

China pilgrimage pays tribute to Cardinal Wu and four Chinese saints

GUIYANG, China (UCAN): Catholics from Hong Kong paid tribute to the late Cardinal John Baptist Wu Cheng-chung and four Chinese martyrs on a pilgrimage in southwestern China during the traditional Chung Yeung Festival.

On October 13, the third day of their five-day tour in Guizhou province, Father Lawrence Lee Len reminded his 26 fellow pilgrims that it was just three weeks after September 23, the day Cardinal Wu, their former bishop, died.

Father Lee is spiritual director of the Hong Kong Lay Prison Evangelical Organization, to which the pilgrims belong. His taking note of the third seven-day period after Cardinal Wu died was significant because Chinese people customarily commemorate a deceased relative or friend every seven days until the seventh week after the person's death.

The commemoration for the late cardinal coincided with Chung Yeung, also called Chongyang, which is an autumn remembrance day falling on the ninth day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar. Chinese in Hong Kong on that day customarily pay homage to their ancestors or go hiking, but most mainland Chinese cannot do so since it is not a public holiday in the mainland.

Father Lee said it was particularly meaningful to commemorate Cardinal Wu on mainland Chinese soil in that he often urged Hong Kong Catholics to help achieve China's "fifth modernization" -- modernizing China with Christianity.

The "four modernizations" proclaimed by the Chinese

government are the modernization of industry, agriculture, defence and science and technology.

After the commemoration, the group went to Qingyan, 1,700 kilometres southwest of Beijing. The small tourist town is full of cultural and religious sites, including a century-old Catholic church, a Protestant church and 12 temples for Buddhists, Taoists and folk religion followers. The ancient town is near the place where four Chinese Martyr-Saints -- Chen



Binchang (Changpin), Luo Tingyin, Wang-Luo Mande, Zhang Wenlan -- were beheaded in 1861. The four are among 120 Chinese Martyrs canonized in 2000.

Some pilgrims said they felt especially excited to be there because Saint Zhang Wenlan is the patron saint of their prison ministry association. Very few Catholics from Hong Kong previously have been able to visit the site.

Among the 14 member associations of the prison evangelical organization, 13 focus on visiting prisoners, and one is dedicated to writing to inmates.

Most of the associations have taken a Chinese martyr as their patron saint.

Therese Chan Sik-ping of Wenlan Intellectus Association later told UCA she felt honoured to visit the tombstone of her association's patron saint.

Seeing the mountainous region where Saint Zhang Wenlan often carried a medicine box to heal poor villagers, she said, helped her appreciate how hard his work was. The visits that she and other association members make to Hong Kong prisoners, she added, are comparatively very comfortable.

One night on the tour, the pilgrims were caught in a traffic jam on a road blocked by some farmers staging a protest. They thought the traffic would not soon return to normal and feared they might have to sleep on the tour bus, so they prayed. They could proceed, however, when the jam suddenly cleared.

As the trip ended, Xiao Wang, the tour escort and a professed atheist, told the pilgrims he sensed help from God in the incident and had a feeling he had been destined to escort this tour of "the people of Our Lady."

The Chung Yeung Festival can be traced to a legend in the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.-220 A.D.) that tells of a man named Huan Jing who, upon the advice of a soothsayer, took his family into the hills to escape disaster. When he returned home, he found all his livestock dead from a plague.

These days, the festival is a time to pay respect to ancestors and family elders, have a family outing and, for women, a day of rest from housework.