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Bishop John Baptist Ye Ronghua, who led the reconstruction of the Catholic Church in northwestern China's Ankang area, died at age 91.

Ucanews.com said Ye died Aug. 28 of age-related ailments.

Ye served as the diocesan administrator of Ankang from 1987 to 2000. He was ordained as the first bishop of Ankang in 2000.

Ye was born in a Catholic family June 6, 1931. He studied in seminaries run by Italian Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions and graduated from the major seminary in Kaifeng in 1958, ucanews.com reported. His ordination to the priesthood was delayed due to political movements that targeted the church.

The Chinese Communist Party launched a sociopolitical movement called the Cultural Revolution that lasted from 1966 to 1976. Ye, not yet ordained, was branded a counterrevolutionary, and he was forced into a labor camp for "reeducation."

He was finally ordained a priest in 1982, at age of 51, after China's religions were allowed to revive.

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During the Cultural Revolution, church properties were confiscated, churches were destroyed and very few priests were left.

Bishop Anthony Li Du'an of Xi'an began administering Ankang in 1988. Over 11 years, he ordained nine priests, restored three churches and opened two clinics, ucanews.com reported.

He also ordained Ye as the first Chinese bishop of Ankang Dec. 10, 2000. The new bishop was recognized by the Chinese government and the Vatican.

Despite his poor health, Ye continued the reconstruction and revival of the local church with a small Catholic community. The prefecture often suffered from financial problems.

Most Catholics in the area are farmers, workers and small businessmen, and many people are unemployed and retirees. Many families barely earn enough to feed themselves and can offer little financial support to the church.