

Shanghai, a Strong and Hard-pressed Diocese



ROME, May 3, 2013 – The death of the bishop of Shanghai, Aloysius Jin Luxian, has brought back to center stage the drama of the Catholic Church in China, and the questions about the stance that the new pope will adopt.

Jin was a Jesuit, like Jorge Mario Bergoglio. He died at the age of 97, and was a leading figure in the rebirth of the diocese of Shanghai after Maoism had wiped it out.

But it was only in 2005 that he reconciled with Rome. He had been installed as a bishop in Shanghai in 1985 at the behest of the communist party and without the pope's approval, in the place of his heroic predecessor Ignatius Gong Pinmei, sent into exile after 33 years in prison and made a cardinal by John Paul II.

Jin as well had spent many years in prison and in the reeducation camps. Afterward he was used as a translator in the service of the state, thanks to his mastery of foreign languages.

As a young Jesuit, in fact, Jin had studied in Paris and in Rome. He had traveled in Germany and England. Partly for this reason, once he was out of prison the Chinese authorities set their sights on turning him into an authoritative leader of the “patriotic” Church created by them in opposition to Rome. And he consented.

Today the diocese of Shanghai numbers about 150,000 Catholics, roughly one hundred priests, many sisters, 37 parishes, 140 churches, a publishing house, a soup kitchen for the poor, a home for the elderly, and other services. On its territory stands the Marian shrine of Sheshan, a national pilgrimage

destination, and the main seminary of China, from which have come figures like Joseph Zen Zekiun, who went on to become the bishop of Hong Kong and a cardinal, and Savio Hon Taifai, the current secretary of the congregation "de Propaganda Fide."

In order to obtain all of this, Jin maneuvered for decades between obedience to the communist authorities and fidelity to the Church. The "underground" Catholics did not forgive him this duplicity. Which, on the other hand, was always pointed to as exemplary by the supporters of a compromise with the regime, a compromise along the lines of the Vatican "Ostpolitik" with the Soviet empire in the postwar period.

In 2005, when Jin reconciled with Rome by professing his obedience to the pope, he accepted a reshaping of his role. The Holy See recognized as ordinary of Shanghai the "underground" bishop, not recognized by the regime, Joseph Fan Zhongliang, also a Jesuit, and demoted Jin to the role of auxiliary.

But since both of them were elderly and ill, the Holy See also assigned them a coadjutor with the right of succession, the bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi, ordained with the joint agreement of Rome and Beijing.

These were years of an apparent thaw. The Chinese authorities had stopped installing bishops without the recognition of Rome. And in its turn, the Holy See had redoubled its efforts to bring unity back to the two Chinese Catholic communities, official and underground. The "Magna Carta" of this period was the 2007 letter by Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China.

But then everything fell apart again. Today the situation of the Catholic Church in China is hampered by three "stumbling blocks," which the prefect of the Vatican congregation for the evangelization of peoples, Cardinal Fernando Filoni, described in this way in a report published in the magazine "Tripod" of the Hong Kong-based Holy Spirit Study Center:

"1. The Eighth National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, organised by the Beijing authorities in 2010 has strengthened the control of the State over the Church and in particular the policy of the three autonomies. Related to this, there is the ongoing pressure put on the so-called 'clandestine' clergy to become members of the Patriotic Association, an institution designed to control the Church in China so that it might be independent of its catholicity and of the Pope. At the same time, the same Association

increased its own control also over the so-called 'official' community, that is, over: Bishops, Priests, places of worship, finances, and seminaries.

"2. Rigorous control over the appointment of Bishops has led to the choice of controversial candidates, who were both morally and pastorally unacceptable, yet acceptable to the political authorities.

"3. Episcopal consecrations whether legitimate or not, were constrained by the interference of illegitimate Bishops, creating a dramatic crisis of conscience for both the Bishops being consecrated and those who were consecrating. [...] Some bishops and priests have been segregated and deprived of their liberties, as the case of Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai has clearly demonstrated. [...] Control over persons and institutions have been honed, and sessions of indoctrination and pressure are being turned to with ever greater ease."

The epicenter of this resurgence of the crisis between Rome and Beijing has been precisely the diocese of Shanghai.

In 2012, inexplicably, the coadjutor bishop of Shanghai resigned. In his place, the diocese chose a new coadjutor with the right of succession in the person of Thaddeus Ma Daqin, ordained a bishop on July 7 with both the mandate of the pope and the approval of the government.

But at his ordination, Ma Daqin declared that he no longer wanted to belong to the Patriotic Association, of which he was a member, maintaining that this was incompatible with his ministry as a bishop according to the guidelines of the 2007 letter of Benedict XVI. And he was immediately punished for this. The authorities had him arrested and confined to the seminary of Sheshan, and the self-proclaimed Chinese episcopal conference instituted by the regime revoked his title as coadjutor bishop of Shanghai.

But Daqin remained undaunted. The Holy See firmly took to his defense. Archbishop Hon, the secretary of "de Propaganda Fide," stated that "no episcopal conference, in any part of the world, has the power to overrule the pontifical mandate. All the more in this case, in which the 'conference' is not recognized. For this reason it stands firm for us that Ma Daqin is the bishop of Shanghai."

And after the death of Jin he should be so to all intents and purposes, as his designated successor. But the Chinese authorities did not even allow him to participate in the funeral last April 29. It appears that on this occasion they put him into isolation in Beijing.

How will Pope Francis move over this mine-strewn terrain?

Will he confirm the tough stance adopted in recent years by the Vatican authorities? Or will he adhere to a stance more inclined to compromise, as personified by Jin?

One of the most committed supporters of the tough stance is Cardinal Zen. While the supporters of compromise include Cardinal Ivan Dias, Cardinal Filoni's predecessor as prefect of the congregation for the evangelization of peoples.

Today at the Vatican - in the congregation, as in the secretariat of state - it is Zen's stance that predominates, although without the combative points typical of this cardinal.

But the stance of compromise continues to have its supporters, mainly on the outside but with footholds in the curia.

Cardinal Zen, in a polemical commentary published one year ago in "Asia News," called by name two of these adversaries of his, criticizing them harshly.

His first target was the Community of Sant'Egidio.

And the second was Gianni Valente, the specialist on China for "30 Days," an international magazine in the orbit of Communion and Liberation that shut down its publications last summer.

Zen accused both of wanting to revive with China the "bankrupt" diplomacy of Ostpolitik. When

instead “the true good for the Church in China is not to continue to bargain with entities that are not only foreign but clearly hostile to the Church, but to mobilize the bishops and faithful to get rid of them.”

One curious aspect of this dispute is that the Community of Sant'Egidio enjoyed the favor and attention of Benedict XVI and his secretary, Georg Gänswein.

While Gianni Valente - who today works for the agency “Fides” of the congregation for the evangelization of peoples - has for years been a friend of Jorge Mario Bergoglio, together with his wife Stefania Falasca, herself a former editor for “30 Days.”

A friendship so strong that Bergoglio telephoned him on the evening of his election as pope.

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