

FAITH MATTERS

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FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE

BY JOSEPH J. CELLA



Jimmy Lai is the most prominent political prisoner in the world, who also happens to be Catholic. A resident of Hong Kong and a British citizen, he could easily have departed Hong Kong to escape the threat of Communist China but chose instead to stay in Hong Kong to advance the cause of freedom and human rights. Knowing his plight should be of concern for Catholics and all citizens of the Free World. And understanding it should inspire our prayers, particularly given the People's Republic of China and the Chinese Communist Party's clear and present threat to Catholics, other Christians in China, and the entire world as a new Cold War is underway.

Jimmy's 1,000th day in prison was September 24, 2023. A recent photo captured by an intrepid AP photojournalist shows the 75-year old being led into Stanley Prison's exercise yard for his daily routine of walking in a 16x30 foot barbed wire-topped enclosure for 50 minutes of fresh air. Jimmy, a diabetic with high blood pressure, is the elder statesman among the hundreds imprisoned by Xi Jinping's regime. The political climate in Hong Kong and the nature of his imprisonment weighs on him, though his faith is strong and growing deeper – represented, in part, through his sketches of Christ crucified and our Blessed Mother.

Reflecting on his plight, I came across the words Pope John Paul II delivered at the Shrine of Saint Lazarus in El

Rincon, Cuba on January 24, 1998: *“There is also suffering of the soul, such as we see in those who are isolated, persecuted, imprisoned for various offences or for reasons of conscience, for ideas which though dissident are nonetheless peaceful. These prisoners of conscience suffer an isolation and a penalty for something for which their own conscience does not condemn them.”*

Jimmy was born on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, 1947, in Canton, Republic of China. His father was forced to flee China after the civil war when the Communists came to power, and his mother was sent to a labor camp, leaving Jimmy and his siblings to support themselves.

At the age of 12, with one Hong Kong dollar in his pocket, he smuggled himself into Macau, before stowing away on a fishing boat bound for Hong Kong. For years he was a child laborer, sweeping the floors of a glove factory making \$8US per month. Jimmy rose to the position of factory manager. In 1975, using his year-end bonus to purchase Hong Kong stocks, he raised enough funding to purchase a bankrupt garment factory, which he branded as Giordano. It went global and prospered.

Following the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989, Jimmy became an advocate for democracy, humanitarian causes and a critic of the People's Republic of China government. He built a media company, Next Magazine and then Apple Daily in 1995,

which was the second largest newspaper in Hong Kong. His publications have been banned in mainland China since their inception. Jimmy's human rights activism led him to realize the importance of serving others, and eventually to his conversion to Catholicism in 1997.

Jimmy has attracted the ire of the Chinese and Hong Kong governments for his political activism and his criticism of the Chinese government's human-rights abuses, including religious persecution. He has faced threats to his life, hostile attacks and vandalism on his home and business, including two fire-bombings.

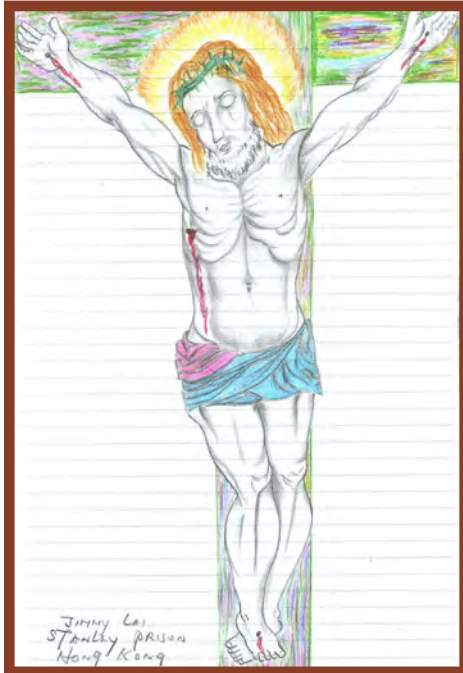
Jimmy has been arrested several times since 2014, each time on flimsy charges. His most recent arrest was in December 2020 and he has been incarcerated ever since. His assets have been frozen while awaiting a December 2023 trial for allegations of sedition and violations of a national security law. If convicted, Jimmy could remain in prison for the rest of his life, possibly in mainland China. In June 2021 Jimmy received the

Gwen Ifill Press Freedom Award from the Committee to Protect Journalists. In September 2021 he received the Christifideles Laici Award from the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast. In April 2022 Jimmy was among five Hong Kong citizens nominated

for the Nobel Peace Prize for "putting his freedom on the line." In May 2022 Jimmy was awarded an honorary degree from The Catholic University of America for his faith and decision to remain in Hong Kong to fight for human rights.

In February 2023 Jimmy was re-nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, along with Cardinal Joseph Zen and several others for being "ardent champions of Hong Kong's autonomy, human rights, and the rule of law as designated under the Sino-British Declaration and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights."

Jimmy's plight, and the persecution facing fellow Catholics, Christians of other denominations, and the Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group in China whose people are enduring crimes against humanity and the



crime of genocide, is a symptom of the broader sickness of Communism, and at its core, a spiritual sickness. In 1976, then-Cardinal Karol Wojtyla captured this sickness well: *“It cannot happen that one group of men, one social group — however well-deserving — should impose on the whole people an ideology, an opinion contrary to the will of the majority.”*

China’s Communist government is scaling religious repression, destroying churches, removing crosses, and arresting clergymen and forcing them to endure “reeducation camps,” returning to Mao-era hostility to religion. Churches have been forced to replace the Ten Commandments with a decalogue of sayings from PRC President Xi Jinping, and a rewriting of holy scripture is underway.

Pope John Paul II addressing the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See on January 10, 2005 stated: *“The Catholic Church, because of her universal nature, is always directly engaged in the great causes for which the men and women of our age struggle and hope. She considers herself a stranger to no people, since wherever there are Christians, the whole body of the Church is called into play; indeed, wherever there is any one individual, we sense a bond of brotherhood.”*

In these dark times, in which the dignity and worth of the individual is being radically assailed every day, and when human rights are misunderstood, manipulated and ignored by the most notorious human rights violators in the world, we must take a

stand in this brotherhood. We must take a stand based on the Catholic moral and intellectual traditions and in our American commitment to the rule of law, which includes the constitutional protection of basic human rights. We must stand in solidarity with our brothers and sisters, such as Jimmy, elevating their plight and praying for them.

Reflecting on his conversion to Catholicism Jimmy stated: *“The way I look at it, if I suffer for the right cause, it only defines the person I am becoming. It can only be good for me to become a better person. If you believe in the Lord, if you believe that all suffering has a reason, and the Lord is suffering with me... I am at peace with it.”* Through his British citizenship and considerable wealth Jimmy could have easily walked away from this fight in the arena he was called to wage, but with his faith, he has forged on as an exemplary witness to faith and detachment from things of this world.

In that spirit, let us pray for victory over the spiritual sickness that fuels this ideology, for wisdom by our leaders in government, and for peace. And please pray for Jimmy Lai and his family, and all others held captive for their freedom of conscience, which John Paul described as *“the basis and foundation of all other human rights.”*

ILLUSTRATIONS
BY JIMMY LAI



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Joseph Cella is the Director of the Michigan-China Economic and Security Review Group. He served as the United States Ambassador to Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Tuvalu, and Tonga from 2019-2021. He is the Founder and Principal of the Pontifex Group, a consulting firm whose practice areas include public policy, public and media relations, marketing, and crisis management.

He is the Founder of the National Catholic Prayer Breakfast, which has welcomed presidents, chief justices, prominent religious leaders, and other distinguished speakers and guests from around the world. He is a co-founder of In Defense of Christians and Fidelis (Catholic Vote) and worked with over a dozen other nonprofit organizations, including Hillsdale College, where he earned his B.A. Cella recently received The Hillsdale College Distinguished Alumnus Award in recognition of outstanding professional achievement in the field of American Diplomacy.

He and his wife, Kristen, have seven children, four boys and three girls, ranging from 17 years to 4 years old. Cella and his family were the largest family to serve in an ambassadorial posting overseas in the history of the State Department. The Cella family lives on a small farm in Michigan.



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