

China World Heritage bid for St. Francis Xavier site

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Catholic pilgrims hoping to visit the original gravesite of St. Francis Xavier on China's Shangchuan Island on his feast day Dec. 3 will find the site closed for renovation as part of a bid for the UNESCO World Heritage listing.

St. Francis Xavier's Church on the island, which houses the saint's empty tomb, is one of 30 historic sites included in the Chinese government's recommendation for the UNESCO world heritage listing for 2018.

The Jesuit missionary died at age 46 on Shangchuan Island on Dec. 3, 1552, while waiting to enter mainland China. He was buried there for two months before his body was exhumed and transferred first to Malacca and then to Goa, India, its current home.

The present church, built in 1986, is a reproduction of the chapel built there in 1869. Church groups outside mainland China provided funding for the reconstruction of the church which is under the jurisdiction of Jiangmen Diocese.

"I was notified by the Religious Affairs Bureau a few months ago that the renovation project would be started on Nov. 12," Bishop Paul Liang Jansen of Jiangmen told ucanews.com.

"The guards at the graveyard have returned home and the site is closed. It will be dangerous now to go there for pilgrimage as construction work is undergoing," he said.

The bishop is delighted that the St. Francis Xavier's Church may become a world heritage site so that more people will know about the missionary's work.

"Besides attracting more pilgrims, it will benefit our evangelization efforts if more tourists visit the island," Bishop Leung said.

He Shaoqun, one of the sanctuary's guards, said visits to the site by pilgrims or tourist has been sporadic.

"Sometimes no one comes at all through the week while other times there are several tourist groups made up of a few dozen people coming. They are mostly Catholics, especially when approaching the saint's feast day," He told ucanews.com.

The renovation work covers the cemetery, the chapel and the guards' dormitory, she said. "It is estimated to be finished next July," she said.

Shangchuan Island is 14 kilometers off the coast of southern Guangdong province.

St. Francis Xavier was canonized in 1622, along with his mentor St. Ignatius of Loyola. He was among 10 founding-members of the Society of Jesus.

Pope Pius X declared him as a patron saint of all foreign missions.

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