

“The salvation of the just comes from the Lord” (Ps 37:39a). July 9<sup>th</sup> is the Memorial of Saint Augustine Zhao Rong, priest, and companions. “Augustine Zhao Rong was the first native Chinese priest to become a martyr. Born in 1746, he served as one of the soldiers who escorted Bishop John Gabriel Taurin Dufresse to his martyrdom in Beijing. The witness of the bishop led Augustine to seek baptism at age 30. He was ordained a priest five years later and was martyred in 1815.”<sup>i</sup>

Between 1648 and 1930, 87 Chinese Catholics gave their lives in witness to the faith. The Chinese martyrs ranged in ages from 9-72, including 4 diocesan priests along with children and parents, catechists and laborers in the Lord’s vineyard.<sup>ii</sup>

Priests and women religious were among the 33 foreign-born martyrs. These individuals “often tried to distance themselves from European political struggles relating to China, but their persecutors saw them as Westerners and therefore, by definition, anti-Chinese.”

In the Jubilee year of 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized all 120 martyrs in Rome on the 1<sup>st</sup> of October. He highlighted the heroic witness of others besides Augustine:<sup>iii</sup>

- Young Ann Wang, a 14-year-old, withstood the threats of the torturers who invited her to apostatize. Ready for her beheading, she declared with a radiant face: ‘The door of heaven is open to all’, three times murmuring: ‘Jesus.’
- And 18-year-old Chi Zhuzi, cried out fearlessly to those who had just cut off his right arm and were preparing to flay him alive: ‘Every piece of my flesh, every drop of my blood will tell you that I am Christian.’
- ‘We never wronged anyone’, Bishop Francis Fogolla replied to the governor who was preparing to strike him with his sword. ‘On the contrary, we have done good to many.’

The words of these martyrs testify to the truth that Jesus spoke to his own apostles. “When they hand you over, do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say. You will be given at that moment what you are to say” (Mt 10:19).

China is still a very difficult place for Christians to practice their faith much less the ordinary citizen who strives for basic freedom. The people of Hong Kong who have asked for their human rights and autonomy to continue fear they will soon lose everything as the centralized government tightens its grip on the once former colony of the British. As the Chinese military flexes its muscles, we see threats to the sovereignty of the people of Taiwan. And those in mainland China have for many decades recognized the need to be careful in the practice of their faith in the midst of a government ever fearful of foreign influence.

Amidst this backdrop, the words of Christ ring ever true across the centuries giving strength to every persecuted generation. “You will be hated by all because of my name, but whoever endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22).

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<sup>i</sup> catholicnewsagency.com/saint/120-martyrs-of-china-533

<sup>ii</sup> catholicnewsandherald.com/faith/185-news/faith/faith-july/104-st-augustine-zhao-rong-and-companions-feast-day-july-9

<sup>iii</sup> vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf\_jp-ii\_hom\_20001001\_canonization