

It's no secret that the Catholic faith has endured persecution throughout the ages. But what some people might lose sight of is the fact that to this day, persecution continues in many parts of the world. And yet, in spite of this the Church continues to thrive in places where others try to destroy it.

Among these places is China.

China has a unique situation. There is a so-called Chinese Patriotic Church that claims to be Catholic; but these bishops are not approved by Rome. The true Catholic faith is underground.

While we had a beautiful Christmas Mass here at Saint Joseph's, halfway around the world in the Pearl River Delta, Mass was celebrated with 300 people in a factory compound. The celebration began at 11 p.m. with fireworks, then a quick meal and Midnight Mass.

The location had been kept secret. Only referrals were allowed to attend the Mass, and photographs could not be taken for security reasons.

But despite the humble setting of the Mass, there was peace and joy. The congregation shared homemade soup before Mass, and there was a sense of community. A dozen rows of benches to kneel were installed and a priest invited at the last minute heard confessions.

The Communist government doesn't like this. They routinely attack Christians and destroy churches, especially in rural areas. But yet Catholics continue to rise. In fact, Rodney Pennington, who studies religious trends for the mission organization OMF International, said in an interview with The Christian Post published in that China would have the world's largest Christian population by 2030.

How is this possible? I'd suggest that it's because a number of people through the years have decided to speak and stand for where true authority lies.

Among these was Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei, a man who was imprisoned for years under the Communist regime. It was at a dinner party that was arranged after he was released with party officials, and the bishops who were part of the alternative church where this was most apparent, when the cardinal sang a simple song, and with a few words sent a bold message to the world. Present at this party was a cardinal who would relay the message.

Since his imprisonment by Communist China in 1955, Bishop Kung had not talked to anyone but his captors and members of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, a government sanctioned organization that renounced the Pope and appointed its own bishops. But when Bishop Kung was released on "house arrest" in July of 1985, 30 years after his incarceration, he was granted an "audience", so to speak, with Cardinal Sin of the Philippines, who had stopped in China with the hope of contacting Bishop Kung.

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and members of the Chinese government arranged for a banquet with five large tables fastened together. Cardinal Sin and Bishop Kung were seated on opposite ends of the tables separated by more than 20 Communists. They were not allowed to

greet each other or to speak. After awhile, Cardinal Sin suggested that each man sing a song to provide a little stimulation for an otherwise silent gathering. So each man sang a song of his choice. When the time came for Bishop Kung to sing, he chose a song of faith that would convey to Cardinal Sin that in all his years of captivity he never renounced his God or his Church.

After Bishop Kung sang just a few bars, in Latin, of the beloved hymn, "Tu es Petrus et super hanc petram aedificabo Ecclesiam." (You are Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church)." It was then a member-"Bishop" of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association informed his superiors of Kung's ruse. Bishop Kung was told to be silent, but he looked at Cardinal Sin and finished the song.

Cardinal Sin carried Bishop Kung's message to the world: this man of God never faltered in his love for his church or his people despite unimaginable suffering, isolation and pain.

Ignatius Pin-Mei Cardinal Kung was born August 2, 1901 in Shanghai to a Catholic family of at least five generations. He began seminary studies at the age of 19. Following his ordination on May 28, 1930, he was named head of a primary school, then moved on to a diocesan high school for three years and went on to be named Bishop of Shanghai on July 15, 1950.

In just five short years, Bishop Kung would become one of the most feared enemies of the Chinese Communists -- a man who would command the attention and devotion of the country's three million Catholics and who would inspire thousands to offer their lives up to God. In defiance of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Bishop Kung invigorated the Legion of Mary. The government declared the Legion of Mary an illegal society that was engaged in espionage under the cloak of religion. It demanded that all members either register in the Public Security Bureau and acknowledge that the Legion was counter-revolutionary, or risk imprisonment.

The Bishop told his followers not to comply, that God would reward them and that they must, under any circumstance, uphold their faith. Because of their trust in Bishop Kung, the members of the Legion of Mary obeyed. Ninety-nine percent of the Legion refused to sign the registration. Hundreds of members, including many students, were arrested and sentenced to 10, 15, 20 years of hard labor.

In New Year's greetings to their Bishop, Shanghai students and members of the Legion of Mary said: "Bishop, in darkness, you light up our path. You guide us on our treacherous journey. You uphold our faith and the traditions of the Church. You are the foundation rock of our Church in Shanghai."

Bishop Kung knew that things would get worse and that his freedom was nearing an end. So, he began to prepare the priests in his diocese for the struggle and persecution that loomed ahead.

In 1953, in defiance, he organized a special evening of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus for young Catholic men in Shanghai. But, four days before the event, the Communist government took over the Jesuit house in Shanghai and arrested many Jesuit priests. Bishop Kung held his evening of devotion, anyway. Over 3,000 faithful young men gathered while police surrounded

the Cathedral. A thousand ladies sat in the square outside the Cathedral reciting the rosary. Seemingly oblivious to the huge police presence, the faithful chanted, "Long live Bishop. Long live Holy Father. Long live the Church." After the devotion, representatives from all the parishes carried a huge wooden cross followed behind by Bishop Kung. The Chinese Catholics openly showed their willingness to follow their Bishop all the way to Calvary.

On September 8, 1955, Bishop Kung, along with several hundred priests and church leaders, was arrested and imprisoned. He was sentenced five years later to life imprisonment.

During his years of captivity, Bishop Kung was asked to denounce the Holy Father and to cooperate with the Patriotic Association. He was told it was not necessary to say the words; a nod of his head would release him from prison. His answer was: "I am a Roman Catholic Bishop. If I denounce the Holy Father, not only would I not be a Bishop, I would not even be a Catholic. You can cut off my head, but you can never take away my duties."

Cardinal Kung was 86 years old when finally released. In 1987, he came to the United States with his nephew and settled in Stamford, Connecticut.

Within a year, he was well enough to travel to Rome for a private audience with Pope John Paul II. During the meeting, the Holy Father told Bishop Kung that he had elevated him to Cardinal, in pectore, in 1979. He asked that the Chinese prelate keep it a secret until it was announced by the Pope Himself, if ever. Cardinal Kung, ever obedient, did not even tell his own family. On May 29, 1991, the Pope announced to the world that Bishop Kung was in fact a Cardinal since 1979.

When Pope John Paul II presented Cardinal Kung with his red hat in ceremonies on June 28, 1991, at the Consistory in the Vatican, the wheelchair-bound, ailing Kung raised himself up from the wheelchair, threw aside his cane and walked up the steps to kneel at the foot of the Pontiff. Visibly touched, the Holy Father lifted him up, gave him his cardinal's hat, then stood patiently as Cardinal Kung returned to his wheelchair to the sounds of an unprecedented seven-minute standing ovation.

The story of Ignatius Pin-Mei Kung is the story of a hero -- a man who refused to renounce God and his church despite dire personal consequences; a man who inspired millions of his countrymen to follow his example and preserve the Roman Catholic Church in a Communist country, a man who kept the faith though confined in solitary cells for 30 years; a man who became a symbol for world leaders in their fight for human rights in all countries.

This was because he knew what true authority was, and where it lied.

In our Gospel this week, Jesus is beginning His mission. We are told that he taught in the synagogue, and "the people were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority and not as the scribes." The word "authority" is key, for Jesus does not quote others as a scribe would do or someone would when giving a presentation; He speaks in a way that is firm in interpreting the Scriptures for He is God Himself.

Authority is something that humans have always struggled with. It goes back to Adam and Eve if you think about it; do not take of the fruit of the tree in the center of the garden, and this commandment is disregarded. As kids we age and sometimes don't listen to our parents; as adults we can think we are the center of the world and no one should tell us anything; and sometimes we become skeptical of everything in the world to the point where there is no longer any objective truth.

Healthy skepticism is a good thing. But taken too far, we can lose sight of the fact that there are things that we should trust in life. Namely, those things that will help us to get to heaven.

The first is God. Jesus not only preaches with authority; He acts with authority. Jesus forcefully rebukes the unclean spirit in the man and comes out. Again, the word "authority" is used - a new teaching with authority as Jesus commands the unclean spirits and they obey. Jesus speaks with authority but he doesn't replace facts by feelings. In banishing the spirit from the man, Jesus restores that man to a fuller life, and enables him to take his spot in his family and community. The authority of Jesus brings forth the mercy of his Father from whom his authority comes. If we say we believe in God, we have to always "let go and let God" as the saying goes. We need to trust that He has a plan for us and listen. We need to trust that He loves us and turn our sins and struggles over to Him so we too like that man can be set free. We need to pray, and cling to God, rather than rebel or be too busy to listen to Him. God knows what's best for us - so let's trust in that truth.

The second is the Church. Jesus created one Church; not thousands. And this is a fact, not to be critical of our brothers and sisters in faith who are evangelical, Lutheran, etc. And what makes the Church distinctive is that She is there to guide us. In 1968, an article ran in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official newspaper of the Holy See. It is titled "Trust in the Teaching Authority of the Church," and you can find it on [EWTN.com](http://www.ewtn.com) in its entirety. It's a good read. One of the key points is this: "Hierarchical teaching is, in fact, a dogma of faith. The Catholic believes that Christ constituted the Pope, and the Bishops united with the Pope, as teachers of the faith, its guardians, its interpreters. He promised them the special assistance of the Holy Spirit so that they do not fall into error when they propose for belief the truths contained in revelation. In other words the teaching of the Church is not a natural fact, imposed by the need that the Church must be an authority on doctrine for the sake of order and unity. It is, rather, a supernatural fact, freely willed by Christ who gave Peter as head of the Apostolic College, the command to confirm his "brethren" in the faith: that is, the other Apostles, and in and with them, all the faithful (cf. Luke 22,32); and invited the other Apostles to preach the Gospel to all the people." That's what the Church does. And just as when we are children we might not like to be told things like eating vegetables before dessert or cleaning our rooms, our parents guide us to help us reach our potential. That is what the Church does too. Remember, the Church teachings will sometimes challenge you. That is a good thing, which is why they are good to pray about, to read over, to think about. The Church tells us the truth - and we have to trust Her. We might struggle with a teaching; a person might not like a particular pope or a bishop. But the Church is not about a popularity contest, or watering down teaching so all "feel good" about it. The truth matters, and the mission of the Church is salvation of souls. This is why Cardinal Kung refused to say that he didn't recognize the pope or the state had authority over the pope - because it was a lie and he'd

rather sit in prison. Like him, may we too trust in the Church and remember Her authority comes from God.

Lastly, we must remember too we have a role to play. In that same article, quotes is the Second Vatican Council, which stated: "The holy People of God shares also in Christ's prophetic office. It spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give honor to His name." They emphasized too the importance of the Church being unified, speaking together, and laity working closely with the clergy. This is exactly what you saw in China, when people stood together with Cardinal Kung and were willing to go to jail for the faith, and what happened at that dinner in 1986 when he sang a simple song to Peter and defied the command to "be silent." The world can be a nasty place, and very hostile. And it can get to the point where we feel we can't offend anyone. But do we want someone to end up in hell because we didn't want to offend them? It does not mean we force our faith down someone's throat, but you and I must also teach with authority. We must be a people of conviction, not afraid to help someone who is going down the wrong path, not afraid to speak to the moral teaching of our faith even if it is deemed intolerant or politically incorrect. Remember last week's Gospel - follow me and I will make you fishers of men. That takes commitment and going out into the water, but we have a job to testify to the truth. So let's not be afraid to do it.

If we listen to the world, the way to happiness is through money, power and popularity. The thing of it is though, as we'll be reminded of in two weeks on Ash Wednesday, from dust you came to dust you shall return. The most important thing in life is love, learning how to receive it from God, leaning how to respond to it, and proclaiming it through words and actions. For when we do, we will be led to heaven. We can't do it on our own though, which is why God became one of us, died for us, and rose from the dead, and sent the Spirit to us and gave us the gift of the Church. Let's trust in God and His plan, and realize that when we listen to that authoritative plan, and proclaim it to one another using our authority as a priest, prophet and king, together we can one day stand in God's Kingdom because we did it (no disrespect to Mr. Sinatra) not our way, but God's way.