

# NEW YORK'S UNDERGROUND CHINESE CHURCH

BY ANN NOONAN

Catholics in New York City's Chinatown fear that their priest, ordained in China's underground Catholic church, has become a pawn in diplomatic negotiations between Beijing and the Vatican.



**Father Paul Dou Daoming.**  
**Photo: Ann Noonan.**

Exiled from China, Father Paul Dou Daoming is a Roman Catholic priest who after numerous tribulations found himself in a thriving parish in New York City's Chinatown. His story is one that should have had a happy ending. But earlier this year, without warning, and as of yet without explanation, Fr. Paul found himself summarily removed from St. Joseph's Church on explicit orders from the New York Archdiocese chancery office.

The banishment of Fr. Paul has deeply upset and confused New York's Chinese-Catholic community, and his replacement has made matters worse. Whereas Fr. Paul was ordained in China as a priest in the "underground Church" loyal to Rome, the new priest whom Edward Cardinal Egan installed at St. Joseph's, Father Joseph Ruan Guozhang, was ordained under China's government-approved "Patriotic" Church. Explicitly opposed to the Vatican hierarchy, the Patriotic Church's primary loyalty is to the Chinese Communist Party. Its orders come not from Rome, but from Beijing.

Nearly 200 Chinese parishioners of St. Joseph's sent a letter to Rev. Yves Touzin, Superior of the New York Metropolitan Area, requesting that Fr. Paul be allowed to stay. When their plea fell on deaf ears, they rented a basement at 58 Henry Street, just a couple of blocks away from St. Joseph's Church, and converted it into a chapel. Unapproved, unauthorized and unsanctioned, this chapel in the heart of lower Manhattan is nothing less than an American version of a Chinese underground church.

The chapel has been established by the American Fujianese

Catholic Association as a not-for-profit organization registered with New York's Department of State. It is not against church doctrine or protocol for Catholic laity to open a chapel or community center. These Catholics, however, have had anything but a peaceful time celebrating their beliefs.

Parishioners have been warned not to attend Mass celebrated by Father Paul at the new chapel. One parishioner, who requested anonymity, stated that in June their pastor threatened to contact the New York City Police Department and have Father Paul arrested if he offered a Catholic service at the chapel without the support of his parish and within its boundaries. Two Chinatown elders, one a Lutheran businessman and one an Episcopalian attorney, stood guard outside the basement church during the first Mass to deter any possible police action. When asked if these were interfaith gestures, the businessman responded, "No, I was once a boy scout and believe that Americans have the right to worship any way they choose."

Questions have been raised over whether Fr. Paul is placing himself at odds with the Catholic Church's Ecclesiastical Court. Under Canon Law, if a priest celebrates Mass without the implied permission of the presiding Cardinal, he risks being considered schismatic. A priest who defies an official suspension of priestly faculties could be forcefully laicized, i.e., defrocked. While this has not yet happened to Fr. Paul, concern about a further schism in the Church regarding China's Catholics continues to grow.

Fr. Paul came as an exile to the United States in March 1994 with the help of the Cardinal Kung Foundation. He was welcomed by the late John Cardinal O'Connor, the Archbishop of New York, and by Bishop Daily, the former head of the Brooklyn Diocese. Fr. Paul first served as a novice at the St. John the Baptist Order in Queens, then as a parish priest in the Church of the Transfiguration, and later at St. Joseph's Church in Manhattan, all without incident.

Fr. Paul was ordained, first as a deacon in 1986 and then as a priest in January 1994, by a Vatican-appointed Bishop, Cosmo Shi Enxiang of Yixian, Hubei Province. Detained numerous times over the years, Bishop Shi was most recently arrested in April 2001 and remains in custody. While in Beijing, Father Paul served under the Vatican-appointed Bishop of Beijing, Pei Shangde, who died on Christmas Eve in 2001 while under official house arrest.

According to St. Joseph's Pastor, Father Lydio Tomasi, "Since Father Paul had never been incardinated with the Archdiocese of New York and only served as a visiting priest, he would be required to report back to the bishop who had ordained him." This is not possible, however, since Bishop Shi is in prison, and the Bishop Fr. Paul reported to in Beijing, Bishop Pei, is dead. The Roman Catholic Bishop of Tianjin, Li Side, standing in for Bishop Pei, has offered permission for Fr. Paul to join any Catholic diocese in the United States, but without apparent result.

Fr. Paul's replacement, Father Joseph Ruan, left China in 1998 to obtain a Ph.D. in moral theology in Rome, and is described by Hong Kong's Bishop Joseph Zen as someone whose "loyalty to the Holy See was never less than evident." All the same, many parishioners at St. Joseph's are uneasy about being led by a priest who was ordained by Shanghai's Patriotic Bishop, Aloysius Jin Luxian. Bishop Jin serves as second-in-command to Bishop Fu Tieshan, who heads China's Patriotic Church, an entity created by PRC officials to control Catholicism in China and minimize the influence of the Vatican and the Pope.

Distrust overseas toward Patriotic Catholic officials—particularly those with direct links to Patriotic Association leaders—has been documented throughout the years. Italy's *L'espresso* described Bishop Fu as "represent[ing] the most radical wing

of this group. He is the president of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and, together with the old-school Communist Ye Xiaowen, the director of the Office of Religious Affairs, he is at the controls of the repressive machine that suffocates religious rights in China. In February the two undertook a propaganda campaign in the United States and Canada to show that there is no persecution in China. In their own country, they have artfully spread rumors of the near reestablishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Beijing."

It remains unclear whether Fr. Joseph is obliged to report back to Bishop Jin. Many persecuted Catholics from China now residing in New York refuse to receive sacraments from any priest who reports back to China's Patriotic hierarchy. Reports that many priests in China's Patriotic Church have secretly expressed loyalty to the Vatican have for obvious reasons been impossible to confirm, and are distrusted by many Chinese Roman Catholics. The Catholic hierarchy, meanwhile, has failed to reassure parishioners at St. Joseph's that Fr. Joseph has or will follow the Vatican's eight-step process to demonstrate his reconciliation with Rome.

One parish family claims that like many, they are all too familiar with religious persecution in China, but never expected to be confronted with it in New York. "We spend our lives praying for bishops, priests, nuns and lay people who



Makeshift altar in Henry Street basement chapel. Photo: Ann Noonan.

have been tortured, beaten up, imprisoned, confined and harassed because of [their] refusal to deny allegiance to the Holy Father,” said one family member. “Father Paul knows us and knows what we have been through. He is a good priest. Why is he being persecuted?”

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Another parishioner, Weiming Zhang, who had been imprisoned in China for two years for his faith, wrote a letter of protest to Cardinal Egan, observing, “We were persecuted and suffered in China by the Communist government, but on the other hand, we got a lot of experience of how to do toward persecutors . . . I apologize for my audacity, but sometimes we feel all people are equal before Almighty God.”

Fr. Paul has not been accused of abusing parishioners, nor has he been involved in any sort of criminal activity. His letter of dismissal from Rev. Yves Touzin, dated March 20, 2004, states simply that it is the Church’s policy to rotate vicars every three to five years in parishes staffed by Scalabrinians, the order that founded St. Joseph’s and that specifically serves migrants and refugees. “After a canonical visitation of the parish and with all due consideration, we have therefore decided to terminate your assignment as parochial vicar at the Church of St. Joseph as of May 3, 2004.”

Despite the well-known shortage of Catholic clergy, and the growing number of Chinese Catholics in New York City, no parish in the Brooklyn diocese or in the New York Archdiocese has offered Fr. Paul a parish in which to reside and serve as a priest. Fr. Paul had obtained preliminary consent to serve at the Church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in a Brooklyn diocese heavily populated by Chinese immigrants. However, the offer was subsequently withdrawn, and Fr. Paul learned that the pastor of St. Joseph’s, Lydio Tomasi, had told the pastor of Perpetual Help that Fr. Paul had stolen a television, computer and chalice from St. Joseph’s. Members of St. Joseph’s Church and Fr. Paul’s previous congregation in Queens subsequently sent letters to Fr. Tomasi stating that they had in fact collected money and purchased the television, computer and other gifts for him over several years. Fr. Paul says Fr. Tomasi had given him permission to borrow the chalice to celebrate Mass.

Insiders believe Fr. Paul has merely become a pawn in China’s game of diplomacy with the Vatican as a move toward reconciliation with Beijing continues to develop. Of great concern to parishioners of St. Joseph’s is the possibility that the PRC will effectively undermine the Church’s support for China’s Roman Catholics. To them, it appears that the decades-long situation in China, in which Catholics loyal to the Vatican have been forced underground in deference to the official “Patriotic Catholic Church,” has been replicated in New York.

At a forum held in August in the underground chapel on

Henry Street, Ann Lau, a guest speaker and Chair of the Visual Artists Guild, stated, “We all understand that a relationship which starts out in deceit is doomed to fail. Can a relationship with Jesus be any different? If Jesus accepts that the ends justify the means, Jesus would have said to Peter, ‘You will deny me thrice but its okay since your lie is to protect yourself.’ After Peter denied Christ three times, he went out and wept because he knew that it was the wrong thing to do. Is it okay to vocally deny Peter’s Church and still claim to be in communion with Christ?”

It is interesting to note that St. Joseph’s pastor, Father Lydio Tomasi, is the brother of the Catholic Church’s Nuncio to the United Nations in Geneva, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi. On April 5, Archbishop Silvano Tomasi made the following remarks to the UN Commission on Human Rights: “An emerging subtle form of religions intolerance is opposing the right of religion to speak publicly on issues concerning forms of behavior that are measured against principles of a moral and religious nature. . . . While respecting a healthy sense of the state’s secular nature, the positive role of believers in public life should be recognized . . . Religion cannot be relegated to a corner of the private sphere of life and in this way risk losing its social dimension and its charitable action toward vulnerable people it serves without any distinction.”

Many from St. Joseph’s Parish believe these considerations should apply to Father Paul Dou as well.

### REFERENCE DOCUMENTS:

- Letter from Hong Kong’s Bishop Joseph Zen to His Eminence Edward Cardinal Egan, March 17, 2004
- Letter from Rev. Yves Touzin, CS, of St. Columba’s Church, March 20, 2004
- Letter from parishioners of St. Joseph’s Parish to Rev. Yves Touzin, March 28, 2004
- Open letter from Rev. Lydio F. Tomasi, CS, the Pastor of Church of St. Joseph, April 12, 2004
- Open letter from by Msgr. Desmond O’Connor, Director of Priest Personnel for the Archdiocese of New York, April 13, 2004
- Open letter from Archbishop Robert Sarah, April 15, 2004
- Office of Priest Personnel Document, April 23, 2004
- Letter from by The Most Reverend Si De Li, Catholic Bishop’s House in Tianjin, China, to Father Paul Dou, April 25, 2004
- Letter from Father Paul Dou to Most. Rev. Nicholas DiMarzio, April 27, 2004
- Undated Farewell and Welcome notice by the Church of St. Joseph, sometime in May 2004
- Letter from Remedios C. Sioco, M.D. to Rev. Lydio F. Tomasi, May 13, 2004
- Letter from members of the Catholic Association of St. Joseph’s Church to Rev. Lydio F. Tomasi, May 16, 2004
- Letter from Father Paul Dou to His Eminence Edward Cardinal Egan, May 27, 2004
- Letter from Most Rev. Robert Brucato, Vicar General to Father Paul Dou, June 2, 2004
- Fujian Catholic Association press release, June 5, 2004
- Letter from Weiming Zhang to His Eminence Edward Cardinal Egan, June 21, 2004
- Guidelines on China from the Vatican, July 3, 2004
- Letter from Msgr. Desmond O’Connor to Weiming Zhang, July 30, 2004

These documents will be linked to the online version of this article on HRIC’s Web site.