

Confident in the mercy of God, he sang the litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary as his family members were being led to their deaths. He wished to remind his loved ones that death was bearable because, as martyrs, they would all be reunited momentarily in a far better place, heaven. His voice, sweetly singing that litany of the Blessed Mother, was the last sound his grandchildren heard prior to their executions.

Mark was beheaded in 1900 with other Catholics in his village during the Boxer Rebellion, one of 32,000 Christians martyred during that rebellion in China, 200 of which were missionaries.

Pope St. John Paul II, during the canonization ceremony, reflected on this period, saying it occurred “in a complex and difficult era of China’s history. Today’s celebration is not the appropriate time to pass judgement on those historical periods: this can and should be done elsewhere. Today, with this solemn proclamation of holiness, the Church intends merely to recognize that those martyrs are an example of courage and consistency to us all, and that they honor the noble Chinese people.”

Quoting the Mass readings, he also said, “*The precepts of the Lord give joy to the heart.*” These words of the Responsorial Psalm clearly reflect the experience of Augustine Zhao Rong (a Chinese Catholic priest) and his 119 companions, martyrs in China. The testimonies which have come down to us allow us to glimpse in them a state of mind marked by deep serenity and joy.”

The story of St. Mark Ji Tianxiang shines as an inspiring reminder for persons and families touched by addiction or who feel like outsiders from the Church, that God’s grace is abundant, holiness is possible for everyone, and that hope never dies.

Socials with the Saints

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Sources include: **“How opioid use disorder occurs”* by the Mayo Clinic; and *“Is addiction sin or sickness? A complex and timely inquiry”* by CatholicPhilly.com; National Catholic Register: “*St. Mark I Tianxiang, the Opium Addict Who Became a Saint,*” by Zubair Simonson, OFS (secular Franciscan); Catholic.com; OSV.com (Our Sunday Visitor website); Wikipedia; Aleteia.org; AmericaMagazine.org; IgnatianSpirituality.com

St. Mark Ji Tianxiang 馬克冀天祥

Born: 1834 in Hengshui, China

Died: July 7 or July 9, 1900 (age 66)

Feast Day: July 9

Canonized: Oct. 1, 2000 (by John Paul II)

Beatified along with 119 other Chinese martyrs on Nov. 24, 1946 (by Pius XII)

Patronage: Drug addicts and those whose loved ones struggle with drug addiction

Born into a Catholic family in China’s Jizhou District, Mark Ji Tianxiang (pronounced JEE tee-ANG-zee-ANG) was a highly respected physician. Patients who could not afford his services were treated for free, because Mark considered it a sacred duty never to refuse the poor. He had two sons, and a brother who was a priest.



While treating one of his poor patients, thirty-five year old Mark contracted a serious stomach virus. As was common for the treatment of physical pain, he began using opium, a pure form of heroin derived from poppy plants, which he ingested by smoking. After recovering from the virus, Mark found himself dependent on the drug. Despite his best efforts and ardent prayer, he was unable to stop.

Presently, it is common knowledge that opium is a highly addictive drug. “Drug addiction is defined as an out-of-control feeling that you must use a medicine or drug and continue to use it even though it causes harm over and over again. Opioids are highly addictive, largely because they trigger powerful reward centers in your brain.”*

Before addiction was scientifically understood, however, it was considered a moral failure, a lack of willpower, a weakness and a grave sin. It was highly scandalous and shameful to be an addict, and Mark felt he was a failure. He endured rejection, akin to being a leper, because of it. Even his neighbors were embarrassed by him. Mark

hoped that receiving the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation regularly would help him overcome his addiction.

He availed himself of the sacrament of Reconciliation weekly, but because he confessed the same “sin” again and again, eventually his confessor, a French missionary, refused him absolution. His confessor believed Mark lacked “a firm purpose of amendment,” and instructed he not to return to the confessional until he had overcome his habit.

Today, because of increased knowledge about the phenomenon of addiction and its relation to the brain and the body, Church teaching about addiction has become more nuanced. “The person with an addiction has become enslaved by the harmful substance and has weakened his freedom,” explains Father Bernard Taglianetti, professor of moral theology at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. He adds that addiction ultimately erodes a person’s ability to choose otherwise. An addict whose freedom has been “severely compromised” is likely “not guilty of mortal sin, but rather venial sin or not guilty of sin at all.”

“We could also say that with the opioid epidemic, it’s not just a question of a disease of a single person, but it’s a whole culture which has promoted and enabled this type of behavior on a societal level,” remarks Redemptorist Father Dennis J. Billy, former chair of moral theology at the seminary. “We can almost say that we live in an addictive culture,” and the sin related to the opioid epidemic may be moreso shared by our society as a whole.

Mark continued to pray and to attend daily Mass, but not being absolved of the “grave sin” of addiction, he was not allowed to receive Communion. He was barred from receiving the sacraments during his last thirty years of life. However, he never showed bitterness toward God or the Church because of it.

Despite being denied absolution and reception of the Eucharist, Mark grew in holiness and remained a practicing Catholic. He raised his family in the faith, supported the Church, and otherwise lived a virtuous life. Despite his fervent prayers for deliverance from his addiction, it never came.

Mark knew well the lives of the saints and prayed that he would be allowed the gift of martyrdom. He felt martyrdom was the only way he could be saved, since he was unable to overcome his addiction.

During the period spanning 1899 to 1901, toward the end of the Qing Dynasty, a group called the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, a Daoist cult nicknamed the Boxers because of the prevalence of martial artists among their ranks, wished to rid China of all foreign influence. They particularly despised Europeans, whom they saw as taking over China, including missionaries who had converted Chinese nationals to foreign religions. An all-out rebellion led by the Boxers broke out in northern China’s Shandong Province in 1900.

The Boxers despised Christians because they considered Christianity an outcome of Western colonialism, and they hated Europeans partially because China’s efforts to rid their country of opium were thwarted by the British. Chinese authorities had removed opium from British ships and dumped the opium into the waters of a Chinese port, but the British military intervened. The British forced the Chinese to continue to grow opium and supply it to Great Britain. Therefore, not only did many Chinese hate Christians and Europeans because of religious differences, but also because of the Europeans’ exploitation of their people. The Boxers began slaughtering Christians, missionaries and converts, throughout China.

Sympathizers in the Jizhou District provided the Boxers with the names of known Christians, among them, Mark. He was imprisoned, as were his second son, two daughters-in-law, and six grandchildren. The prisoners were threatened, tormented, and taunted in an attempt to persuade them to renounce their faith. Specifically, Mark was given an opportunity during his trial to renounce Christianity, but he refused to do so, and was prepared to die for his faith.

On July 9, 1900, the Christian prisoners were taken out to be executed. Displaying great courage before his executioners, Mark requested that he be killed last. He asked this so that he could encourage his family members to remain steadfast, and so that none of them would have to die alone.