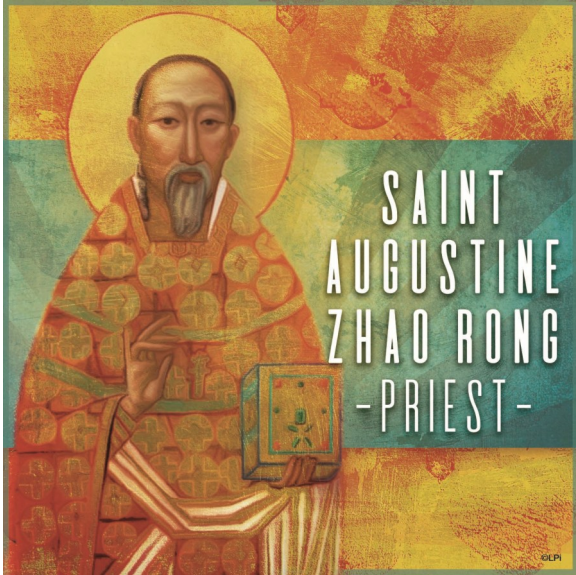


FROM FR. JASON



Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we journey through Ordinary Time, the Church invites us to pause and reflect on the extraordinary witness of the saints. On July 9, we commemorate St. Augustine Zhao Rong and his 119 Companions, a group of martyrs who gave their lives for Christ in China between 1648 and 1930. Their stories are not only a testament to courage and faith but also a powerful reminder of the Good News that is the Gospel.

Christianity first arrived in China as early as the 7th century, brought by missionaries from Syria. Over the centuries, the faith experienced periods of growth and suppression, depending on the political climate. The 120 martyrs we honor came from all walks of life: 87 were native Chinese, including children, parents, catechists, and laborers, while 33 were foreign missionaries, primarily priests and religious sisters from congregations such as the Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, Salesians, and the Paris Foreign Mission Society.

Among them was St. Augustine Zhao Rong, a Chinese soldier who once escorted a Catholic bishop to his execution. Witnessing the bishop's serenity and unwavering faith, Augustine was moved to conversion. He was baptized, later ordained a diocesan priest, and ultimately martyred in 1815. His transformation from persecutor to priest is a profound example of how grace can penetrate even the hardest of hearts.

These martyrs lived in a time when Christianity was often viewed with suspicion, seen as a foreign threat to Chinese culture and sovereignty. Many of the foreign missionaries tried to distance themselves from political entanglements, but their presence was still perceived as subversive. The native Chinese Catholics, meanwhile, were often accused of betraying their heritage. Yet, in the face of torture, imprisonment, and death, they remained steadfast—not for political gain, but out of love for Christ and His Church.

One particularly moving story is that of Ann Wang, a 14-year-old girl who refused to renounce her faith even under the threat of execution. As she faced death, she proclaimed, "The door of heaven is open to all," and whispered the name of Jesus three times before her martyrdom. Another, Chi Zhuzi, only 18, cried out to his torturers, "Every piece of my flesh, every drop of my blood will tell you that I am Christian," after they had severed his arm and prepared to flay him alive.

The canonization of these 120 martyrs by Pope St. John Paul II on October 1, 2000, during the Jubilee Year, was a profound moment of recognition for the Church in China. In his homily, the Holy Father emphasized that these men and women, though persecuted as enemies of the state, were in fact "authentic witnesses to the Gospel of peace and reconciliation." Their canonization was not only a tribute to their sacrifice but also a call for healing and unity between cultures and nations. It reminds us that the Church is not bound by geography or politics, but is a communion of saints—past, present, and future—who proclaim Christ's love in every land and language.

These are not just stories of the past. They are a call to each of us today. In a world where faith is often challenged—sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly—these martyrs remind us that the Gospel is worth living for, and yes, even dying for. Their courage invites us to examine our own witness: Do we live our faith boldly? Do we speak of Christ with love and conviction? Are we willing to be misunderstood for the sake of the truth? Let us pray for the Church in China, where Catholics still face restrictions and hardships. And let us ask the intercession of St. Augustine Zhao Rong and his companions, that we too may be faithful witnesses in our time—rooted in love, strengthened by grace, and radiant with hope. St. Augustine Zhao Rong and Companions, pray for us!

Peace,