



NEWS REPORT

from Vatican Insider



The president of Bishops' Conference of China's 'underground' Catholic

Vatican Insider March 17, 2014

by Gerard O'Connell



Bishop Joseph Fan of Shanghai is seen here in his home while under house arrest in 2010.

Bishop Joseph Fan Zhongliang of Shanghai, 96, the President of the Bishops' Conference of the 'underground' Catholic community in China, and head of the local underground community in that Chinese metropolis, died on Sunday, March 16, after a long illness.

The local authorities in Shanghai have granted the Catholic faithful two days to pay their final respects to the late Jesuit bishop. It seems this agreement was reached after an uncertain early reaction in which officials removed his biretta, an act that was meant to underline the fact that they do not recognize him as a bishop, a Church source told UCA News, the main Catholic news agency in Asia.

"They backed off as a result of a protest by the underground Church administrator, who threatened not to hold a Mass and let the officials face the resulting wrath of angry Catholics," the source said.

The Bishop's body is likely to be cremated, a Church source told Vatican Insider, as that is a common practice there. This happened to the body of the other Jesuit bishop from Shanghai, Aloysius Jin Luxian, who died on 27 April 2013.

Bishop Fan was born in 1918 and baptized at the age of 14. He entered the Shanghai Jesuit novitiate on 30 August 1938 together with Jin Luxian, though Fan was two years younger, and for the next 17 years they journeyed together.

Fan was ordained priest in 1951, but in 1955 he was arrested together with the then Bishop (later cardinal) Ignatius Kung (Gong Pin-mei), and other priests including Jin Luxian. They were all thrown in prison accused of revolutionary crimes, and served long prison sentences.

Fan was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment in Qinghai province, during which he was assigned the job of carrying corpses to a cemetery.

In 1979, however, the two Jesuits - Fan and Jin - were released, as China moved in a new direction, but from then on their paths diverged radically over the leadership and direction of the Shanghai Catholic community, which was ever under pressure from the Communist authorities. The subsequent history of the Shanghai Catholic Church - with its official and underground communities, revolved, but in very different ways around these two men over the past decades.

After his release in 1979, Fan became a high school teacher before being allowed to return to Shanghai. He was secretly ordained as coadjutor bishop of Shanghai in 1985 and succeeded Cardinal Kung when he died in 2000, though this was never recognized by the State. In all these years, Bishop Fan found himself under strict surveillance, a situation that prevailed to the end.

After learning of Bishop Fan's death, Cardinal Joseph Zen, also a native of Shanghai, writing in his Chinese language blog recalled that Fan's family name, Zhongliang means "fidelity" ('Zhong') and 'goodness' ('Liang') and said, "this faithful servant and good shepherd has finish his 'via

crucis' (way of the Cross) and now has gone back to the home of the Father. We remember him as a good example and we are sure that from heaven he will protect his flock."

Then, addressing "my brothers and sisters of the diocese of Shanghai", Cardinal Zen told them "Don't be afraid of the strong waves because we can trust God to safely reach the harbor, and that things will become right in a sure way"

Shanghai has lost a "steadfast and persevering" leader in Bishop Fan, said Anthony Lam Sui-ki, senior researcher at the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, which is headed by Cardinal John Tong Hon.

Lam described Bishop Fan as a well-respected churchman, Lam said. He told UCA News that even all the young priests from the "open" community in Shanghai would seek Bishop Fan's blessing before they were ordained.

Bishop Fan was president of the Bishops' Conference of the 'underground' or clandestine (that is not officially recognized) Catholic community. In actual fact, however, apart from the very beginning, the conference has not been able to meet, and for many years a secretariat has operated this clandestine body.

"Bishop Fan's death will create the need for the underground bishops to get together for an election", Lam told UCA News.

At the same time, Lam said, there is now an urgent need for Auxiliary Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of the "open" community to be given back his freedom, though it is hard to predict how the government will handle his case he said.