

*In memoriam*

## Bishop Yang Xiangtai (1923–2021)

*Katharina Feith*

After a short stay in hospital in Weixian, the Bishop Emeritus of Handan, Hebei Province, Stephan Yang Xiangtai 杨祥太 passed away on the evening of 13 October at the age of 98. With him, another great personality of the old generation in the Chinese Church has gone.

Bishop Yang was born on 3 January 1923 (17 November 1922 according to the lunar calendar) in Gaocun village, Wu'an County, Henan Province (now Hebei Province) into a Catholic family. At that time, the village belonged to the diocese of Weihui (now Handan), which was served by the Italian PIME missionaries. Yang Xiangtai attended the Catholic primary school in Wu'an from 1933. In 1935 he entered the Minor Seminary of Weihui Diocese and in 1940 began studying philosophy and theology at the Regional Seminary in Kaifeng, Henan Province. On 27 August 1949, he was ordained a priest in Kaifeng Cathedral by Archbishop Gaetano Pollio PIME. After his ordination, he worked as a chaplain at Nanguan Church in Kaifeng.

At the end of 1950, Yang Xiangtai was transferred by Bishop Mario Civelli PIME from Weihui to his home district of Wu'an. In the spring of 1954, he was arrested by the police in Wu'an, but was able to resume his ministry after his trial. In July 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, he was arrested again and placed in the Wu'an detention centre. In October 1970, he was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment as a counter-revolutionary. For "re-education" he was first sent to a labour camp in Quzhou, then to a brick factory in Handan and finally to a salt factory in Tangshan.

On 15 March 1980, Yang was released and fully rehabilitated. He then worked in Handan, Cixian, Shexian and Wu'an Counties, which had become part of Hebei Province and the official Diocese of Handan with the new administrative division. In 1988, he became spiritual director of the diocesan minor seminary and the Sisters' Congregation of the Holy Spirit, the Comforter. In 1988, Bishop Chen Bailu appointed him Vicar General of the diocese.

On 30 November 1996, Bishop Chen ordained Stephen Yang as Coadjutor Bishop of Handan Diocese in Caozhuang Church, Yongnian County. In February 1998, he became rector of the minor seminary.

On 17 September 1999, after Bishop Chen's retirement, Bishop Yang became ordinary bishop of Handan Diocese. On 21 June 2011, he consecrated Bishop Joseph Sun Jigen as his coadjutor bishop in Feixiang Church. This was done in secret, a few days before the official date: This was to prevent the consecration ceremony, which had already been approved by the Holy See and the Chinese authorities, from being presided over by an



Bishop Yang Xiangtai 2007  
with a group of young Catholic  
women in Caozhuang, Handan  
Diocese.  
Photo: Christian Klyma.

illegitimate bishop. In retaliation, the authorities arrested two priests and Bishop Sun, but released him three days later. Bishop Yang suffered a heart attack in those days and had to be hospitalised.

The public announcement of Bishop Yang's death by the Diocese of Handan says: "Bishop Yang deserves recognition and respect for his devotion to the Lord, his kindness to people, his simple life and commitment to his work, his 72 years as a faithful servant and good shepherd. Now that he has completed his earthly journey, we invite the clergy, sisters and faithful to pray for his soul to rest in peace."

As *AsiaNews* writes, although Bishop Yang was not an underground bishop, he had never easily submitted to the "patriotism" of the religious authorities linked to the Chinese Communist Party. In 2015, for example, he had supported the courageous protests of the clergy of Wenzhou against the demolition of crosses in Zhejiang province.

On the website of the Chinese Patriotic Association and Official Bishops' Conference there is a short obituary of Bishop Yang and a strongly political letter of condolence.

Fr. Zhang Guanglai gathered some testimonies from priests and sisters in *Xinde* who described Bishop Yang as a quiet, reserved, unspectacular person with a deep love of humanity. Fr. Zhang stated that "over the years, Bishop Yang's presence has been a bond of unity in the local Church, a foundation of stability in the diocese and a comfort to the faithful in general." Yang Xiangtai had always taken care of poor, destitute people, the mentally ill, people in difficulties of all kinds. He encouraged, strengthened and accom-



Procession at the funeral of Bishop Yang Xiangtai. Photo: Handan Diocese.

panied many seminarians and religious sisters in their vocation, according to the testimony of a number of them. Bishop Yang has also composed and written many hymns.

Pictures on WeChat show many mourners gathered around the dead bishop. Bishop Yang was not only revered by many, but also loved at the same time. The very solemn funeral took place on 19 October.

Handan is a very active diocese with 180,000 Catholics. Part of the Catholics live underground (Yongnian Diocese).

The China-Zentrum has had a friendly relationship with Handan Diocese and Bishop Yang for many years. R.i.P.

**Sources:** *AsiaNews* Oct. 13, 2021; *LICAS* Oct. 15, 2021; *UCAN* Oct. 18, 2021; Obituary of the diocese (on WeChat); [www.chinacatholic.cn](http://www.chinacatholic.cn) Oct. 15, 2021; [www.xinde.org](http://www.xinde.org) Oct. 17,18, 2021.