Bishop Ma confined, isolated from his diocese, at the seminary. Acting without Vatican authorization, the CCP-aligned Catholic Council of Bishops revoked his episcopal offices, and its head, Bishop Shen Bin, took Bishop Ma’s seat as bishop of Shanghai in 2023. The Vatican initially objected to the transfer but approved it three months later for the sake of unity in the Chinese Catholic

Church. At that time, the Vatican expressed hope that the CCP would reciprocate by finding a “just and wise” solution to Bishop Ma’s case, but that has yet to happen.

The CCP has detained Bishop Melchior Shi Hongzhen of Tianjin Diocese for the past 15 years in his parish church compound, where he has said he spends his days reading in his study. The government has occasionally allowed him out to hold last rites for diocesan Catholics. In late summer 2022, the Vatican agreement negotiating team, led by Archbishop Claudio Celli, visited Bishop Shi at his parish compound and gave him a pectoral cross from the pope, a sign of episcopal authority. As this report goes to print, the Vatican is reporting that China has decided to “officially recognize” 95-year-old Bishop Shi as bishop of Tianjin. Its August 27, 2024, press release, as the *National Catholic Register* reported, declared this “a positive fruit of the dialogue.”¹⁷ It’s a bitter fruit, considering the bishop’s advanced age, which makes it highly likely that he is now too frail to carry out his episcopal ministry. This recognition is on par with Beijing’s cynical practice of releasing clerics and other prisoners of conscience from prison once they are on their deathbeds.

The Chinese government has uniquely persecuted Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin of Mindong Diocese in Fujian Province. Directly due to China’s precondition for the agreement, in 2018 Pope Francis demoted Bishop Guo from serving as the ordinary bishop of Mindong, a position he had held for two years, and replaced him with the government-appointed Bishop Zhan Silu, one of the seven Chinese bishops for whom the pope had lifted excommunication. Bishop Guo obediently served as Zhan’s auxiliary bishop but found himself thwarted from carrying out his pastoral ministry and eventually forced from his home. The authorities first served him an eviction notice, which forced him to sleep on the street in wintertime, then cut off his water, heat, and electricity. In 2020, after two years of nonstop government pressure on him and his priests and left with no autonomy, he resigned. His current whereabouts and well-being are unknown.

Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, is in a category by himself. The 92-year-old cardinal is the most senior and ranking cleric of the Catholic Church of China and a prominent figure internationally. Due to Hong Kong’s history of having a semi-autonomous political system, he and his diocese have been outside CPCA jurisdiction. However, the Chinese government is persecuting Cardinal Zen because he had been the most prominent voice of conscience in the Chinese Catholic Church, openly criticizing the CPCA and championing religious freedom. He explained in his 2016 open letter, “I speak out because I am the voice of the voiceless. In China there is no freedom of expression!”¹⁸ As China has tightened its grip on Hong Kong, especially by imposing the draconian national security law (NSL), it has stopped Cardinal Zen from publicly criticizing the CCP. The Hong Kong Diocese, which Cardinal Stephen Chow now leads, is under state pressure to build a close relationship with the CPCA. The Chinese government even threatened in its media outlet to take control of the Hong Kong diocese’s school system, holding the bishops accountable for Catholic school graduates who protested for democracy.

In 2022, police arrested Cardinal Zen in two separate politically motivated cases. For two months, the nonagenarian faced the daily ordeal of a trial over a minor regulatory infraction, for which he pleaded not guilty, and the judge convicted and fined him. The other case, involving the NSL, has been pending for two years and may result in a life sentence for “colluding with foreign forces.”¹⁹ It hangs like the sword of Damocles over him and the diocese. When the media asked him to comment on Zen’s arrest, Pope Francis responded, “He says what he feels, and you can see that there are limitations there.”²⁰ It is widely understood that the lawfare against the elderly cardinal stems from his public criticism of the CCP and his role as the personification of the free Hong Kong church. It has effectively forced his silence on the CCP and restricted his travel. China has made an example of him to cow the Hong Kong Diocese, which has begun cooperating with CPCA demands, including by having diocesan bishops and priests subjected to lectures

by CPCA authorities on the dos and don'ts of Sinicization laws. After one such meeting with the CPCA's head bishop, Cardinal Chow repeated the preposterous claim to international media that President Xi shares Pope Francis's love for humanity, pointing to the president's Belt and Road Initiative.

All 10 of these bishops have endured some combination of high-tech and human surveillance, bureaucratic database collection, strict censorship of anti-government criticism, and punishments that include some, if not all, of the following:

- Deprivation of essential state services
- Indefinite detention without due process
- Isolation and solitary confinement
- Psychological torture, such as sleep deprivation
- Fines
- Restrictions on wearing religious garb and engaging in religious activities
- Bans on movement, travel, and speech
- Indoctrination, interrogation, and investigation
- Threats to the bishops and their dioceses
- Judicial prosecution
- Open-ended police investigation

The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association

The Chinese government is persecuting the nine mainland bishops principally for resisting its demands to join the CPCA. The bishops refuse to take the membership pledge of “independence” from foreign influence, such as from the Holy See, and will not submit to the officially atheistic CCP in religious matters. China observer Reverend L from Hong Kong, who requests anonymity, stressed the implications of registration in an email to Hudson: “It’s not like you just sign up and then that’s it,” he writes. “Registration means, the cleric submits to never ending CCP surveillance and reeducation to learn about Christianity according to the CCP.” These nine bishops are “conscientious objectors,” not simply “underground.” Their identities, episcopal titles, dioceses,

apostolic chains of authority, and other data are not hidden. The government had for a time recognized some of these bishops in their episcopal ministries—like Bishop Xing of Shanghai and Bishop Guo of Mindong, who never joined the CPCA.

CCP efforts to sever the Chinese Catholic Church's ties to the Holy See began in 1951 with the expulsion from Beijing of papal nuncio Antonio Riberi, his entire diplomatic staff, and foreign Catholic clergy. After he rejected the demand to lead a CCP-aligned church in 1955, the government arrested Cardinal Ignatius Kung, then bishop of Shanghai, China's most important diocese, subjected him to a show trial, and imprisoned him for 30 years. Chinese leaders founded the CPCA two years later as a government-supervised body and in 2018 placed it under direct CCP supervision. China's 10–12 million Catholics are divided between CPCA churches and non-CPCA churches, though they overlap significantly.

To this day, the Vatican has not approved the CPCA as a legitimate Catholic body. In 2007, Pope Benedict issued a letter to the Chinese Catholics, which remains the Vatican's guiding body of principles for its relations with China. In it he explains that the CPCA's ideology is “incompatible” with Catholic teaching. Explicitly referencing the CPCA and its 1980 offspring, the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops, the pope wrote, “The declared purpose of the afore-mentioned agencies to implement ‘the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church’ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.” Pope Benedict emphasized the importance of both hierarchical communion with the successor of St. Peter and the unity of the Chinese Catholic Church. He reiterated, “Communion and unity—let me repeat—are essential and integral elements of the Catholic Church: therefore the proposal for a Church that is ‘independent’ of the Holy See, in the religious sphere, is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.”²¹

The Vatican does permit bishops to join the CPCA, and publicly stated this in its 2019 pastoral guidelines. By 2018, the pope

had approved all its episcopal members on the basis that virtually all had vowed loyalty to the pope. Pope Benedict's letter instructed that those bishops in the CPCA "must increasingly give unequivocal signs of full communion with the Successor of Peter."

The CCP aims to bring Christianity under its control through its "patriotic" structures. Since Beijing officially announced the Sinicization policy in 2015, which impacts all faith traditions, the Chinese Catholic Church has seen its greatest repression since the Mao Zedong era. Sinicization of the hierarchical Catholic Church depends heavily on the bishops joining the CPCA, which is the pathway for the church's absorption into the United Front Work Department.

Sinicization requires church leaders to prevent minors' exposure to religion, base sermons on Xi Jinping Thought, promote socialist principles, implement socialist values within the church, acquire state authorization for all religious activities, submit to periodic CCP "reeducation," and report the names of mass attendees to the state, among other restrictions. This campaign is also removing crosses and Christian symbols from churches and reinterpreting the Bible. The CPCA keeps close watch on the bishops and holds them responsible for ensuring Chinese Catholic Church conformity to Sinicization rules. Bishop Zhan, the CPCA member who replaced Bishop Guo in Mindong, reflected the new spirit of the Xi Jinping era when, upon taking up his new see, he promptly led 33 diocesan priests to a "formation course" at the Central Institute of Socialism with the CCP's local United Front. He declared with palpable party fervor, "To carry out the sinicization of religion with determination, we will continue to follow a path that conforms to socialist society."²²

The China-Vatican Agreement

While Rome sees the China-Vatican agreement as a strategy for achieving unity in the Chinese Catholic Church and hierarchical communion with Rome, Beijing has different aims. It has taken

advantage of the secrecy of the pact's contents to falsely tell Chinese clergy that the pope ordered them to unify under CCP control in the CPCA. To clear up confusion, in 2019 the Vatican issued guidelines for Chinese Catholics expressly permitting and even normalizing CPCA membership, and allowing an exception for those whose consciences dictated otherwise.²³ Specifically, the Vatican suggested that clergy who were conscientious objectors could take the CPCA pledge while rejecting the "independence" provision. In Mindong, for four days police tortured one priest who followed this advice.²⁴ Vatican diplomats then began to encourage the clergy to join the CPCA and gave its bishops warm welcomes at important conferences in Rome. The Holy See's former representative in Hong Kong, Bishop Javier Herrera, articulated in a press interview what some others in the Vatican Curia were whispering when he derisively said that CPCA conscientious objectors have a "psychological barrier" resulting from rigid thinking.²⁵

The papal goal of the Chinese Catholic Church's communion with the Successor of Peter poses a direct challenge to the CCP, which remains determined to control all sectors of civil society and views religious freedom as an existential threat. In a 2021 speech, President Xi exhorted cadres to double down on the "adaptation of religions to socialism" and to "rally the vast religious believers around the Party and the government," according to Xinhua, the official government news agency.²⁶

On the eve of the agreement's signing in 2018, the Jesuit outlet America published a summary of it from an "informed" Vatican source. Its terms allow CCP authorities and the CCP-aligned Catholic Council of Bishops to select a bishop candidate after a "democratic election" system the CCP devised in 1957, "whereby the priests of the diocese, together with representatives of women religious and laypeople, vote from among the candidates presented by the authorities that supervise church affairs."²⁷ Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin describes the process for choosing bishops as requiring "consensus" between the Vatican and Beijing.²⁸ The pope was to have

a say and the right to veto, but the CCP has not consistently honored the agreement over the past six years.

Two years after the signing, Beijing published regulations on appointing bishops that omitted any papal role and, in several of the 10 or so episcopal appointments since the signing, it denied the pope even a veto. In 2022 the government transferred one bishop behind Francis's back to a diocese it had created, about which the Vatican issued a note of "regret." In another case in 2023, for the sake of "unity and communion," the pope approved of a CPCA transfer of a Vatican-approved bishop to the Shanghai Diocese three months after his installation. In 2024, several episcopal appointments were made in accordance with the agreements, but between a quarter and a third of China's dioceses still lack a functioning bishop, to the admitted disappointment of the Vatican.

Meanwhile, the CCP continues to persecute bishops who object to the CPCA, and the free Hong Kong church is coming under its grip. At a press conference in 2020, Cardinal Parolin objected to the suggestion that China persecutes and insisted that there is only "regulation" of the Catholic Church. He overlooks the fact that regulation and bloodless, or at least hidden, coercive measures are the modern face of repression. Similarly, despite ample evidence to the contrary, he insists that the CCP's Sinicization policy is simply another term for inculturation, the missionary practice of incorporating Chinese culture into Christian art and clerical dress. This willful blindness is consistent with the Vatican's no-criticism, no-dissent posture toward Eastern European Communism, known as *Ostpolitik*, which Pope John Paul II discarded for a more assertive stance that was ultimately successful.

The agreement is provisional, and the two parties must renew it every two years—which occurred on October 22, 2020, and on October 22, 2022. The Vatican appeared keenly interested in its renewal in 2024. On September 13, 2024, Pope Francis said that negotiations were being done in a spirit of goodwill and that

he was "happy with the dialogue with China." He continued, "The result is good."²⁹

CCP Efforts to Suppress the Church

Acknowledging that Beijing prevents the Catholic Church in China from having full communion with Rome, the Vatican hopes that a solution will eventually come through a diplomatic nunciature in Beijing, a papal visit to China, or at least a "stable liaison office." Furthermore, Cardinal Parolin has indicated the Vatican seeks a common and united episcopal conference, a consistent line of communication between bishops and the pope, and permission for the Catholic Church to evangelize.³⁰

But so far Beijing continues to restrict papal authority over the Chinese Catholic Church and suppresses religious freedom generally. Catholic Council of Bishops leader Bishop Shen seemed fully committed to the CCP's demand for independence from the pope. In an interview in August 2022, he said emphatically:

We must . . . adhere to the principle of independence and autonomy in running the Church, adhere to the principle of democracy in running the Church, and adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of the Catholic Church in China. This is the bottom line, which no one can break, and it is also a high-pressure line, which no one should touch.³¹

Meanwhile, the CCP continues to undermine unity of the Chinese Catholic Church through persecution. As a China expert and the former longtime editor of the pontifical foreign missions outlet AsiaNews, Father Bernardo Cervellera reflected on the unity that Bishop Shao brought to his diocese. Until his arrest in November 2018, the bishop had retained control of his cathedral while being a bishop outside the CPCA. Father Cervellera writes:

This is the sign that the division in the Chinese Church is not intended primarily by Catholics, but by the Party. This policy—which has lasted for 60 years—does not seem

in favor of the evangelization of China, but—as mentioned so many times in the past by the same PA [Patriotic Catholic Association, also known as the CPCA]—is a step towards the suppression of all Christians.³²

Faithful Catholic leaders in China suffer and die for their beliefs in obscurity, with few outside their own dioceses aware of their heroism and inspiring stories. At the same time, in the absence of Western pressure, their persecutors are confident they can get away with it and see no reason to change. Within the various Chinese dioceses of the persecuted bishops, Catholic clergy have expressed anguish and demoralization from the agreement. As the new bishop of Mindong Diocese directed its priests to join the CPCA in 2018, a priest there described his confusion:

I do not want to disobey, . . . [nor] betray my conscience. I can always go home and return to cultivating the fields. I am a simple priest. . . . In the contrast or contradiction between faith and obedience, please, dear Vatican tell us: what should we do?³³

Father Matteo Ricci, the great Jesuit missionary to China in the sixteenth century, successfully introduced Catholic dialogue with Chinese authorities. The Vatican's current dialogue initiative with China spans three papacies and is in its fourth decade. Its

main achievement has been the 2018 agreement on the appointment of bishops, but this has brought a new danger. As bishops free of CCP control suffer persecution and repression or die, the Catholic Church in China comes increasingly under the control of a communist government that intends to make it its own propaganda instrument.

Beijing's persecution and pressure targeting Chinese Catholic bishops have intensified since the agreement was signed. At stake is the very perpetuation of the 400-year-old Catholic Church of China. This report demonstrates the regime's cruelly coercive character and its implacable quest for ideological control. It is evident that the CCP aims to suppress all religions—including Christianity—and replace them with the dogma, values, and images of the party.

The next section features profiles of 10 currently persecuted Chinese bishops.

This report's list of persecuted bishops is original and was compiled by researching news accounts, analysis by Catholic sinologists, Hong Kong diocesan archives, Western journalist reports in Catholic and other outlets, and a US congressional delegation account as well as firsthand interviews by the author.



THE TEN PERSECUTED BISHOPS

Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin

Biographical Information



Born: 1958

Diocese: Mindong, also known as Xiapu (Funing), Fujian Province

Ordained priest: 1984

Consecrated coadjutor bishop of Mindong:

December 28, 2008

Appointed ordinary bishop of Mindong: July 30, 2016

Appointed auxiliary bishop of Mindong: 2018

Resigned: October 4, 2020

Arrest History Summary

1990–1992: Detained

1993–1994: Detained

1996: Detained

March 2010: Fined and served arrest warrant for organizing a religious camp

April 6–26, 2017: Detained

March 26–27, 2018: Detained

November 9–13, 2019: Detained and escaped

January 15, 2020: Forced out of episcopal position

Directly due to the China-Vatican agreement, Chinese authorities stripped Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin of his episcopal position, thwarted his efforts to carry out his pastoral ministry, and forced him from his home. As a precondition of the agreement, in 2018, Pope Francis asked Bishop Guo to step down as the ordinary, or principal, bishop of Mindong, a position he had held

for two years. This move allowed government-appointed Bishop Zhan Silu to take Guo's seat; the pope lifted Zhan's excommunication for this purpose.

Photo: St. Ignace Cathedral on March 19, 2023, in Shanghai. (Zhe Ji via Getty Images)

Bishop Guo agreed to serve as the auxiliary bishop, but in 2020—after two years of continuous government pressure on him and his priests to register with the CPCA and with no real autonomy—he resigned from his public role and retired to a life of prayer. Officials had effectively evicted him from his residence earlier that year and hounded him from his office. His current whereabouts are unknown.

Bishop Guo suffered several unofficial detentions without due process and other persecution for over 30 years after he entered the priesthood, but he refused to join the government-controlled CPCA. Police intensified pressure on him to join the association and attend a meeting of its clergy in Fujian, where they placed him under the supervision of two guards in November 2019. Days later they took him by car to Ningde to “submit him to new tactics of persuasion.”³⁴ A day later, the bishop escaped detention and returned to his home in Luojiang.

On January 15, 2020, at the COVID-19 pandemic’s outset in China, officials barred Bishop Guo from his residence by posting an eviction order on its door, citing noncompliance with fire regulations even though it had proper construction permits. (At least five parishes within the diocese also saw buildings closed due to “fire safety standards,” but one was reportedly reopened without any modifications after Bishop Zhan installed a government-registered priest there.) Bishop Guo was reduced to homelessness and slept out in the cold on the doorstep of the curia, the diocese’s administrative office building.³⁵ After an international outcry, the authorities allowed him to return to his home, but the government-controlled utility companies shut off his heat, water, and electricity. Bishop Guo had to carry water up five flights of stairs from an outdoor tap to his room.

“When he goes down to the ground floor of the building,” AsiaNews drily remarked, “He does not forget to bless the CCTV cameras installed to monitor him. This way he blesses his controllers.”³⁶

Despite the Vatican’s recognition of Bishop Zhan, the government did not reciprocate by recognizing Bishop Guo until he signed a document accepting obedience to Bishop Zhan, the new diocesan ordinary, and the laws of the country. However, Guo did not subscribe to the principle of “independence” from Rome.³⁷ Through this maneuver (which seemed to follow the 2019 Vatican guidelines issued for conscientious objectors within the clergy of the Chinese Church) Guo acquired government recognition. But it was short-lived.

The United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) used the signed document to trick diocesan priests into believing that Guo had joined the CPCA without reservation from the independence pledge. The government’s Religious Affairs Office called all underground priests individually, demanding that they join the association. National security police arrested Father Huang Jintong, a parish priest, at his home and isolated him at a remote location. There they tortured him for four days, inflicting sleep deprivation combined with round-the-clock interrogation under bright lights, until he signed the independence pledge. Government officials offered some priests ¥200,000 (\$28,000) to join the association,³⁸ and with others they tried blackmail or threatened to fire the priests’ relatives from their jobs. Bishop Zhan personally pressed them to register, according to reports.³⁹

Bishop Guo ultimately decided that he preferred personal persecution to government recognition. In June 2019, he wrote a letter formally withdrawing his application for recognition, explaining:

The government has already decided to persecute priests who refuse to sign the request. If I am unable to protect them, it is not worth my time to be recognized as an auxiliary bishop. I am willing to face persecution together with other priests.⁴⁰

Fujian authorities cut out Bishop Guo from the decision-making process in the diocese. Among other demands, they ordered Mindong clergy in a letter to “love the fatherland . . . prohibit

the entry of minors into the Church . . . not to contact foreign powers . . . not to market or distribute religious printed material . . . consciously practice the values of socialism . . . not organize educational courses for minors, [and] not carry out religious activities online.”⁴¹ They expected the bishops to enforce these commands within the Mindong Diocese.

With substantial government funding, Bishop Zhan constructed a new cathedral. Bishop Guo refused to attend its consecration ceremony on June 28, 2019, viewing it as a government-owned and -controlled facility.⁴² In solidarity with tortured and otherwise persecuted underground priests in his diocese, Bishop Guo also refused to participate in the 2019 ordination of CPCA priests. “I must take care of these unofficial priests and faithful,” he explained. “This is the specific task that the Holy See has given me.”⁴³

In April 2020, police threatened and pressed Bishop Guo and his assistant Father Liu Maochun to submit to the CPCA, according to *Bitter Winter*.⁴⁴ Under constant pressure, unable to protect the unregistered priests, and with little pastoral control within his diocese, Bishop Guo announced his resignation from public life on October 4. In his resignation letter, he stated, “I am no longer able to keep up with this era. Nonetheless, I do not want to become an obstacle to progress.” He belittled his service, calling himself an “incompetent pastor” with “no talent, no virtue, no wisdom, no skills, no knowledge.” AsiaNews published his letter with the following comment:

In perfect Confucian style, Msgr. Guo humiliates himself by mocking his few qualities. The fact remains that he, a great confessor of the faith, who has suffered imprisonment many times, out of love for the unity of the Church leaves room for a formerly excommunicated bishop, known by all as ambitious and thirsty for power. Bishop Zhan Silu, reconciled with Pope Francis, does not seem to have made any gesture of public request for forgiveness in front of his community.⁴⁵

After Bishop Guo was pushed aside for Bishop Zhan, diocesan priests reportedly felt sadness, anger, and distress.⁴⁶ One underground priest said to AsiaNews, “We of course feel hard to accept but do we have the rights to oppose the Vatican? . . . I may consider to quit and leave my priesthood.”⁴⁷ Confused about whether to betray his conscience by pledging independence from the Vatican or to disobey the Vatican by ministering without government approval, in the underground, a Mindong priest using the pseudonym “Father Savio” (Italian for “Wise”) penned an open letter, writing:

I do not want to disobey, but not even betray my conscience: I can always go home and return to cultivating the fields. I am an ordinary priest, I do not have the intellect of these great people who think so much; I have a simple faith that is based on yes is yes, no is no; I have no ambition for power, nor am I ambitious: in the contrast or contradiction between faith and obedience, between conscience and obedience, please, dear Vatican tell us: what should we do?⁴⁸

Long before the China-Vatican agreement, Bishop Guo faced persecution for following his conscience. AsiaNews reported that, as a priest who resisted registration with the CPCA, he “spent time in prison” three separate times, in 1990–92, 1993–94, and 1996. Before his ordination as coadjutor bishop of Mindong on December 28, 2008, he had served as a teacher in seminaries there and as an economic administrator of the diocese.⁴⁹ Before he resigned, government authorities fined him for organizing two religious education camps for some 300 university students in the diocese.⁵⁰

In April 2017, before Easter, authorities arrested the bishop.⁵¹ They also detained him in March 2018, reportedly for refusing to celebrate mass with Zhan and for planning a mass without government approval.⁵²

For decades the Chinese government has persecuted Catholics in the historically significant Mindong Diocese (which was the birthplace of Bishop Gregorius Luo Wenzao, who was ordained as the first Chinese priest in 1654 and the first Chinese bishop in 1685).⁵³ Bishop Guo succeeded Bishop Vincent Huang Schoucheng as the ordinary of Mindong. Bishop Huang, known for being “humble and intelligent, a great pastor,” had spent at least 35 years in prison, house arrest, or forced labor.⁵⁴ Mindong has long had a strong community of faithful Catholics, and 20,000 of them flooded the streets for Bishop Huang’s funeral mass in 2016,⁵⁵ which Bishop Guo officiated in defiance of government restrictions limiting the number in attendance to 3,000.

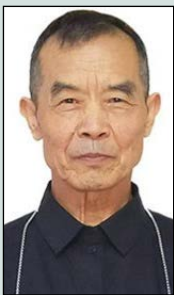
Just after the 2018 China-Vatican agreement, Mindong had over 90,000 Catholics, of which 80,000 were in the underground church. A total of 57 priests served the diocese, of which only 12 were reportedly members of the CPCA. By January 2020, through a systematic campaign of pressure, incentives, and

arrests, the government had registered most Mindong priests, and only 20 remained underground.

The quick submission to the CCP-linked CPCA of a Catholic underground stronghold led “diocesan sources” to describe Mindong as Beijing’s “pilot project” for implementing the China-Vatican agreement.⁵⁶ The government had begun its take-over of the diocese in 2006 by making Monsignor Zhan Silu a bishop without Vatican approval and without the required consecrating bishop. At the time, the Vatican defined this as a “serious violation of religious freedom” and excommunicated Zhan.⁵⁷ Now with Vatican approval, Bishop Zhan exemplifies the CCP’s model of a Catholic hierarch. Upon taking Guo’s seat as ordinary in 2018, he promptly led 33 diocesan priests to a “formation course” at the Central Institute of Socialism with the CCP’s local United Front, declaring with palpable fervor, “To carry out the Sinicization of religion with determination, we will continue to follow a path that conforms to socialist society.”⁵⁸

Bishop Augustine Cui Tai

Biographical Information



Born: 1950

Diocese: Xuanhua, Jiangsu Province

Ordained priest: 1990

Ordained coadjutor bishop of Xuanhua: April 7, 2013

Succeeded ordinary bishop of Xuanhua: 2018

Arrest History Summary

1993–2007: Detention and forced labor

2007–late 2016 / early 2017: Detained

February 2017: Detained

Mid-April 2018: Detained

December 2018–January 2019: Detained

March 29, 2019–January 2020: Detained

June 19, 2020: Detained

April 2021–present: Detained

Bishop Augustine Cui Tai is the ordinary, or principal, bishop of Xuanhua Diocese and has ministered with the approval of the Vatican but not the Chinese government. In early 2013, Pope Benedict XVI appointed Monsignor Cui as auxiliary bishop of

the Xuanhua Diocese, and Bishop Cui’s ordination as coadjutor bishop of Xuanhua took place in April. Bishop Thomas Zhao Kexun, the ordinary bishop, entrusted him with full authority to run the diocese. After Bishop Zhao’s death in 2018, according

to canon law, Bishop Cui automatically succeeded him to lead Xuanhua Diocese.

Over the past 31 years, from 1993 to the present, the Chinese government has subjected Bishop Cui to repeated detention, house arrest, and internment in forced labor camps. Although in the past the government has charged the prelate with “illegal missionary activities” and “illegal and unauthorized religious meetings,” in recent years police have taken to detaining the bishop for extensive periods without any official charges, cynically telling his diocese that they are taking him into custody for “travel,” “trips,”⁵⁹ and “vacations.”⁶⁰ These detentions take place without any due process. The bishop has been in detention “almost non-stop” since 2007, in various secret detention centers, forced labor camps, and hotels, where he is under constant government guard and isolated from his family and church community.⁶¹

From his arrest in 2007 to at least 2020, Bishop Cui was unable to spend Easter in the diocese, the Union of Catholic Asian (UCA) News reported.⁶² Authorities have permitted him to be out for only a few days during the Chinese New Year and the mid-autumn festival of the moon to return to his family’s home, according to the Hong Kong appeal. In February 2017, two weeks after the Chinese New Year, security officials arrested Bishop Cui while he was at his sister’s home.⁶³ They released him sometime in the following months and rearrested him in April 2018.

Since the signing of the 2018 China-Vatican agreement, the police have taken him into custody and detained him a total of four separate times. In December 2018, three months after the finalization of the agreement, the police arrested him again at the urging of a priest in his diocese, Father Francesco Zhang Li, and detained him for at least 15 days. The bishop had suspended Father Zhang on December 23, 2018, for fabricating “miracles,” calling for the elimination of the underground church, and rejecting the bishop’s authority.⁶⁴

The CCP designed this practice of informal arrest and detention to suppress the bishop’s religious activities while evading the bad international publicity that a public political trial of a Catholic bishop would bring. In a May 2018 appeal, during Bishop Cui’s detention, Cardinal Joseph Zen and the Hong Kong Diocese’s Justice and Peace Commission called for an end to his persecution.⁶⁵

During his detention, on November 29, 2019, the Vatican’s prefect of the congregation for the evangelization of peoples, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, wrote a letter to Bishop Cui to reaffirm the Holy See’s recognition of Xuanhua Diocese and Bishop Cui’s authority there. He wrote in response to Chinese authorities’ establishment of a new diocese, without Vatican authorization, to replace Xuanhua.

Upon his release in January 2020 from a 10-month, unofficial, secret detention without charge, the CCP allowed Bishop Cui to spend six months in relative freedom in his diocese, his longest period of freedom since 2007.⁶⁶ In June 2020, CCP officials again detained him without charge for an undocumented period.

For the fourth time under the China-Vatican peace agreement, police took Bishop Cui into custody in April 2021, and he has not been seen since.⁶⁷

Xuanhua Diocese has requested prayers for Bishop Cui and called on the Chinese government to “end the illegal detention of Bishop Cui and unconditionally release the prisoner as soon as possible.” One of the faithful told AsiaNews that “it is a shame that such a sweet person like Monsignor Augustine is treated in this way, even against Chinese law,” and that Cui’s imprisonment “has become almost a routine . . . it does not allow the Bishop to celebrate and take care of his sheep. Our shepherd has become a sacrificial lamb.”⁶⁸

Bitter Winter characterized Bishop Cui as a “popular prelate” whose detention is “an immense scandal” for the Catholics in Xuanhua.⁶⁹ An AsiaNews article describes him as a man who

leads a “simple and orderly life, firm in his faith and full of virtue.” The bishop taught that Catholics should be “good citizens”

while calling for religious freedom and the right not to be forced to join the CPCA.⁷⁰

Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo

Biographical Information



Born: June 5, 1934
Diocese: Zhengding, Hebei Province
Ordained priest: June 7, 1980
Consecrated bishop: December 19, 1980

Arrest History Summary

1963–1978: Detained

April 4–July 1989: Detained

September 11, 1989–January 1993:
Arrested or detained at least five times

January 6, 1994: Arrested

August 27–October 18, 1995: Detained

June 1998: Arrested

August 15, 1999: Arrested

March 20, 2002: Arrested

April 20, 2002: Arrested

May 23–August 23, 2003: Detained

April 5–14, 2004: Detained

September 9–11, 2004: Detained

September 30, 2004: Arrested

December 14, 2004: Arrested

January 5–8, 2005: Detained

March 30–April 25, 2005: Placed under 24-hour surveillance

July 4–7, 2005: Detained

November 8, 2005: Arrested

June 25–September 25, 2006: Detained

December 19, 2006: Arrested

June 5, 2007: Arrested

August 23–December 14, 2007: Detained

August 24–September 18, 2008: Detained

March 30, 2009: Detained

July 7, 2010: Detained

December 2010: Detained three times

May 12–24, 2015: Detained

March 2018: Detained

August 10, 2020–present: Detained

Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo has had a long history of persecution,⁷¹ and CCP authorities have targeted him for arrest and detention over much of the past 30 years, including during the present post-agreement period. Typically, they take him into custody under the guise of “study sessions,” “education,”⁷² doctor visits, and “tours,”⁷³ but the real reason is to punish and pressure him for his conscientious objection to the CPCA.

Bishop Jia’s earliest detention was from 1963 to 1978, but few details are known about it. Authorities arrested him again, on April 4, 1989, while he was meeting with a Hong Kong Salesian priest at a Beijing railway station. Police confined the bishop to a prison cell crowded with criminals for seven days, preventing him from sitting or lying down. They then moved him to the Baoding Public Security Bureau jail, where authorities filled his cell with more than eight inches

of water to force him to accept CCP religious oversight and authority through the CPCA. The bishop refused. The police released him in July, and he returned to his cathedral in Wuqiu, Jinzhou.

Shortly afterward, Shijiazhuang Religious Affairs Bureau officials promised Bishop Jia that if he joined the CPCA, he would “be given a good car and allowed to go to any church in Hebei province he would like to visit.” When he refused, the police put him under house arrest and installed listening devices throughout his residence.⁷⁴

He was detained again in 1991, 1992,⁷⁵ 1994,⁷⁶ 1995,⁷⁷ and 1998.⁷⁸

In 1999, CCP authorities arrested Bishop Jia during President Bill Clinton’s visit to China and during the Catholic feast of the Assumption of Mary. By November 1999, the Cardinal Kung Foundation (led by Joseph Kung, who is based out of Connecticut and is the nephew of the renowned Cardinal Ignatius Kung Pin-Mei) had estimated the bishop’s total time in detention at approximately 20 years, based on various published news reports.⁷⁹

Throughout the early 2000s, the CCP subjected Bishop Jia to repeated brief detentions.⁸⁰ On May 23, 2003, police arrested him after he received treatment for a protruding intervertebral disc, the UCA News reported. During his confinement, they questioned him about his contact with foreigners, including the Cardinal Kung Foundation, and pressed him to join the CPCA.⁸¹ On September 9, 2004, they arrested him again and forced him to keep on the move for three days, traveling under police guard through the town of Wentang, while paying his and the guards’ expenses.⁸²

In 2005, authorities arrested Bishop Jia at least four times and forced him to spend months under police surveillance. They arrested him in January and held him for three days.⁸³ From ap-

proximately March 30 to April 25, police had him under 24-hour surveillance. Two days after releasing him, authorities arrested seven priests who were traveling to a religious retreat that the bishop was administering, and they prohibited him from initiating any religious activities.⁸⁴ On July 4, the police detained him and ordered him to tell others that he was “being taken away by the government officials to visit a physician.” The Cardinal Kung Foundation reported that at that time the bishop was healthy and had no need of a physician. Police detained the bishop for three days, releasing him on July 7.⁸⁵ On November 8, they rearrested him and took him to the city of Jinzhou for a “study session.”⁸⁶ Police had arrested two of his priests in their parishes the day before, and ten by November 18.⁸⁷ They beat one, Father Gao Lingshan, so severely that he “bled profusely” from the mouth, according to Joseph Kung’s 2007 congressional testimony.⁸⁸ In its list of persecuted Chinese clerics from 2005, AsiaNews reported that every month, Bishop Jia “undergoes forced indoctrination about government policies for weeks on end.”⁸⁹

The police arrested Bishop Jia on June 25, 2006, in Jinzhou, as a Vatican delegation arrived in Beijing. At that time, the bishop “was still very sick with his catheter in place after his [spinal] operation,” noted the Cardinal Kung Foundation. The Religious Affairs Bureau told him that he was going away for “education,” a CCP euphemism for indoctrination or brainwashing. Diocesan Catholics told the Cardinal Kung Foundation that they suspected the police confined the bishop “when there have been important people in town,” to prevent the facts of the Catholic Church’s persecution from coming out.⁹⁰ The foundation documented that between January 2004 and June 2006, authorities had arrested Bishop Jia at least nine times.⁹¹ They briefly released him before rearresting him on December 19 as he prepared to celebrate the twenty-sixth anniversary of his consecration as a bishop, stated foundation director Joseph Kung.⁹²

Throughout 2007 and 2008, authorities continued to repeatedly arrest and release Bishop Jia and put him under tight sur-

veillance. After arresting him in June and August 2007, police reportedly ordered him not to publicize Pope Benedict's June Letter to the Chinese People, an order he ignored.⁹³ They posted a sign for the CPCA next to the gate of his cathedral of Christ the King, in Wuqiu, which the bishop removed.⁹⁴ They also repeatedly denied the bishop, then ill, permission to leave house arrest for medical treatment and arrested those trying to visit him. On August 24, 2008, six officials in two cars pulled up to Bishop Jia's cathedral, detained him, and placed him under 24-hour surveillance.⁹⁵ The Cardinal Kung Foundation reported details of a police observation post near the cathedral for monitoring the bishop round-the-clock and deterring visitors from entering the cathedral.⁹⁶

During 2009 and 2010, authorities increased their efforts to silence Bishop Jia and force him to join the government-aligned church. Father Bernardo Cervellera, then editor of *AsiaNews*, reported that five police officers in two vehicles arrived at the bishop's residence, taunted him, and then seized him on March 30, 2009,⁹⁷ just as the Vatican's Commission on the Church in China began its plenary meeting in Rome.⁹⁸ When Chinese authorities tried to force the bishop to join the CPCA, he pledged his loyalty to the pope and firmly refused to join the CPCA and the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops.⁹⁹

In December 2010, officials from the CCP United Front Work Department and the Public Security Bureau took Bishop Jia into custody on three separate occasions, all to pressure him to sign an agreement to close his orphanage for disabled children. He repeatedly refused, even as officials threatened to take him away for another "study session."¹⁰⁰

Only months before the signing of the China-Vatican agreement in September 2018, the government isolated Bishop Jia under house arrest. After his family repeatedly requested a visit, police finally allowed them to see him at his residence on March 26, 2018, but only under official supervision, and the officers recorded the entire interaction.¹⁰¹ By mid-2020, Bishop Jia faced

intensified, unrelenting persecution. Police took him into detention, and his persecution in secret detention continues as of this writing.

He had operated an orphanage for disabled children with the help of Catholic nuns for over 30 years. In the early 1990s, a disabled infant had been left on his doorstep, and he took the baby into his home and cared for him.¹⁰² Other parents soon began dropping off their sick and disabled children, so in recent years, the bishop and the nuns had cared for 80 abandoned children there. Police declared his orphanage illegal as an unauthorized religious activity and set out to disband it. On June 24, 2020, a group of 70 police and 25 social service workers took custody of half of the older orphans. Facing widespread resistance from the children, including one who "threatened to kill himself if he were taken away," the police halted their relocation of the younger children.

One of the disabled orphans told *Bitter Winter*, "I feel heartbroken every time I recall my friends being taken away. . . . I feel scared when government officials visit here. I hide every time they come, fearing that they will take me away as well." The police returned "almost every day" in July, threatening Bishop Jia and demanding he hand over the remaining children.

As the China-Vatican agreement was on the verge of renewal for the first time, police seized Bishop Jia on August 10, 2020, and took him into detention at a hotel to isolate him from his church community. His "crime" was having allowed in his church the singing of hymns without government permission. CCP officials kept the bishop under tight surveillance. According to a Catholic from his diocese, "He had to report to authorities daily by taking a photo of himself at bedtime. He also had to take photos of what he has eaten, where he has been, and what he has done. He has no freedom at all."¹⁰³

Bishop Jia remains in indefinite detention, and the Chinese government has acknowledged he suffers from illness, which

largely developed from his times in detention. Police use this to pressure him to resign, as China expert Father Bernardo Cervellera reported, mocking him by saying that “it is time to retire, since he is sick.”¹⁰⁴

The Holy See has spoken out more than once on Bishop Jia’s behalf over the course of his six decades of persecution. While he and Bishop Wei Jingyi were in detention from March to May 2004, the Cardinal Kung Foundation reports, the papal spokesperson raised their cases publicly and “expressed serious concern about the arrest of these two underground bishops.”¹⁰⁵ After the Vatican Commission on the Church in China

concluded its meeting in Rome on April 2, 2009, it issued a statement expressing its “profound sadness” at Bishop Jia’s arrest, which had occurred at the outset of its meeting, and cited “other ecclesiastics,” including many whom Beijing had recognized but who had reconciled with Rome, who were “deprived of their freedom” and “subjected to undue pressure and limitations on their pastoral activities.” It gave as examples of such pressure these clerics’ subjection to “forced vacations” far from their faithful and political indoctrination sessions that lasted for months. It noted that these situations of “uneasy relations with the civil authorities . . . create obstacles to . . . dialogue.”¹⁰⁶

Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin

Biographical Information



Born: 1968

Diocese: Shanghai

Ordained priest: December 18, 1994

Ordained auxiliary bishop: July 7, 2012

Arrest History Summary

July 7, 2012–present: Detention without trial

Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin has been under constant surveillance, restrictions, and detention since July 7, 2012, the day he was ordained auxiliary bishop of Shanghai with both a papal mandate and government approval. The China-Vatican agreement did not improve his situation. During the ordination mass at Shanghai’s St. Ignatius Cathedral, Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian and two other Vatican-approved bishops performed the “laying on of hands” ritual to invoke the Holy Spirit on Bishop Ma. By rising from his knees and hugging those three bishops, Ma avoided the imposition of hands by Bishop Zhan Silu, a government-selected bishop who lacked Vatican approval. At the ceremony’s close, Bishop Ma took the pulpit and, after giving thanks and

spiritual remarks, publicly announced his resignation from the CPCA. He was leaving, he declared, because it was an obstacle to his leadership within the Catholic Church. According to a transcript, he invoked the words of the Jesuit St. Ignatius, saying:

In this present moment, in this place, we have to choose a way that will serve God with greater glory. . . . In the light of the teaching of Our Mother Church, as I now serve as a bishop, I should focus on the pastoral work and evangelization. It is inconvenient for me to take on certain responsibilities. Therefore, from this day of consecration, it will no longer be convenient for me to be a member of the Patriotic Association.¹⁰⁷

His defiance prompted an emotional outpouring. The Catholic media reported that among the 1,000 people in attendance, including CCP officials, over 40 clergy, nuns, and lay members of the congregation, there was resounding and prolonged applause and tears of joy.

As Father Bernardo Cervellera, a senior journalist for the Catholic press and China expert, reported, the state retal-

iated against Bishop Ma that night: “The Religious Affairs Bureau [of the Chinese government] did not like this perfectly aimed blow and has confined him to house arrest in the Sheshan seminary, for a forced period of ‘rest.’”¹⁰⁸ Other Catholic sources also report that, within hours, police took the 44-year-old bishop into detention and put him in solitary confinement at the mountainside Sheshan Seminary, outside Shanghai,¹⁰⁹ a form of house arrest that state religious authorities cynically described as a “retreat.” The CCP subjected him to weeks of interrogation and periodic sessions of communist indoctrination. This occurred only months after Shanghai’s auxiliary bishop, Joseph Xing, “disappeared” after showing signs of defiance to the government’s official Catholic organizations.

In effect, the state condemned Bishop Ma to indefinite detention without charge or trial because he dared to exercise his constitutionally and internationally recognized right to religious freedom. His case drew international attention. On July 17, 2012, at St. Margaret’s Church in Hong Kong, Cardinal Zen led a mass dedicated to Bishop Ma. Congregations in Catholic churches abroad offered prayers for him.

Upon his detention, the authorities denied Bishop Ma the right to wear the zucchetto (hat), ring, pectoral cross, and other signs of his episcopal office. In December 2012, the Catholic press reported that the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops would strip him of his episcopal title as well.¹¹⁰ On December 12, Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai, a Hong Kong native and then the secretary of the Vatican’s Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, confirmed to AsiaNews that the council had dismissed Bishop Ma as coadjutor bishop of Shanghai, revoking his episcopal office:

No conference in the world has the power to appoint or remove a bishop, least of all this “so-called” Conference, which is not recognized by the pope. This is a clear case of abuse of authority. Anyone involved in

this act will have to explain why they have decided to cause such harm to the Church and the communion of the Church, both in China and in the world.¹¹¹

On March 16, 2014, the Holy See recognized the still-detained Bishop Ma as Shanghai’s bishop following the death of Bishop Joseph Fan. At that time Bishop Ma was able to have visitors and regularly use Weibo, the Chinese social media site, to preach the Gospel and lead his 50,000 followers in daily prayers. In one blog post on Weibo, he quoted Nelson Mandela, writing, “Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all my people were the chains on me.”

On May 3, 2016, UCA News reported that CCP authorities had shut down Bishop Ma’s popular Weibo account in March and refused him permission to attend a nearby commemorative mass for his predecessor Bishop Jin. The Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops had installed Jin as Shanghai’s bishop in 1985, and the Vatican had recognized him in 2005. Observers thought the restrictions were due to Ma’s growing following on social media, though the government gave no explanation.¹¹²

The following month, on June 12, 2016, Bishop Ma, by then under house arrest for four years for rejecting the CPCA, in a dramatic reversal praised the government-controlled association in his blog post. “For a certain time, I have been deceived by others and [said and] made certain wrong words and deeds about the [C]PCA,” Bishop Ma wrote. He expressed remorse for his prior stance, saying it was “extremely unwise in hindsight” and that “it undermined the excellent development of the Shanghai Catholic Church that Bishop Jin has built up.” He hoped to act to “remedy those faults,” he said.

If Bishop Ma expected that his new embrace of the CPCA would enable him to resume his episcopal ministry, he was mis-

taken. The CCP did not free him, and he remains in indefinite detention.

On April 4, 2023, Bishop Joseph Shen Bin was installed as bishop of Shanghai Diocese. He had been ordained bishop 13 years earlier, with both the mandate of the Holy See and government recognition, but the CCP-linked Catholic Council of Bishops unilaterally decided to transfer him to Shanghai and announced the move in a letter. The council does not have Vatican authorization and operates under Shen's leadership.

Shen was a safe bet for Beijing. In August 2023, he gave a speech in which he insisted on independence from papal authority for the Catholic Church in China:

We must . . . adhere to the principle of independence and autonomy in running the Church, adhere to the principle of democracy in running the Church, and adhere to the direction of the Sinicization of the Catholic Church in China. This is the bottom line, which no one can break, and it is also a high-pressure line, which no one should touch.

The Vatican's Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin commented on Beijing's unilateral transfer of Shen (and the transfer of another bishop to a diocese without Vatican recognition around the same time). *America: The Jesuit Review* reported that Parolin asserted, "This way of proceeding seems to disregard the spirit of dialogue and collaboration established between the Vatican and the Chinese side over the years and to which is referred in the Agreement."¹¹³ He also noted that "the Holy See was informed of the provision adopted by the Chinese authorities to transfer Mgr. Joseph Shen Bin, bishop of Haimen, but, yet again, it was not involved." On April 5, Matteo Bruni, director of the Holy See Press Office, stated, "The Holy See had been informed a few days ago of the decision of the Chinese authorities" to transfer Bishop Shen from Haimen to Shanghai, and it only "learned from the media of the installation this morning."

Nevertheless, for the sake of "unity and communion," and "the greater good of the diocese," Pope Francis gave his approval for Bishop Shen's transfer to Shanghai, three months after it occurred, on July 15, 2023. Cardinal Parolin emphasized that this papal approval was appropriate for "the pastoral situation of the Shanghai Diocese that is recognized by the Holy See and which for too long was without a bishop."¹¹⁴ Of course, Shanghai has had three bishops over the decade since Bishop Jin's death, but what the cardinal meant in delicately referencing "the pastoral situation" was that Shanghai had been without a bishop who had the freedom to carry out his episcopal ministry since Bishop Jin's death on April 27, 2013. Bishop Joseph Fan was under house arrest until his death in 2014; Bishop Thaddeus Ma was still detained, or "blocked," as the cardinal put it; and Bishop Xing had mysteriously "retired."

In a Vatican News interview with Cardinal Parolin at that time, the Vatican made a rare public appeal to Chinese authorities on behalf of Bishops Ma and Xing.¹¹⁵ The cardinal expressed the Holy See's hopes that the papal recognition of Bishop Shen's transfer "may, in agreement with the [Chinese] Authorities, favor a just and wise solution" to "pending issues" concerning the two bishops whom they had bypassed in choosing a bishop to head the Shanghai Diocese. This was Vatican recognition that Bishop Ma and Bishop Xing were suffering injustice at the hands of the government.

The Vatican has not seen a resolution of these cases even as it now fully supports Bishop Shen of Shanghai and honors him with invitations to high-level conferences in Rome. Any hope has faded that Bishop Ma will be able to resume his episcopal role as auxiliary to Shen, to whom he offered obedience on his blog.

Since the seventeenth century, the Shanghai Diocese has been the most important and largest diocese of the Catholic Church in China. Located there are the prominent Sheshan Seminary and China's famous pilgrimage site and the first ba-

silica in East Asia, the nineteenth-century Basilica of Our Lady, Help of Christians, also known as the Shrine of Our Lady of Sheshan. It also has a long history of persecuted bishops.

The great Cardinal Ignatius Kung Pin-Mei was the bishop of Shanghai during the Maoist period. Then Bishop Kung had a key role in establishing the apparatus of Catholic resistance that later became the Vatican-loyal underground Catholic Church. In 1955, after he rejected Beijing’s demand to lead a CCP-aligned church, authorities arrested Bishop Kung. He was taken to a crowded stadium with his hands tied behind his back and ordered to publicly confess his crimes. Instead, the five-foot-tall bishop loudly cried out, “Long live Christ the King, Long live the Pope.”¹¹⁶ The CCP subjected him to a show trial and imprisoned him for 30 years. Pope John Paul II secretly elevated him to cardinal (in pectore) in 1979. In 1988, Bishop Kung came to visit family in the United States, where he died in 2000 at age 98.

Authorities also arrested several hundred clergy and church leaders and over 1,000 lay Catholics in Shanghai in 1955. Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian had been imprisoned then and sent to “reeducation” camps until 1972. State authorities selected him as auxiliary bishop of Shanghai without a papal mandate in 1985, and the Holy See finally recognized him in 2005. Bishop Joseph Fan Zhongliang was the coadjutor bishop of Shanghai and served there with a papal mandate but without government authorization from March 2000 until his death at age 97 on March 16, 2014. After CCP authorities arrested him in 1955, he spent over 30 years in jails and forced labor camps. In 1985, he was secretly ordained coadjutor bishop of Shanghai, while Cardinal Kung was imprisoned. Upon Cardinal Kung’s death in March 2000, Pope John Paul II named Bishop Fan the legitimate bishop of Shanghai. The CCP immediately placed him under house arrest and kept him there until his death 14 years later.

Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin

Biographical Information



Born: September 10, 1963

Diocese: Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province

Ordained priest: August 10, 1989

Consecrated coadjutor bishop of Wenzhou: November 10, 2011

Appointed ordinary bishop of Wenzhou: September 7, 2016

March 2007: Charged with “illegal exit”¹²⁰

August 23–October 8, 2016: Detained

April 12–17, 2017: Detained¹²¹

May 18, 2017–January 3, 2018: Detained¹²²

November 9–late November / early December 2018: Detained¹²³

October 25–November 2021: Detained¹²⁴

April 7, 2022: Arrested¹²⁵

April/May 2022: Detained¹²⁶

December 16–18, 2023: Detained¹²⁷

December 24–25, 2023: Detained¹²⁸

January 2, 2024–present: Detained¹²⁹

Arrest History Summary

September 5, 1999: Detained, hospitalized while in custody¹¹⁷

October 27, 2005: Arrested¹¹⁸

September 25, 2006–May 2007: Detained¹¹⁹

Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin heads the Wenzhou Diocese with authorization from the Vatican but not from China's government. He became the ordinary bishop of Wenzhou upon the death of his predecessor, Bishop Vincent Zhu Weifang, who had spent at least 22 years in prison and forced labor camps. As of this writing, Bishop Shao is still imprisoned.

Over the past 25 years, from the time he was a parish priest, CCP authorities have taken Bishop Shao into custody many times, with various, spurious explanations, such as for a "trip," "religious seminars," "tourism," and "vacation."¹³⁰ These periods of detention have often entailed interrogation and indoctrination sessions, according to AsiaNews.¹³¹ During the detentions, police have also subjected him to "psychological pressure" to join the CPCA.¹³² These detentions take place without due process or trial and are typically in secret locations where the bishop is isolated from his diocesan community.

Prior to the China-Vatican agreement, Bishop Shao had been arrested and detained, often on the eve of important Catholic holydays, including Christmas, Easter, and the Assumption of Mary. The police first jailed then Father Shao in 1999, during which time he contracted an illness and had to be hospitalized.¹³³

His next major arrest was in fall 2005, while he was serving as Wenzhou's vicar general. Police arrested him and Father Jiang Sunian, the diocese's chancellor, following a mass that they held for 600 Catholics in Yongqiang parish. "Public security officers seized him at the front desk when he approached the counter to order food while the other Catholics waited inside a room," reported AsiaNews.¹³⁴ Noticing the commotion, lay Catholics escorted the other priests who were with Father Shao out through the back door of the restaurant's kitchen to protect them from being arrested too.

The following year, in September 2006, authorities arrested Father Shao and Father Paul Jiang Sunian at a friend's house as they traveled home from a trip to the Vatican and other cities in

Europe, according to Joseph Kung.¹³⁵ They sentenced Shao to nine months for illegally leaving the country and released him on parole a month early, in May 2007, due to "severe hearing and gallstone problems."¹³⁶ The police confiscated the belongings of both men, including notes and a photograph of them with Pope Benedict XVI at the Vatican.

Government agents detained Bishop Shao and his secretary in August 2016. Officials told their church that they were being taken on a "trip." According to a local priest, "the government [did] not want Bishop Shao to preside over the funeral of [underground] Msgr. Zhu."¹³⁷ The agents released him six weeks later.

During the negotiations leading up to the China-Vatican agreement, on May 18, 2017, police and members of the Zhejiang Province Religious Affairs Bureau took Bishop Shao into custody.¹³⁸ On June 16, 2017, a Catholic who happened to be at Wenzhou Airport spotted him there as police were transporting him to Beijing.¹³⁹ He was next seen, still under detention, on September 11, when parishioners spotted him at a Beijing hospital.¹⁴⁰ He was released in January 2018 until his series of detentions after the agreement.

On June 26, 2017, the Holy See Press Office issued a press release expressing "grave concern" for Bishop Shao.¹⁴¹ It expressed "the hope that Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin may return as soon as possible to the diocese and that he can be assured the possibility of serenely exercising his episcopal ministry." It stated further that the Holy See was "profoundly saddened for this and other similar episodes that unfortunately do not facilitate ways of understanding" and invited the faithful to pray for the bishop and for the Catholic Church in China. It noted that "the diocesan Catholic community and his relatives [had] no news or reasons for his removal, nor [did] they know where he is being held."

Bishop Shao remained in secret detention until January 2018. On November 9, 2018, just weeks after the China-Vatican agreement signing, police took him into custody and held him

for several weeks. On the day of the arrest, Father Bernardo Cervellera stated that this arrest, like the others, was undoubtedly for further “interrogation and indoctrination”:

As an “underground” bishop, in the periods of kidnapping he is coerced to submit to the religious policy of China, which requires registration with the government and membership of the Patriotic Association (PA). But membership of these bodies implies adhering to the project of an “independent” Church [from the Holy See], which Msgr. Shao refuses. The Letter to the Chinese Catholics of Benedict XVI also judges the status of the PA as “irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine.”¹⁴²

Father Cervellera reflected on the unity that Bishop Shao brought to his diocese, retaining control of his cathedral while being an “underground” or unregistered bishop.¹⁴³ He expressed mistrust of the Chinese authorities, whom he asserted aim for the “suppression of all Christians”:

Msgr. Shao Zhumin is the bishop of a now unified Church, where there is no longer the division between official and underground Catholics, exactly what Pope Francis hoped for in his Message to Chinese Catholics and the world, published a few days after the agreement. Still, the PA, in addition to kidnapping the bishop, has in these days banned “official” priests from going to pay homage to the tombs of “underground” priests and bishops. And this is the sign that the division in the Chinese Church is not intended primarily by Catholics, but by the Party. This policy—which has lasted for 60 years—does not seem in favor of the evangelization of China, but—as mentioned so many times in the past by the same PA—is a step towards the suppression of all Christians.¹⁴⁴

During his brief respites from detention, Bishop Shao worked energetically under difficult conditions to lead his diocese. At

the outset of the coronavirus pandemic lockdown, the Chinese government ordered Catholics in churches both outside and within the CPCA not to congregate in churches but instead to pray at home.¹⁴⁵ A source told AsiaNews, “Usually on Sundays, police and members of the Patriotic Association stand in front of the church to chase away children and youth. But now the government has asked everyone not to go out to reduce the spread of the virus so that children are at home with an altar in a room.” Bishop Shao followed the instructions by holding Sunday mass in a house church. This came to light when, on March 16, 2021, the government fined a local Catholic from Zhejiang ¥200,000 (\$28,000) because Bishop Shao and 20 faithful gathered for mass in the layman’s private chapel.¹⁴⁶

Bishop Shao also organized diocesan charitable activities. After the Holy See sent 700,000 masks to China at the height of its pandemic, Bishop Shao raised money to send masks to the Holy See at the height of Italy’s pandemic. In his fundraising appeal to his diocese, he gave a lesson on gratitude and good works: “Right now, Europe who had provided us with help in our time of need is seriously hit by the epidemic, in particular the Holy See and Italy . . . we must in turn restore everything we have received.”¹⁴⁷

In April 2022, CCP authorities arrested Bishop Shao prior to holy week and forced him onto a plane without any explanation.¹⁴⁸ On May 10, Catholic sources told AsiaNews that they had seen Shao under close guard in a Beijing nursing home. The report added, “Bishop Shao underwent an operation recently and is currently in a nursing home, monitored day and night by policemen.” The police released him later that month.

On January 2, 2024, the date of his most recent detention, police again imprisoned Bishop Shao in a secret jail without due process, and there he remains indefinitely. A source told AsiaNews that, at the time of Bishop Shao’s arrest, “he

was ordered to take clothes for spring, summer, autumn, and winter,” suggesting he was to be held for a lengthy period.¹⁴⁹ This detention, while without any charge, was likely a response to his letter to a priest, Father Ma Xian-shi, opposing his decisions about priestly ordinations and transfers made without Bishop Shao’s consent and warning that “anyone who received holy orders from someone who lacks legitimate power to ordain is automatically suspended.”¹⁵⁰

Bishop Shao is beloved in his diocese. During his 2017 detention, the faithful of his diocese began a campaign of prayer and fasting for his release on the eighteenth of every month, beginning in December 2017.¹⁵¹ The authorities released him a month after the campaign’s launch.¹⁵² After his release, on January 27, 2018, the diocese sang a song welcoming him home.¹⁵³ They addressed him “as our dear bishop who leads us to Christ. Our bishop is the good shepherd . . . your name is always in our hearts.”

Bernardo Cervellera commented in AsiaNews that the bishop deserves this affection from his diocese, describing him as one of the “sweetest and meekest” people.¹⁵⁴ In 2024, the outlet reported that the faithful offer the following prayer for him after every major arrest:

Pray that the Lord will give him confidence and courage, that he will not be demoralized by what happened; pray also that he will remain healthy and whole, under the guidance of Christ, so that he may return to us as soon as possible to shepherd his flock; let us pray together.¹⁵⁵

The city of Wenzhou, the heart of Shao’s diocese, has had a long tradition of Christian religious observance, and many call it the “Jerusalem of the East.”¹⁵⁶ In Zhejiang, Christians constitute over 10 percent of the population,¹⁵⁷ and in 2018, there were 130,000 Catholics—80,000 in the underground church and 50,000 in CPCA churches.¹⁵⁸

Bishop Melchior Shi Hongzhen

Biographical Information



(Wikimedia Commons)

Born: January 7, 1929

Diocese: Tianjin

Ordained priest: July 4, 1954

Consecrated coadjutor bishop of Tianjin:
June 15, 1982

Appointed ordinary bishop of Tianjin:
June 8, 2019

Arrest History Summary

March 2005: Placed under surveillance¹⁵⁹

2010: Detained under house arrest¹⁶⁰

2012: Detained under house arrest¹⁶¹

June 1, 2019–present: Detained¹⁶²

Bishop Melchior Shi Hongzhen is the ordinary bishop of Tianjin. He succeeded the late Bishop Li Side, who, after many years of persecution, died in detention in 2019, the year after the signing of the China-Vatican agreement. Bishop Shi has been repressed

for refusing to pledge independence from Vatican authority and rejecting the CPCA. He has worked successfully to reconcile clergy in his diocese, irrespective of CPCA membership, as Pope Benedict XVI encouraged in his letter to the Chinese Church.

CCP authorities have detained Bishop Shi in a form of house arrest and placed him under close government surveillance that “prevented [him] from exercising [his episcopal] ministry.”¹⁶³ In August 2007, security officers visited Bishops Li and Shi and ordered them to join the CPCA, and again they refused.¹⁶⁴ Since the China-Vatican agreement, Bishop Shi’s situation has not improved.

In 2010, journalist Louisa Lim reported in an NPR interview that the authorities did not allow Shi to go to Tianjin’s “splendid cathedral” but confined him to a makeshift concrete church compound on a busy highway, where he is “effectively a prisoner.” Lim described the bishop as a “slightly deaf but cheerful man” who humbly endures near-constant house arrest and “spends his days reading in his book-filled study.”¹⁶⁵ The government has barred Bishop Shi from carrying out his episcopal responsibilities and from appearing or acting in his role as bishop. He can function as a simple parish priest within a small area. “I just give Mass, baptism, and the last rites. That’s all,” he told Lim.

The NPR journalist added, “Believers can come and worship with him at Chongxinjiao Church but Catholic clergy reportedly cannot.” In 2014, Catholic World Report stated that when “Bishop Shi is called away to administer last rites, he is required to seek permission from the local police to leave the small area of his parish.”¹⁶⁶

Bishop Shi, who has worked to foster cooperation between the legal and underground clergy in his diocese, also prays for and comforts the people of Tianjin. In August 2015, after an industrial explosion in the city, he held a mass and prayed for the 114 dead and the hundreds of injured and their families. Sixty Catholic volunteers from his diocese’s Social Services Center were among the first responders to the accident and aided in the rescue, an underground priest who works with Bishop Shi told the Union of Asian Catholic News.

On June 8, 2019, Bishop Stephen Li Side died while detained in a mountain village, where he had been under house

arrest for 27 years. The Chinese government permitted Bishop Shi to visit him as he lay in the hospital, dying of a cerebral hemorrhage, but not to participate in his funeral. A week before Bishop Li’s death, security forces “took over” Bishop Shi’s parish compound to prevent him or anyone else from passing.¹⁶⁷

Ordained as a coadjutor bishop, Bishop Shi had the right to assume leadership of the diocese upon the death of Bishop Li. A source told *Bitter Winter* that after Bishop Li’s death in 2019, officials from Tianjin’s United Front Work Department told Bishop Shi to sign a letter accepting an appointment to the CPCA.¹⁶⁸ Bishop Shi again refused.

In deciding to remain in the underground, Bishop Shi indicated that he took inspiration from St. Thomas More, the sixteenth-century English martyr. He explained to NPR’s Lim:

The Patriotic Association is an organization of the country, like the Communist Party. You are free to join or not. I didn’t. What I’ve been doing doesn’t harm the country in any way.

In 2022, Bishop Shi received a visit in his compound from a Vatican delegation.¹⁶⁹ Its leader, Archbishop Claudio Celli, had traveled to Tianjin to negotiate the second renewal of the China-Vatican agreement. The archbishop gave the then 93-year-old Bishop Shi a pectoral cross, a sign of episcopal authority, on behalf of the pope. This symbolic show of Vatican respect undoubtedly helped bring about the CPCA’s announcement in August 2024 that the government recognized Bishop Shi. While long overdue, it is an empty and cynical gesture. Now 95 years old, the bishop is probably unable to fully carry out episcopal duties among the 21 parishes in his diocese, including the training and ordaining of priests. With Bishop Shi’s long-enforced confinement, the Tianjin Diocese has been without a bishop who can carry out his episcopal duties since 2005.¹⁷⁰ First established as an apostolic vicar-

iate in 1912, Tianjin was promoted to a diocese in 1946. Despite seeing much religious repression over the decades, the diocese, located 50 miles from Beijing, has had over 100

years of continuous Catholic presence and currently has over 100,000 faithful and 60 priests, of whom 40 are registered with the CPCA.¹⁷¹

Bishop James Su Zhimin

Biographical Information



Born: July 10, 1932

Diocese: Baoding, Hebei Province

Ordained priest: April 12, 1981

Consecrated coadjutor bishop of Baoding:
May 2, 1993

Appointed ordinary bishop of Baoding:
December 21, 1995

Arrest History Summary

1956: Detained¹⁷²

1957: Detained¹⁷³

1959–62: Detained¹⁷⁴

1975–79: Detained¹⁷⁵

1982–86: Detained¹⁷⁶

1988: Detained¹⁷⁷

December 17, 1989: Detained¹⁷⁸

May 21, 1990–mid-1992: Sentenced to three years of “reform through labor”¹⁷⁹

January 20–29, 1994: Detained¹⁸⁰

December 1995: Detained¹⁸¹

February–April 1996: Detained under house arrest¹⁸²

April 1996: In hiding¹⁸³

May 24, 1996: Arrested¹⁸⁴

May 1996–October 1997: In hiding¹⁸⁵

October 8, 1997–present: Detained¹⁸⁶

Bishop James Su Zhimin is the ordinary or principal bishop of the Baoding Diocese, of whom there has been no official word since he was taken into secret detention without charge or trial in 1997. Previously, the CCP repeatedly incarcerated him for several years, months, or weeks at a time and horrifically tortured him. Altogether, Chinese authorities have locked him up in various labor camps and detention centers for at least 44 years, if he is still alive. This cruel treatment is in reprisal for his refusal to take the CPCA pledge of independence from papal authority. The Vatican-China agreement did not bring any change to the case of Bishop Su.

The CCP detained Bishop Su three times from 1956 to 1975. He was an active layman during the time of Mao Zedong, and

police incarcerated him for much of the late 1950s, '60s, and '70s. They also imprisoned him during the “liberalizing” 1980s, when he was ordained a priest, and again after his appointment as a bishop for Baoding, a city in Hebei Province 90 miles southwest of Beijing. In detention, security police once beat him with a board so savagely that it splintered, prompting them in a sadistic frenzy to tear off the door frame for more wood to continue. Another time, they beat him after suspending him from the ceiling by his wrists. They also confined him to a closet-sized cell for several days and filled it with a layer of water to prevent sitting or sleeping. While forcing him to do hard labor as a means of “reeducation,” they denied Bishop Su adequate medical care after a wheelbarrow of rocks fell on him, breaking both his legs.

In January 1994, US Representative Chris Smith (R-NJ) visited Bishop Su in Beijing during a rare period of freedom for the cleric. Bishop Su was at that time living in a room in the apartment of a Catholic family, and there he held a mass for the delegation, using a chest of drawers as an altar and a bed as a pew. American Trinitarian Father Stanley DeBoe, who accompanied Smith, told Hudson Institute that the bishop walked with a “distinctive limp” and was nearly deaf, disabilities that had resulted from the prison abuse. The bishop shrugged off Congressman Smith’s concern that the “underground” mass was risky, saying, “If I have to go back to prison, that’s where my people are.” Authorities arrested Bishop Su again before the delegation returned to Washington but released him nine days later, after US government pressure.

While free, the Hong Kong Diocese reports, Bishop Su tirelessly celebrated mass, administered the sacraments, and comforted the Catholic laity in private homes since the party had banned him from churches. Members of the Smith delegation attended his open-air liturgy for the holyday of Epiphany in a cattle shed with hundreds of Chinese Catholic worshipers, who came on bicycles despite the risks. Over his decades of incarceration, he has also made prison his church. The Hong Kong report includes moving testimony from those who heard him preach the Gospel in the labor camps.

Bishop Su’s disappearance into police custody in 1997 began the year before. In May 1996, he led a spectacular pilgrimage of thousands of Catholics publicly praying as they proceeded to the shrine of Our Lady of China in Donglu, outside Baoding. Chinese authorities arrested him, but he managed to escape and go into hiding. They had not authorized the event and were determined not to allow it to happen again. Joseph Kung testified to the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China that “5,000 Chinese soldiers, supported by dozens of armed cars and helicopters, destroyed and leveled” the Donglu shrine.¹⁸⁷ Spring 1996 saw Baoding government security carry out several raids that resulted in the imprisonment of Catho-

lic leaders. “Task forces from the city and county government” forced at least 4,000 Catholics in and around Baoding to publicly recant their faith that year. From his hiding place, Bishop Su wrote an open letter, dated June 15, 1996, to the National People’s Congress stating that security personnel had “taken away” at least one bishop, seven priests, and 15 laity in his diocese.¹⁸⁸ He bravely petitioned the organization “to thoroughly investigate” specific abuses against Baoding Catholics.

On October 8, 1997, police discovered Bishop Su while he was in hiding and arrested him for the final time. They took him into custody in the city of Xinji, Hebei. Ever since, they have held him in secret detention, incommunicado, and denied any due process. As of November 6, 1997, Joseph Kung believed the authorities were holding Bishop Su in the detention center of Qing Yuan County, Baoding, Hebei Province.¹⁸⁹

In late 2003, a family member spotted Bishop Su at Baoding Central Hospital,¹⁹⁰ where his captors had taken him for an eye operation and heart treatment.¹⁹¹ A team of 20 security guards and a high-level public security officer surrounded him. When authorities learned that a family member had recognized Bishop Su, they immediately removed him to a secret location, preventing his family from speaking to him. No one has seen him since.¹⁹²

In 2015, Bishop Su’s nephew, Su Tianyou, told UCA News that “his whereabouts are unknown, and I don’t even know if he is alive or not.”¹⁹³ The bishop’s family and Baoding diocesan priests have repeatedly appealed to the Chinese government for information about the prelate. Between 2015 and 2018, Cardinal Joseph Zen, the bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, marched outside Hong Kong’s Chinese Liaison Office holding photos of Bishop Su, petitioning the Chinese government to disclose his situation, and the Hong Kong Diocese’s Justice and Peace Commission made various appeals on his behalf.¹⁹⁴ The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the US Congress held a series of hearings in 2020 entitled “Where Is Bishop Su?”

Bishop Su's supporters expected the blackout on information about him to end at the signing of the China-Vatican agreement. During the negotiations on the agreement, Chinese authorities told Baoding Catholics that they would provide information about him and even release him if the Vatican improved its relations with China. However, no official information about Bishop Su has been forthcoming.

Beijing wants to erase any mention of Bishop Su. CCP authorities warned his nieces and nephews against even praying for him in the privacy of their homes. *Bitter Winter* reported that the CCP had told Baoding Catholics, who had begun preparing for the ninetieth birthday of the detained bishop in 2021, that any celebrations for Bishop Su were "absolutely forbidden." AsiaNews reported, "The authorities in Baoding (Hebei) have deployed police in the streets, ordered controls on mobile phones and banned groups from meeting in homes to prevent a simple act, namely remembering [his] birthday."¹⁹⁵

The CCP has also tried to suppress interest in Bishop Su through disinformation that influential church authorities picked up and repeated in the United States. In 2000, then Archbishop Theodore McCarrick falsely told the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (while both he and Nina Shea served as commissioners) that Bishop Su was not in communion with Rome, had been released from prison, and had agreed to join the CPCA.¹⁹⁶ On October 28, 1997, Rev. Drew Christiansen, then the director of the USCCB's Office of International Justice and Peace to United States Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, asserted with "satisfaction" that the bishop "has been released" in a letter.¹⁹⁷ The USCCB letter did not reveal its source or any evidence for this demonstrably false claim. It remains posted, as of this writing, on the USCCB website without any note of correction.

In 2020, there were unsubstantiated claims that Bishop Su died in custody, but the authorities have not returned any remains to

his family or church. The rumors were apparently based on the Chinese government's demand for an appointment of a new bishop for Baoding, under the China-Vatican agreement on the appointment of bishops. Su Tianyou, Bishop Su's nephew, said the family members "still hope to see him, whether he is alive or dead."¹⁹⁸ On May 16, 2024, AsiaNews reported that since Bishop Su's sighting in 2003, "nothing is known about his fate."¹⁹⁹

Bishop Su had told the Smith delegation, "Tell my story." His story is that he defines himself as a pastor, not a martyr, though, like his predecessor, he may be that too. A 2017 report by the Hong Kong Diocese' Justice and Peace Commission describes him as a joyful and articulate preacher beloved by his flock. In 2017, UCA News described Baoding as a "stronghold for the underground Church with more than one million Catholics."²⁰⁰ Bishop Su continues to inspire Baoding Catholics. In the words of a Baoding priest, "The influence of Bishop Fan or Bishop Su is actually the spirit of the older generation that affects us, encourages us and inspires us."²⁰¹ For his witness to faith, Bishop Su has taken on the status of a hero within the church in Baoding.²⁰² The Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) reports that "for the faithful he is the greatest and most famous Chinese bishop because of his faithfulness to the Holy See."²⁰³

Baoding Diocese is another diocese that has felt the brunt of CCP persecution. Bishop Su's predecessor, Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyen, went missing in November 1990, and on April 16, 1992, police dropped off his body in a bag on his relatives' doorstep, according to *Bitter Winter*.²⁰⁴ According to a 2017 report by the Hong Kong Diocese's Justice and Peace Commission, Bishop Fan "might have been tortured to death," since fractures and bruising were visible on his remains.²⁰⁵ Baoding's Bishop Peter Liu Guandong, who with Vatican approval elevated Bishop Su as the coadjutor bishop in 1993, spent 44 years either in prison or in hiding. In 2024, Catholics, including a priest, who are not affiliated with the CPCA continue to "disappear."²⁰⁶

Bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi

Biographical Information



Born: April 17, 1963

Diocese: Shanghai

Ordained priest: June 2, 1990

Ordained auxiliary bishop: June 28, 2005

Arrest History Summary

2011–present: Disappeared and designated as “Resigned”

In late 2011, when Bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi was 48 years old and had served six years as bishop, he suddenly disappeared from public view.²⁰⁷ Catholic sources state that he resigned or retired, with no specific date or further explanation from either Catholic Church or state authorities. In 2023, the Vatican made a rare appeal to China for a “wise and just solution” to his case. This is a clear indication that the Chinese government had forced the bishop from his episcopal seat, blocked him from carrying out his pastoral duties, and treated him unjustly. It was likely due to his dissent from government interference in the church.

After his priestly ordination, Bishop Xing served in the seminary, teaching Catholic Church history and liturgy and serving as its spiritual director, while helping in the nearby parish on Sundays.²⁰⁸ In 1997, he was appointed as the parish priest in Songjiang, Shanghai, and vice-chancellor of the Shanghai Diocese. The following year, he became vicar general of Shanghai Diocese and rector of Sheshan Seminary (until 2003). At various points, he had been sent to study abroad, including in New York (2003–04), which helped prepare him to succeed Shanghai’s Bishop Aloysius Jin. On June 28, 2005, Bishop Jin ordained him auxiliary bishop of Shanghai. The pope approved Bishop Xing, and the Chinese government recognized him.

Bishop Xing’s seminary colleagues describe him as “courageous and prayerful.”²⁰⁹ His mentor Maryknoll Father Larry Lewis, who arranged then Father Xing’s studies in New York, described him as “a prayerful man who has a deep faith and good insight into people.”

Authorities obscured the circumstances of Bishop Xing’s disappearance from the beginning, and even the exact date he vanished is unknown. Father “Huabei,” a priest writing under a pseudonym from northern China who had lived in Shanghai, documented details surrounding the bishop’s disappearance. His statement in UCA News notes that the earliest signs that Bishop Xing was missing appeared on December 10, 2011.²¹⁰ That day, Xing did not fulfill the responsibility of his role as auxiliary bishop to substitute at an ordination ceremony while Bishop Jin was hospitalized, and the church had to cancel the ceremony. Another sign appeared in the week before Christmas 2011, when Bishop Jin was appointed as Shanghai’s vicar general then Father Thaddeus Ma Daqin, whom the church would soon ordain to replace Bishop Xing. On December 25, the church held Christmas Mass, among the most important liturgical events of the year, without Bishop Xing. They have not heard from him in 13 years, as of this writing.

Bishop Xing had repeatedly indicated his resistance to the key demand of the CPCA—to reject papal authority. According to media reports, during his 2005 episcopal inauguration ceremony, he professed to “loyally serve” the pope and announced that the Holy See had nominated him as bishop of Shanghai, indicating full papal backing. This apparently angered the authorities. Citing China’s official Xinhua News Agency, AsiaNews quoted Liu Bainian, then vice president of the CPCA, as testily stating, “There wasn’t any link between Xing’s nomination and the relations between China and the Vatican,” and “Xing was totally a bishop elected by the masses.” In 2006, Bishop Xing also reportedly drew the CPCA’s ire by his absence from the ordination ceremony of Anhui’s Bishop Joseph Liu Xinhong, a bishop whom the Holy See had not recognized.

In his letter, Father Huabei suggests that the last straw for the government occurred at the Eighth National Congress of Catholic Representatives on December 7–9, 2010, under government supervision, in the face of Vatican opposition. Bishop Xing attended in obedience to Bishop Jin, Huabei said, but indicated his dissent in various ways throughout the congress:

The first pictures of the congress on the official TV news report prominently featured the image of Xing. The authorities seemed to believe that as long as Xing was present, the congress was half way to being claimed as a success. . . . During the congress Xing was criticized for his “three NOs.” He did not wear the bishop’s soutane [vestment], did not put on his zucchetto [bishop’s hat] and did not show any supportive stance to the congress. Even though he went to Beijing, it was considered that his uncooperative attitude showed contempt for the patriotic coalition comprised of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and the Bishops’ Conference of the Catholic Church in China, neither of which is recognized by the Vatican.²¹¹

The patriotic coalition had considered Bishop Xing the designated successor of Bishop Jin although it had not named Xing coadjutor due to the fact that Bishop Jin and Bishop Joseph Fan (who did not have government approval) held those positions. When he ordained Bishop Xing, Bishop Jin told UCA News that he hoped Bishop Xing would be “a good bishop, so that he can succeed me.” Bishop Jin described his new auxiliary as “mature enough.” He added, “I have not much to teach him.”

But having lost the confidence of the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops, Bishop Xing was to be sidelined. Bishop Jin

obtained approval from the council and a papal mandate for Father Thaddeus Ma Daqin’s ordination as auxiliary bishop, with the right of succession. (As described in an earlier chapter, the authorities detained Bishop Ma promptly after his episcopal ordination in 2012 and have held him in indefinite detention for outright declaring his rejection of the CPCA.)

After Bishop Jin’s death in 2013, Shanghai Diocese was left without a functioning bishop for ten years until the unilateral transfer of Bishop Shen Bin by the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops (as described in the chapter about Bishop Ma). Shanghai has had three bishops over the decade since Bishop Jin’s death, but with Bishop Joseph Fan under house arrest until his death in 2014, Bishop Thaddeus Ma still detained, and Bishop Xing “retired,” Shanghai had been without a bishop who was free to carry out his episcopal ministry since April 27, 2013.

As mentioned earlier, during a Vatican News interview with Cardinal Parolin, the Vatican made a rare public appeal to Chinese authorities on behalf of Bishops Xing and Ma, recognizing that they were suffering injustice at the hands of the government.²¹²

The Vatican has not seen a resolution of the two cases even as it now fully supports Bishop Shen of Shanghai and honors him with invitations to high-level conferences in Rome. The authorities have not clarified Bishop Xing’s situation or made his whereabouts and well-being publicly known.

In 2023, PIME missionary and sinologist Rev. Gianni Criveller wrote about Bishop Xing, “Having opposed the religious policy of the authorities, he is thought to have been the victim of actions designed to discredit him and force him to resign.”²¹³ With a total blackout on information about Bishop Xing, observers can only imagine specifically what coercive actions he has had to suffer over the past 13 years.

Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-kiun

Biographical Information



(Getty Images)

Born: January 13, 1932

Diocese: Hong Kong

Ordained priest: February 11, 1961

Appointed coadjutor bishop:

September 13, 1996

Ordained coadjutor bishop: December 9, 1996

Installed bishop: October 20, 2002

Elevated to cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI: March 24, 2006

Retired as bishop: April 15, 2009

Arrest History Summary

May 11, 2022: Arrested under Hong Kong's national security law

September 26, 2022: Put on trial

November 25, 2022: Convicted and fined under regulatory law

After his elevation to cardinal by Pope Benedict XVI in 2006, Cardinal Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong who is an internationally renowned religious leader, became the conscience of the Catholic Church in China for religious freedom and later for freedom generally in Hong Kong. He explained in an open letter to an Italian journalist in 2016, "I speak out because I am the voice of the voiceless. In China there is no freedom of expression!"²¹⁴ As the CCP tightened control over Hong Kong, its officials arrested the then 90-year-old cardinal twice in 2022 in politically motivated cases. They put him on trial for two months for a regulatory infraction and fined him. The other arrest was based on Hong Kong's draconian national security law and resulted in an open-ended investigation that could bring a life sentence and hangs like the sword of Damocles over the cardinal to this day. These arrests have had the effect of muzzling and cowing the formerly free Hong Kong church.

Cardinal Zen's persecution began in January 2022 when an article in the state-owned newspaper *Ta Kung Pao* accused him of abusing his position by criticizing the government to "disrupt Hong Kong," a violation of the NSL.²¹⁵ In February, another *Ta Kung Pao* report ominously likened him to Falun Gong, the Chinese spiritual group, which the CCP has been savagely targeting for "elimination" in the mainland for the past 25 years. In 2019, the paper also blamed Zen for "inciting" pro-democracy protesters who had been educated in Christian schools. Local Catholics correctly viewed such accusations in the Chinese government media as a prelude to arrest.

On May 11, 2022, the police arrested the cardinal under the NSL on the vague charge of "conspiracy to collude with foreign forces." They released him on bail several hours later, restricting his movements and confiscating his passport. On September 22 that year, the government put him on trial on an entirely different charge: violating a regulation by failing to register an aid group for pro-democracy protestors for which he served as a trustee. On November 25, a Hong Kong magistrates' court convicted Cardinal Zen, along with five co-defendants, of a regulatory breach for failing to properly register the humanitarian aid fund. The punishment was a relatively small fine, about \$512.

When asked about Zen's trial in September 2022, Pope Francis responded, "He says what he feels, and you can see that there are limitations there."²¹⁶ It was widely understood, including by the pope, that the real reason the police had arrested the elderly cardinal and hauled him before the court for weeks on end was that he had criticized the CCP. Observers also recognized that, henceforth, the church would be under threat in Hong Kong.

The cardinal was the most senior Chinese hierarch that the CCP had ever put on trial. (Cardinal Ignatius Kung Pin-Mei of Shanghai was not made a cardinal until after his 1955 arrest.) Though Zen's penalty was minor, the CCP made its point. As Zen himself had once written about the mainland, "The Chinese com-

munists, after they have killed hundreds of thousands, maybe they don't need to kill so many nowadays." In other words, the new authorities in Hong Kong did not need to apply the severest coercive tactics to get the church to fall in line after having already imprisoned nearly two thousand Hong Kong dissidents (many of whom face a life sentence), including free speech advocate and *Apple Daily* publisher Jimmy Lai.

Regarding the NSL charge, the investigation into whether Zen colluded with foreign powers is ongoing and could lead to prosecution at any time. It is also a charge that the CCP could arbitrarily level against any Hong Kong Catholic cleric. And it could result in a life sentence since there is no CPCA equivalent in Hong Kong so that all Catholic clergy are officially in "collusion" with Rome. Hong Kong's Cardinal Stephen Chow explained, "The difficulty of the national security law lies in not knowing where the red line is. . . . Everyone needed to know where the boundaries were so they would know how to express themselves."²¹⁷ He requested clarification, but a law known as Article 23 expanded the pernicious law in 2024, and the vagueness remains. Until recently Hong Kong was a center of free learning and discourse for Chinese Christians. Now Hong Kong laws threaten religious freedom, and authorities monitor the church as a suspect institution.

Cardinal Zen is no longer free to travel. Since his arrest, authorities temporarily released his passport only once, for five days in January 2023, so that he could go to Rome to attend the funeral of Pope Benedict XVI, the pontiff who had made him a cardinal. Nor is Cardinal Zen any longer free to criticize CCP policies or to publicly speak of mainland China's persecuted bishops. He must now self-censor, not just for his sake but for the church's.

Until his arrest, Cardinal Zen had been the world's most prominent advocate for persecuted Chinese Catholics. In Hong Kong, he had led campaigns for the release of detained bishops on the mainland and championed Hong Kong's imprisoned lay dissenters, such as Jimmy Lai.²¹⁸ He had strongly condemned the CPCA as a "schismatic Church." On the world stage, he

had courageously described CCP encroachment on religious freedom and warned against the Vatican's agreement to share power with the CCP in appointing mainland Catholic bishops.

The Vatican did not always appreciate Cardinal Zen's outspokenness about CCP injustices against the church. In 2020, when he flew to Rome to appeal to the pope, he found out he was not allowed to meet with the pontiff. Some there accused him of "intemperance" and insinuated that he had a "psychological barrier" for objecting to clergy joining the CPCA, even though the Vatican itself has not approved the association.²¹⁹ In his 2016 open letter, Zen explained that he spoke out because bishops in China could not speak for themselves:

In China there is no freedom of expression. Especially those bishops who are trying to come out from the underground and get recognition from the Government, they can only say what please the Government. . . . We know that in China the atheist regime has always wanted to totally control the religions. . . . In dictatorship regime there is no compromise, there is only total submission, slavery and humiliation.

His enforced silence about the CCP's repression of the church leaves a gaping void. There is no one in all of China to take his place.

The arrest of Cardinal Zen also signaled the restriction of Hong Kong's religious freedom generally, the last of the fundamental freedoms to be extinguished there by the CCP. Beijing intimidated the Hong Kong church until it began ceding to CCP demands. In a statement about Cardinal Zen's arrests, the Hong Kong Diocese did not defend him or religious freedom. Rather, it made the timid request that authorities handle his case "in accordance with justice" and suggested leniency due to his age.

Churches and Christian schools still stand but are now guarded in what they say, and all schools and colleges must teach

a curriculum based on the NSL. For example, in a February 2022 interview, then Bishop Chow, an educator and former Jesuit school head, confidently defended as indispensable the mission of Hong Kong's 249 Catholic schools in developing "independent thinking."²²⁰ He asserted, "I find it unacceptable for human dignity to be ignored, trampled upon, or eliminated entirely." Zen's arrest dramatically narrowed Chow's vision. Using the analogy of a flower growing in the crack of a wall, Bishop Chow reflected, "I can feel that Hong Kong, including our Church, are becoming more like an existence within cracks. . . . That spaciousness for our freedom and expression, which we had taken for granted, seems diminishing."²²¹

In October 2022, Bishop Chow felt it prudent to change the name of his diocese's Commission on Justice and Peace to the less provocative Commission on Integral Human Development. On November 15–16, 2022, while the Zen verdict in the registration case was pending, Bishop Chow, along with theologians from the Holy Spirit Center, the renowned research center of China's Catholic Church, was called to a command performance. He attended an online conference with the leaders of the CPCA and the Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops, neither of which the Vatican recognizes as legitimate and which have never had a presence in Hong Kong. According to the government-approved press, council chairman and organizer Bishop Shen Bin opened the Hong Kong meeting by praising the recently concluded "victorious" CCP's Twentieth Congress and establishing that its "spirit" would guide the council toward "fully implementing Xi Jinping's Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era."²²² Referring to both the CCPA and the Hong Kong Diocese, Shen then made a chilling pronouncement: "It is necessary to jointly promote the translation and interpretation of the Bible, and promote Sinicization of China's Catholicism."²²³ It bears close watching to see if the Hong Kong Diocese will agree to be en-

listed in the project to conform scripture and Catholic teaching to CCP ideology.

Since then, Cardinal Chow has cooperated in CPA-initiated visits between the Hong Kong Diocese and the CPCA on the mainland. During these exchanges, the CCP instructs the Hong Kong church on the dos and don'ts of its Sinicization policy. After Cardinal Chow's visit with CPCA chair Bishop Li Shan in Beijing in 2023, he announced that Xi "respects" the pope. It's likely that Li told him to say this since he then made the bizarre claim that Xi's Community of Common Destiny—the CCP's global model to replace the US-led world order—"coincides" with Pope Francis's "love for humanity."²²⁴ Chow also learned from Li that the Hong Kong church would have further visits with the CPCA "to see how we can have more collaboration, in the formation of clergy," which implies the introduction of communist doctrine into Hong Kong seminaries.

A young Joseph Zen, born in Shanghai, no doubt drew inspiration from the heroic bishop of Shanghai at the time, Cardinal Ignatius Kung. Zen fled Shanghai for Hong Kong after the communists took over mainland China. He became a priest in the Salesian order and a scholar of theology. Shortly after the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre, his superiors sent him to China for six months a year, for over seven years, to teach theology in CPCA-aligned Catholic seminaries in Shanghai, Xian, Wuhan, Shijiazhuang, Beijing, and Shenyang. That placed him "in continuous dialogue with those our brothers and their persecutors," as he wrote in his 2016 open letter. He also served as supervisor of his Salesian order, where he found it necessary to work with mainland government authorities.

"During that long living together," he commented, "I witnessed the humiliation of those our Bishops, the suffering of so many brothers because of their faith and their deep '*sensus Ecclesiae*' which made me feel very humble."

Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu

Biographical Information



Born: 1958

Diocese: Xinxiang, Henan Province

Ordained priest: 1985

Consecrated ordinary bishop of Xinxiang:
October 27, 1991

Arrest History Summary

May 31, 1998: Arrested²²⁵

January 25, 2000–late 2001: Detained²²⁶

2005: Surveilled and prevented from visiting the diocese²²⁷

May 21, 2021–present: Arrested and secretly detained²²⁸

Authorities arrested Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu, the ordinary or principal bishop of Xinxiang Diocese in Henan Province, in May 2021 while he was convalescing from cancer surgery, and they continue to indefinitely detain him without due process in an unknown place. The police had previously arrested and jailed him and had long prevented him from entering his diocese. In addition, they now keep him from carrying out the pastoral and episcopal duties he managed to perform in the past, such as training and ordaining new priests.

Bishop Zhang has served as a Vatican-approved bishop of the Apostolic Prefecture of Xinxiang, in Henan Province, since 1991.²²⁹ Because he is not affiliated with the CCPA and Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops, the government considers him a criminal.²³⁰ Bishop Casimir Wang Mi-lu of Tianshui, who was not affiliated with the CPCA, consecrated him in 1991 with a Vatican mandate. The Vatican appointed him as head of the Xinxiang Diocese in 1998, but since 2005, the government has barred him from his diocese and kept him under surveillance in Hebei Province. In addition to a seminary that the government shut down in 2021, he founded two religious orders, which the government pronounced “illegal.”²³¹

On May 21, 2021, the police arrested Bishop Zhang and others in a sweeping crackdown against religious activities held without governmental approval. They then singled him out for prolonged punishment.

The day before his arrest, 100 police officers from three cities carried out a massive raid on his seminary, located in Cangzhou, Hebei Province, on the upper floor of a Catholic-owned factory.²³² They arrested 10 priests, including professors, those involved in pastoral work, and 10 seminarians. Three seminarians managed to escape, and the police later hunted them down and detained them. The government closed the factory and arrested its director.²³³

Bishop Zhang had established the seminary for those who wanted to become priests but were not willing to submit to the authority of the CCP-controlled CPCA. After three days of detention, the seminarians were able to return to their families with an order banning them from continuing religious studies. The authorities threatened them with jail time if they continued studying for the priesthood.²³⁴

The police took the bishop and the clergy to Legal Education Centers, that is, secret detention centers that detainees call “black jails.” There officials keep inmates overnight, deprive them of personal freedom, and subject them to “brainwashing” and Communist Party indoctrination.²³⁵ AsiaNews reported on the “official version” of events: “At the time of the arrest, the authorities had invited the bishop and the priests ‘for tea.’”²³⁶

Police also seized personal belongings, documents, papers, and books from the seminary.²³⁷ “Several computers were also confiscated,” according to AsiaNews, “including that of the diocesan treasurer.”²³⁸

The bishop’s family related that the police would not allow him to go home for Chinese holidays, as is sometimes the practice for detainees. Police allowed two relatives to visit Bishop Zhang for a

few minutes in the presence of officers during the Chinese Lunar New Year, in February 2022.²³⁹ As of this writing, the last report on him was in March 2023, when AsiaNews confirmed that Bishop Zhang remained detained at a secret location by local police.

The authorities have held the bishop without charges or trial in violation of China's laws prohibiting detention without charge for more than three months. The government can strip Catholic bishops of all due process rights if they resist Sinicization rules and do not pledge independence from papal authority.

Xinxiang Diocese has 100,000 Catholic believers, and until the 2018 Sinicization regulations had operated independently from the government.²⁴⁰ An unnamed government source told *Bitter Winter* that by the end of 2018, the CCP had shut down about 60 percent of legal—that is, government-registered—Christian meeting venues in the city of Xinxiang and removed the crosses from many remaining churches. It reported that, in 2019, Xinxiang investigated 10,000 university students for their religious beliefs to suppress them.²⁴¹ In 2021, authorities there shut down the Catholic schools and kindergartens.

Government regulations on religious activities under the CCP's Sinicization campaign explicitly mandate the credentialing of Catholic bishops by the state's Chinese Catholic Council of Bishops.²⁴² They require bishops without credentials to stop engaging in activities as "religious professionals." Catholic clergy can engage in religious activities, including operating and teaching in seminaries, but only on the condition that they personally register with the CPCA and that the institutions and activities they engage in submit to government approval and oversight to ensure conformity with communist doctrine. Bishop Zhang rejected these directives.

The faithful of Xinxiang Diocese are deeply concerned for Bishop Zhang's well-being. They do not know the circumstances of his detention or whether he is receiving medical care to treat his cancer. They have dedicated the following prayer for him:

Lord our God, Father of all peoples, you have chosen your servant, Bishop Zhang Weizhu, to be the pastor of your people. We pray that you will give him the strength and courage to face the difficulties encountered during his ministry; we pray that you will give him physical and inner peace.²⁴³

While the Sinicization crackdown has been cruel to this bishop, since his ordination in 1991, Bishop Zhang has been under "constant pressure" from the government. He has endured persecution and many restrictions on his ministry, noted Catholic News Service.²⁴⁴ For decades, he has suffered periodic arrests, detentions, harassment, and forced indoctrination for resisting the CPCA. One example occurred in May 1998, on Pentecost Sunday, when authorities arrested him while he was traveling to his home village to observe the feast with family and friends.²⁴⁵ By 2005, they had placed Bishop Zhang under surveillance in Hebei Province to ensure he kept a distance from his diocese in Henan. In 2010, they barred him from overseeing his diocese's finances and resources, a responsibility that state authorities then took over.

In 2022, *Bitter Winter* reported that a reliable source claimed the Vatican had asked the Chinese government to release Bishop Zhang, to which the government responded that the prelate committed unspecified "serious crimes and should remain in detention."²⁴⁶



CONCLUSION

Beijing's persecution of these 10 bishops is a terrible injustice—one that is little known to the outside world. They suffer the deprivation of their fundamental right to religious freedom and other basic rights. Due to their religious beliefs, they have endured physical and psychological suffering. Moreover, this persecution should not be understood simply as 10 individual cases, as horrific as they are. These bishops comprise a significant representation of the Chinese Catholic Church's faithful leadership, and the suppression of their ministries denies millions of Chinese Catholic faithful their religious freedom, too. Beijing's actions repress the Chinese Catholic Church at large.

The CCP is aware of the Catholic Church's global influence, and fears losing the favor of Western investors and trading partners. Consequently, Beijing uses hidden measures of coercion against the conscientious objectors among the Catholic Church's Chinese leadership. These measures include indefinite detention in secret jails without due process, disappearances, and open-ended investigations under the constant threat of severe penalties.

The Vatican's secret deal on bishops with China has led some to wrongly assume that the CCP exempts the Chinese Catholic Church from its current crackdown on religion. As this report shows, the persecution of these 10 bishops, as well as the repression of the church this represents, has only grown worse since the pact's signing in 2018.

This fact reveals a crucial truth: the CCP represses en masse Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong practitioners primarily because it seeks to suppress all religions—including Christianity—and replace them with the dogma, values, and images of the party. The United States should take the lead in making this widely known throughout the world and in defending religious freedom within China.

Photo: Cardinal Joseph Zen attends a mass at the Holy Cross Church on May 24, 2022, in Hong Kong after appearing in court earlier in the day. (Anthony Kwan via Getty Images)

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