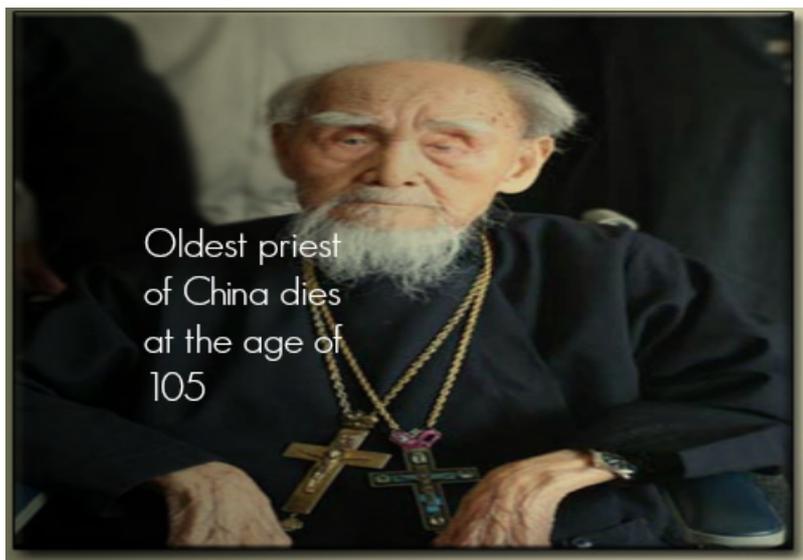


China's oldest priest dies at age 105



Father Ye Yaomin withstood persecution and banishment to help build up the Church in China

China's oldest priest, Father Ye Yaomin of Guangzhou, died on Tuesday at the age of 105, bringing to an end to an epic life that spanned the fall of emperors, wars and a Communist Party intolerant of his devout faith.

In good health until his final weeks, Father Ye had recently declined hospital care and food in the apparent knowledge his time was close, said Sister Chen Jianyin, who had cared for him for more than two decades.

“He told us that the Church is his home and he has to die in his home,” she said.

The elderly priest passed away in the early hours of Tuesday after parishioners took him back to the Immaculate Conception Church in his hometown of Foshan, Guangdong province. His funeral is scheduled for Saturday at the church.

Ye's religious career began in 1937, when he traveled to Hong Kong to study at the Southern China Major Seminary, where he remained for seven years until near the end of the Second World War.

After returning to his native Guangdong, Ye was ordained a priest in Guangzhou in 1948.

His timing could not have been worse: a year later, the Communist Party took power after winning the civil war and quickly eroded the role of the Church.

In 1955, Father Ye was found with news clippings he regularly received from former classmates in Hong Kong, then under British rule, after someone reported him to the party.

Banished to the desolate central province of Qinghai, the priest was ordered to spend his next years feeding pigs.

“He was once asked by some people if he hated the Communist Party for his suffering. He said ‘no, hatred is itself a sin’,” said Sister Chen.

It wasn't until 1980 that Father Ye was able to return to his hometown, thousands of kilometers to the south.

Chairman Mao had died four years earlier and China was about to loosen its iron grip on religion. Father Ye, already 70 years old, began preaching in Foshan's Jiangmen Diocese.

During a period when churches were rebuilt across China, Father Ye eagerly joined in the effort, declining repeated chances offered by relatives to emigrate overseas.

“China needs priests,” Sister Chen quoted him as saying.

Throughout his long life, Father Ye was always extremely generous, giving money to the needy regardless of their religion, added the nun.

“He always said that ‘it's God's money, not mine’,” she said. “He just used my hands to give it out to others.”

ucanews.com reporter, Hong Kong