

What real Mission requires, Bishop Jin had in spades



Despite overwhelming criticism, Louis Jin stuck to 'what was most basic and important' to Catholicism in China

I first met Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian in 1987 in Shanghai. Then 71, he had been back in his native city since 1982 after 27 years in jail or custody of one kind or another.

Locked up with hundreds of other Catholics in Shanghai in 1955, he came back in 1982 to one of the jobs he was doing when imprisoned – rector of the diocesan seminary.

His return was something he thought long and hard about and was the cause of enduring controversy among Catholics in and outside China. How could someone who had endured the wrath of the Communist authorities allow himself back into a public and formally approved position in the Church unless he had caved in and was acting in bad faith?

Or so the notoriously bitter and acrimonious suspicions of some Chinese and observers of China said.

And to me, a non-Chinese yet a brother Jesuit, the same question occurred. So, I put it to him. And he answered directly:

“Michael, in the last millennium, there have been three attempts to introduce Christianity into China. All ended in the persecution of Christians and the expulsion of missionaries. Three times, the interventions had to begin with another wave of foreigners. I don't want there to have to be a fourth time.”

So, at 65 years of age in 1982, Louis Jin chose the road less travelled. Not for him the nobility of unrelenting opposition to his persecutors and the adulation of those who stuck to an approach that ended in disaster in the 1950s. But equally not for him the capitulation to powers whose only purpose was to exploit his gifts, contacts and intelligence.

The simple fact is that Jin took another view to the prevailing orthodoxy among Catholics in the 1950s

– that the Communist Party was a fleeting thing in China’s history, that the Nationalists in Taiwan would be back any moment and the best interests of the Church were to be served by at least non-compliance if not outright opposition to the new government of Mao Zedong.

Whatever his private views, he suffered the same fate as all leading Catholics in the 1950s. From the 1980s, much to the suspicion of some, the condemnation of others but the amazement of most, Jin walked the thin line between recognizing the authority of the government while sticking to what he believed was most basic and important to Catholicism in China.

Three memories of my dealings with Louis Jin in the last quarter century of his life endure for me.

The first is his relentless efforts to give people of all kinds a chance in life – the students he created the seminary for and taught; the children of families he got scholarships and support for when he leveraged friendships and connections with universities and colleges across the world; the men and women in Shanghai and beyond it whom he fostered and prompted to new and different ways of serving the Church and spreading the Good News.

The second thing that will always stay with me about Louis is a very Jesuit thing: his readiness to embrace humiliation and rejection as part of the challenge in following Jesus.

There were years of imprisonment and house arrest he spoke of lightly in his recently published memoir – years behind bars not knowing what was to come next or from whom. And while in work camps in the 1970s, the tedious application of his considerable mind to the menial task of translating into Chinese technical manuals in the range of European languages he had command of.

He was the object of deeply personal attacks, born to my mind out of jealousy and competitiveness, when his enemies – some from his youth in the Jesuits – never tired of retelling stories and sowing suspicions to undermine his credibility.

There were experiences in the 1980s and 1990s (some of which I shared with him personally) when Church authorities working out of ignorance, misinformation or fear would impede his best efforts to assist the growth of the Church in China with little or no explanation.

The third enduring feature of Louis’s personality that was always a delightful thing to witness was his simple affection and readiness to receive affection from friends and those helping him, particularly in his declining years. As he aged, his fragile health needs (heart problems and diabetes) became greater and the threats to his fragile health more immediate and pressing.

To see the tender attention he received from the Sisters in the congregation he founded in Shanghai, to behold the reverence and care the young Sisters showered on him, to appreciate the tender humanity with which he graciously accepted the assistance he needed to walk, engage, meet people and be cared

for was both awe inspiring and humbling at the same time.

As Horatio said of Hamlet, in Shakespeare's play of the same name:

Now cracks a noble heart. Good night sweet prince

And flights of angels speed thee to thy rest.

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