

Chinese Catholics struggled to keep faith alive

FUSHUN, China (CNS) — Ninety-year-old Sister Peter has worked in a bus factory, built houses, reinforced river embankments and spent time in jail and a mental institution.

Bishop Pius Jin Peixian of Liaoning, 83, spent 10 years in prison and later was sent to a work farm.

In 1966, at age 19, Cecilia Tao Beiling was sent to a work farm “for re-education,” because she was Catholic. She spent eight years and four months there. Today, she is the deputy chief editor of the Shanghai Diocese’s Guang Qi Research Center.

Throughout China, Catholics who suffered after the communist government closed churches in the late 1950s and during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution kept their faith alive under tough conditions. Later, they faced a tough decision: whether or not to openly worship and work within the system under restrictions imposed by the government, including rejecting ties to the Vatican.

Sister Peter, a member of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Fushun, said that in 1958 the Chinese government closed the community’s motherhouse and put the superior in jail. Some of the sisters were doctors, so they worked in a local hospital, but about 10 others, including her, were forced to do manual labor.

In January 1969, Sister Peter was accused of having connections to other Catholic nuns and priests. She was arrested and put in jail, where officials spent 17 days interrogating her. She said that during that time she was beaten, and near the end she went five days without food.

At that point, she said, “I had a mental breakdown for three days,” so she was released from jail.

Sister Peter said that Jesus then appeared to her in a watch that hung from a chain around her neck. Jesus talked to her through the watch, she said, and told her, “You

carry me in your heart.”

Members of the communist Red Guard came upon her talking to the watch, attacked her and put her in prison, where they confiscated the watch. After about two hours, however, officials returned the watch, she said, and Jesus told her, “Don’t worry, I am with you.”

Sister Peter said another person in the prison witnessed her joy and faith when the watch was returned, and that person later became a Catholic.

In the following years, she held various jobs. She also spent a year in jail — allegedly for criticizing Communist Party leader Mao Tse-tung — and, beginning in 1974, she spent a year in a mental hospital.

“God gave me the grace” to make it through the rough times, she said in mid-March.

In 1980, when the government returned part of the Fushun church’s property, she and some of the nuns returned to the church compound, and her community was reinstated in 1986.

Today, four sisters who made it through the church suppression remain at the Fushun motherhouse. Two of them are very ill, and Sister Peter prays with them four times a day, then prays in the chapel.

For nearly two decades, China’s Catholic churches were suppressed. In the 1980s, as the government began loosening its religious restrictions, Catholics who had suffered were faced with how to pass along the faith to a generation brought up without religion. Although some were forced to join or made the decision to join the government-approved Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which rejected Vatican ties, many secretly maintained their allegiance to the pope and the universal church.

Bishop Jin, ordained a priest in 1951, was in prison from 1958 to 1968 and later served at the Shenyang Masanjia work farm. He said that during his imprisonment he “definitely believed that someday we would be free” but did not know when.

In 1980, the government called him to serve the church as a priest and apologized to him. The government, not the Vatican, appointed him a bishop in 1989, and he

decided to accept the appointment. The bishop said his sister, a nun in Taiwan, and a bishop in Japan helped negotiate for him to be recognized secretly by the Vatican.

He was “trying to work in a very complicated situation,” he said.

Liaoning Auxiliary Bishop Paul Pei Junmin was born in 1969, so shortly after he started elementary school the Cultural Revolution was finished.

“I basically received the Catholic teaching from my parents,” he said. His mother’s cousin, who died two years ago, was an acolyte for 45 years.

“He was the only preacher in my village,” he said in mid-March, and during the Cultural Revolution the cousin “was almost beaten to death” and almost burned to death because he was Catholic.

Since the village did not have priests or catechists, “this gentleman played a very important role” in passing on the faith, said Bishop Pei. “He was a very dear person to me.”

Later, at age 76, the cousin was ordained a priest of the Liaoning Diocese. He died two years ago, the bishop said.

In a November address in Atlanta to a conference on China’s Catholic Church, Tao, a laywoman, called her 100 months on a work farm “a way to carry the cross of Jesus.”

In the early 1980s, Tao said, she felt the need to participate in the Catholic community and pass on the faith to her son, but she hesitated. Millions of Catholics were refusing to join the patriotic association and were continuing to practice their faith clandestinely.

One day she passed a church and went to pray in front of the Eucharist.

“It was as though Jesus spoke to me there and urged that our family become part of the registered church, in order to worship God openly and help pass on the Catholic faith to the next generation,” Tao said. “In this time of prayer I decided we would participate in (the) open church, even though this would mean we would be criticized by friends or family. If these misunderstandings came, I prayed that I would be strong to accept these, too, as part of the cross that Jesus asked me to

share.”

In 1990, Tao accepted a position as coordinator of the academic program at the novitiate of a diocesan order of nuns. When she ran into conflicts with the government’s Religious Affairs Bureau, Shanghai Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian sent her abroad to study: first English in the Philippines, then religious education in England and finally systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, where she earned her master’s degree.

Upon her return, the bishop asked her to work at Guang Qi Research Center, where one of her principal responsibilities has been the translation of English-language theological works into Chinese. Among her projects was an eight-volume series, “Catholicism” by Father Richard P. McBrien, one of her theology professors at Notre Dame.