

In memoriam Bishop Lucas Ly (1921–2017)

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Bishop Lucas Ly in 2010. Photo: Mario Bard.

Bishop Lucas Ly (Li Jingfeng 李鏡峰), Bishop of Fengxiang in Shaanxi Province and one of the most prominent personalities within the Chinese Church, died at the age of 96 on the morning of November 17, 2017. Since the beginning of 2017, his health had been gradually declining.

Bishop Ly was born on January 15, 1921 in Tongyuanfang in Gaoling County (Shaanxi Province) into a deeply religious Catholic family. Four of the six children chose to enter religious life as priests or religious sisters. In 1934, Lucas Ly entered the minor seminary and was ordained a priest in 1947. He took on various duties in the diocese. In 1959, he was arrested and spent the years until his 1980 release in labor camps. On April 25 of the same year, he was secretly ordained Auxiliary

Bishop of the Diocese of Fengxiang by Bishop Zhou Weidao. In 1983 he became the Ordinary of Fengxiang.

Until 2004, Fengxiang was one of the very few dioceses of China, where there was no official church. The only Catholic Church represented there was the “underground” Church. Although illegal, the underground diocese of Fengxiang was about as visible as it could be, with its cathedral, its many churches, its seminary attended by seminarians of different dioceses as well as with its various diocesan facilities and services. Both the faithful and the clergy steadfastly refused any and all cooperation with the official Catholic Patriotic Association. According to *AsiaNews*, in the summer of 2001, a local office of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), formerly called the Religious Affairs Bureau, was opened in the city of Fengxiang. Its stated aim was to register underground Catholics with the official Church and welcome them as members of the Patriotic Association. In November of 2001, the authorities conducted raids on convents and parishes in the area.

Bishop Ly disappeared for several weeks for “indoctrination on the regulations relating to religious activities.”

In 2004, after many talks with the religious authorities, Bishop Ly finally decided to allow himself to be recognized by the government as Fengxiang’s official bishop. That recognition was given by the government the same year. Bishop Ly somehow managed to win that recognition from the government without being forced to join the Patriotic Association. He also continued to successfully refuse any hints or demands that he affiliate himself with the official Chinese Bishops Conference, which is not recognized by Rome.

In 2011, Bishop Ly, who despite his advanced age was still in good physical and mental condition, organized the election of his successor. The election was conducted by the diocesan curia. Officials from the local Religious Affairs Bureau were invited as observers and they, too, confirmed the validity of the election of Father Peter Li Huiyuan, born in 1965. Fr. Li Huiyuan had been the only candidate put forward for the office by Bishop Lucas Ly. Bishop Ly was careful to see that the entire election process was in complete accord with both Canon Law and with the Chinese government’s rules concerning such Church elections.

Following the death of Bishop Lucas Ly, the diocese is now headed by Bishop Peter Li Huiyuan, although Bishop Li has still not yet received the government’s recognition as the official Ordinary of the Diocese of Fengxiang.

Bishop Ly always attached great importance to being in complete unity with the Pope. In October of 2005, along with three other bishops from Mainland China (the official Bishops Li Du’an of Xi’an and Jin Luxian of Shanghai as well as the underground Bishop Wei Jingyi of Qiqihar), Bishop Ly was invited to Rome to take part in the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist, but – as was the case of the other Chinese bishops – he was not granted an exit permit by the authorities.

Throughout the entire period of the Synod, though, the seats conspicuously marked with the names of the four Chinese bishops were kept free as an unspoken reminder to the others. A letter of Bishop Ly was read aloud to the Synod Fathers, in which he personally thanked Pope Benedict XVI for the invitation to participate in the Synod. Both the Pope as well as the Synod Fathers wrote letters of encouragement to the four bishops who had been prevented from attending. As one commentator noted, despite the physical absence of representatives from the Mainland, the Chinese Church had never before been so very present at a synod.

On the occasion of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization in October of 2012, Bishop Ly wrote a surprise letter to the Synod Fathers. His letter was read aloud during the Synod.

In his letter, he spoke of the faithfulness of Chinese Catholics despite fifty years of persecution. “Could not the piety, fidelity and sincerity of Chinese Christians stir up the clergy abroad?” he asked. In his conclusion, Bishop Ly wrote: “I will not get into politics, which are always transient.” In their response, the Synod Fathers expressed their thanks for having heard this voice from the People’s Republic of China and for the fidelity of Chinese Christians, who themselves are an encouragement to Christians around the world.

Bishop Ly also wrote a well received and much appreciated commentary on Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 Letter to the Chinese Catholics.

According to *UCAN*, during his years in office, Bishop Ly ordained more than 70 priests and helped organize the construction of more than 50 churches. Unfortunately, due to a lack of seminarians, his seminary had to be closed a few years ago.



Before the funeral of Bishop Lucas Ly: The Cathedral of Fengxiang draped in black crape. Photo: Diocese of Fengxiang.

Bishop Lucas Ly's funeral was held on November 25 in the presence of a large crowd of priests and faithful. His body was laid to rest in St. Joseph's Cathedral in Fengxiang.

As we ourselves have seen time and again on our visits to China, Bishop Ly was a strong, impressive personality endowed with principles and steadfastness. He dedicated much to the preservation of Christian traditions. Since he had been educated before 1949, he was conversant in Latin, which he often used in talks with foreign guests.

Bishop Ly resided in two small rooms in the building next to the cathedral where the seminary was located. The solid formation of the seminarians was always very close to his heart.

Now, with his death, we have lost one of the last, great Chinese bishops of the "old guard."

Requiescat in Pace – May He rest in Peace.

Sources: *AsiaNews* Nov. 17; *Eglises d'Asie* Nov. 17; *UCAN* Nov. 21.

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