



NEWS REPORT

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Msgr. Joseph Fan Zhongliang, underground bishop of Shanghai, has died

He spent about 30 years in prison or forced labor camps. Designated successor to Card. Kung Pin-mei, he never had the freedom to exercise his ministry. The government replaced him with Msgr. Jin Luxian, who died last year. The only bishop left in Shanghai, is Msgr. Ma Daqin who is under house arrest. The Pope's blessing through AsiaNews.

AsiaNews March 17, 2014

by Bernardo Cervellera



Rome (AsiaNews) - Bishop Joseph Fan Zhongliang (see photo), the underground bishop of Shanghai, who had spent almost 20 years under house arrest, died yesterday at the age of 97. He had been gravely ill for the past 10 years. The date and place of his funeral are still unknown. It is highly probable that the government, who never recognized him as a bishop, will force the faithful to celebrate a low-profile liturgy stripped of any Episcopal insignia.

Born in 1918, in 1938 he joined the Society of Jesus and became a priest in 1951. In 1955, when Mao Zedong aimed to eliminate all bishops and priests who did not want to break their bond with the Pope, he was arrested along with the city's bishop, Msgr. Ignatius Kung Pin-mei. Since then, he has spent about 30 years in prison or forced labor camps.

In 1985 he was secretly ordained coadjutor bishop of Shanghai, while Msgr. Gong was still in prison. Upon the latter's death in 2000, he was appointed an ordinary bishop of Shanghai by Pope John Paul II. But in parallel that same year, the government had appointed Msgr. Aloysius Jin Luxian official bishop of the city.

The government never recognized Msgr. Fan, although in recent years, the two bishops, both Jesuits, were secretly reconciled.

Bishop Jin died last year. Now the diocese of Shanghai has only one bishop, Msgr. Thaddeus Ma Daqin, who has been under house arrest since the day of his ordination. In fact Bishop Ma, although appointed by the government - but with the Holy See's approval - refused to be ordained by illegitimate bishops or remain a member of the Patriotic Association, the Communist Party's supervisory body of the Church.

Pope Francis, a Jesuit brother of Msgr. Fan, never met him directly. A year ago, some Shanghai faithful appealed to AsiaNews to seek a Papal blessing for him, as he was already very sick and worn down by his illness.