

Today's Martyrs – Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin



Bishop Thaddeus
Ma Daqin

Thaddeus Ma Daqin was ordained as bishop of Shanghai on July 7, 2012. Later that afternoon he disappeared, and has only been seen in public a few times since. Aside from his consecration his story is actually a rather typical tale of the struggle between a person of conscience and the people who oversee the People's Republic of China. It is a tale not only of the desire to control and dominate but also a tale of mutual respect and even tolerance, limited and crippled though it may be.

Up until his consecration Fr Ma was a 44 year old priest with dual status: he was both a priest recognized by the Vatican as in communion with the Latin-rite (Roman) Catholic Church, and he was a member of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), which is the government-sponsored and Vatican-unrecognized official 'church'. This is not an unusual circumstance in today's China. For years since the end of the Mao Zedong regime the official and underground churches have coexisted as parallel entities, often with a great deal of overlap. Back in the 1980s there was a bishop who was the official bishop of one diocese and the underground bishop of its neighbor. In Shanghai the Vatican-approved Bishop Joseph Fan Zhongliang and the CPCA Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian SJ have worked together for the benefit of the church; Jin was later given Vatican approval.

The real problem with dual membership is the conflicting loyalty experienced by bishops. A Latin-rite bishop may not consecrate another bishop without Vatican approval – in fact this is one of the few things for which automatic excommunication is incurred. On the other hand the government uses the CPCA to press Catholics to be independent from the Vatican, and so it sometimes demands that CPCA bishops consecrate bishops who are not approved by the Vatican. Some bishops have been excommunicated for surrendering to the CPCA's demands.

At least one CPCA bishop who was not in communion with Rome showed up at Ma's consecration Mass. Ma avoided the imposition of hands by these bishops. Then at his first homily as bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin announced that he was resigning from the CPCA. After Mass people thanked him for his stand; hours later he disappeared. It soon became known that he was being held under house arrest at the seminary located at the Shrine of Our Lady of Sheshan.

Fr Thaddeus Ma Daqin had been a constant blogger on the internet, and by July 16 the government had allowed him to resume blogging on a limited basis, even allowing him to make oblique references to his personal situation. That day he quoted poems written by one of the first Chinese Catholic priests, Fr. Wu Yushan SJ, aka Wu Li (1632-1718); the subject of these poems was loneliness. Bishop Ma posted a tribute to his deceased parents following All Souls Day in November 2012: "If they were still alive today, I don't know how nervous and worried they would be!" and added that while he was often 'drinking tea' - a euphemism for talking with the authorities - "my thoughts are free". Bishop Jin died at age 86 on April 27, 2013 and Bishop Ma lauded him in his posts. He posted greetings to 14 priests and 4 seminarians, and parts of a play he had written on Paul Xu Guangqi, the intellectual giant who was among China's first converts to Catholic Christianity.

Not all internet postings went well. On October 8, 2013 Bishop Ma posted a major analysis of the recent papal encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (The Light of Faith): "His mystery of faith - suffering, death and resurrection - invites us into His truth, eternal life and light. The witness of Apostle Thomas reminds each Christian to do reflections on our faith". Chinese authorities removed it, but not before copies were made on servers outside of their reach. Then again, on December 6 he successfully posted a eulogy for Nelson Mandela which included words of Mandela's that seemed to apply to his own situation: "Freedom is indivisible; the chains on any one of my people were the chains on all of them, the chains on all of my people were the chains on me... Faith sometimes undergoes painful tests, but I will not give in to pessimism... Both the oppressors and the oppressed need liberation. The ones who take away others' freedom are prisoners of hatred. They are locked behind bars of prejudice and narrow-mindedness".

Bishop Ma has also been seen in public. He showed up at the October 24, 2013 wake of Shen Baoyi, his predecessor as editor-in-chief of Guangqi Press, the Catholic publisher, said a few remarks, blessed his body, and quietly left.

All of this could be cited as evidence that the Chinese political leadership has been evolving into a kind of



Bishop Joseph
Xing Wenzhi

benevolent despotism. True perhaps, but one fact should not be forgotten: the only reason why Thaddeus Ma Daqin was consecrated a bishop in the first place was because his 49 year old predecessor, Bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi, disappeared in December 2011, apparently for the crime of not wearing his episcopal regalia at a CPCA meeting in Beijing. Bishop Xing had been approved by both the Vatican and the CPCA, but he has not been given the respect and consideration given Bishop

Ma in his captivity: nothing is known about his health or whereabouts. With the death of Bishop Fan on March 14, 2014 at age 95 the Catholics of Shanghai have no bishop available to serve them.

The Vatican has tried to negotiate an arrangement whereby it and the Chinese government can share responsibility for episcopal appointments, similar to the arrangement in Vietnam, but the government has refused. The irony is that the government obviously does not care about exercising day-to-day control over Christians in China. It would appear that the government *does* want to maintain the legal mechanisms of control for future use, which is ominous. In the meantime Bishops Thaddeus Ma Daqin and Joseph Xing Wenzhi are captives of a government that instinctively responded to their challenges to its mechanisms with repression. Please pray for the good health and freedom of these men of God.

Update: Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin's internet access has been suspended as of the last week of April 2016.

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