

A Catholic experience in western China

November 2020

For public use

CSW everyone
free to believe



The Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang is located in Shaanxi in Northwest China. Despite the introduction of several economic and technological development zones, inequality and poverty persist, exacerbated by a rural-urban divide. Many churches in Fengxiang are not wealthy, and their priests sometimes live on the edge of poverty themselves, devoting their time to ministering to the rural poor.

The information below comes from an independent researcher who has been exploring the history of the diocese and the challenges faced by the Catholic community there in recent years.

The Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang has a history of more than 300 years, with 41 churches in the diocese: 14 of them have not received registration certificates from the Government's Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs as places of religious activities. In Fengxiang County alone, there are 21 churches. The diocese has more than 20,000 believers, 50 priests and 200 nuns. In November 2017, Bishop Lucas Li Jing-feng of the Fengxiang Diocese passed away at the age of 96. He is the only bishop who came from the "underground" church,¹ then gained official recognition from the government, but never joined the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). He was imprisoned for 20 years from 1959 to 1979 for his opposition to the CCPA. Under Bishop Li's leadership, the Fengxiang Diocese was the only diocese in China that had no members or bishops who had joined the Patriotic Association. In September 2018, less than a year after his death, the Chinese government signed a secret agreement with the Vatican on the appointment of bishops.

**The old bishop was a very strong man. He had his own way to communicate with the government: "You talk about your policy, I talk about my faith. We are the people who have lived our faith all our lives, dedicated to God and not married."
- local priest, Shaanxi province**

In 2019, the church of Qianyang, which had been built with funds raised by parishioners in the Fengxiang Diocese, was demolished by the authorities. In the same period of time, the church of Qishan, the pilgrimage site of the Holy Mother of Moujiaping, and several other church properties were demolished by the government without any explanation, which triggered protests by clergy and faithful believers. The protests were temporarily defused by the government using intimidation and economic inducements.

In June 2020, the government appointed a new bishop for the Fengxiang Diocese and publicly claimed that if the churches wouldn't join the Catholic Patriotic Association, it would continue to demolish churches until they compromised. It was very painful and frightening for many clergy and faithful. In desperation and helplessness, all the churches under the jurisdiction of the diocese have since joined the Catholic Patriotic Association.

Meanwhile, not only has the Catholic Church been suppressed in the Baoji area, but also the Protestant church, Victory Road Church, which belongs to the Three-Self Christian Church,² was demolished in 2019. According to sources, the local house churches are also being suppressed and harassed.

What has happened to the Catholic Church, the Three-Self Church and house churches in the Baoji area over the past two years is a representative microcosm of the Chinese government's systematic violations of religious freedom. And in September this year, the Vatican renewed its secret agreement with the Chinese government. While we have no clear evidence of harm to the situation of Catholics in China as a direct result of the Vatican's agreement with Beijing, what is happening in the Fengxiang diocese shows that the situation of Catholics and Christians in the region has deteriorated dramatically since the Sino-Vatican agreement was signed, and that the agreement has done nothing to help them.

1 Churches which are not under the state-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA).

2 The state-sanctioned Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Independent churches not registered with the TSPM may be known as 'unregistered' or 'house' churches.

'The Pope is probably in a desperate mood to engage the Chinese government. The Church treats people with honesty, but the government treats people in a dishonest way, and they'll consider themselves as clever if they can coax or deceive you. So if you understand that the two sides have very different agenda, can this agreement be fair and equitable?'

- local priest, Shaanxi province

At present, some priests in the Catholic Diocese of Fengxiang have fled the country, others are homeless, and some have expressed their dissatisfaction with the current bishop, but more often their anger is directed at the government's brutal crackdown and their frustration with the Vatican.

'China's constitution says to guarantee freedom of religion, that's pretty good. Like Xi Jinping's speeches in 2019 and 2020 [at the] two sessions³, which I paid special attention to. He said something very good, like "people first, people-oriented". But in reality, is it actually really people first?'

- local priest, Shaanxi province

Recommendations

CSW recommends that the government of the People's Republic of China:

- Respects, protects and promotes the right of all people in China to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), in accordance with Articles 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- Ceases all harassment and intimidation of Catholic leaders and lay people in Fengxiang Diocese and across the country;
- Immediately and unconditionally releases any prisoner of conscience detained in connection with their religion or belief, including Catholic clergy detained for refusing to join the CCPA;
- Ensures that any form of registration system is optional, not mandatory, and is not used as a tool to control religious activities.

CSW also recommends that the Vatican review their agreement with the Chinese authorities, in consultation with Catholic leaders and lay persons, as well as FoRB advocates and experts.

³ The annual meetings of the National People's Congress (NPC) and Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC).

**CSW everyone
free to believe**

CSW is a human rights organisation advocating for freedom of religion or belief, and as Christians we stand with everyone facing injustice because of their religion or belief.

T +44 (0)20 8329 0010

🐦 @CSWadvocacy

f /CSWUK

csw.org.uk

PO Box 99

New Malden

Surrey, KT3 3YF

United Kingdom