

Chinese Bishop Liang dies of brain embolism

HONG KONG - Bishop John Baptist Liang Xisheng of Kaifeng died Sept. 23 of a brain embolism, the Asian church news agency UCA News reported Oct. 12. He was 84.

A church source who requested anonymity told UCA News that the bishop, who never registered with the Chinese government, suffered poor health after a car accident in 2002. His health deteriorated even more after a fall earlier this year, the source said.

Bishop Liang is the ninth bishop in mainland China, and the fourth from the underground or nonregistered Catholic community, to die this year. Underground Catholics, who refuse to register with China's State Administration for Religious Affairs, reject the authority of government-approved administrative structures over the church.

Father Peter Chen Jinduo of the registered Catholic community in Kaifeng, in central China's Henan province, told UCA News Oct. 11 that he offered a Mass for the late bishop after lay Catholics told him Bishop Liang had died.

"There is no difference between the open (registered) and underground communities, as we are one church," the 90-year-old priest stressed.

However, the situation in Kaifeng helps illustrate the complexity of the situation for the church in China.

The registered Catholic community in Kaifeng has not elected a bishop since Bishop Stanislaus Han Daoyi died Oct. 27, 2000. A priest told UCA News later that year that the issue of electing a new bishop was not raised because of Bishop Liang's presence in the area.

Though clergy from both church communities in Kaifeng seldom contact each other, Father Chen said then-Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Gao Hongxiao, who automatically

succeeded Bishop Liang upon his death, called him early this year to request a meeting. Bishop Gao, a Franciscan from the Fengxiang Diocese in Shaanxi province, was ordained coadjutor bishop of Kaifeng Jan. 1, 2005.

Both Father Chen and the church source who requested anonymity said Bishop Gao is in hiding to avoid government officials.

On Oct. 27, 2000, Father Zong Changfeng of Zhouzhi, another diocese in Shaanxi, was ordained coadjutor bishop of Kaifeng. The source said Bishop Zong has never gone to Kaifeng because the government would not allow him to do so. The source said the “impeded” prelate is living as a priest in the Zhouzhi Diocese.

Bishop Liang, born March 23, 1923, was ordained a priest March 13, 1980. He was clandestinely consecrated bishop of Kaifeng Aug. 31, 1989. During the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, he was labeled a “rightist” and suffered persecution because of his faith.

Soon after the bishop died, a brief message about his death that also requested prayers for his soul was posted on some mainland Chinese Catholic Web sites.

UCA News reported that the Diocese of Kaifeng has three elderly and nine young priests serving about 10,000 Catholics, mainly in rural areas of the diocese.