

HONG KONG

Jimmy Lai the Confessor: a modern example of white martyrdom

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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A newsroom is usually a noisy place—heated arguments over viewpoints, continuous live broadcasts from competing television stations. Yet at times it can fall as silent as a library. At *Apple Daily*, that moment of silence arrived whenever Jimmy Lai was shouting

in his office.

Lai was notorious for firing people without mercy. A single order, and an entire department could disappear. On a whim, he could uproot both people and capital and move them across the strait to Taiwan. Working for him was like boarding a runaway train every morning: no one knew the destination, nor how the conductor intended to drive it. All that was certain was that once he raised his voice, people rushed forward into what felt like a desperate, life-risking journey. From the perspective of journalistic principles, some of his decisions looked like certain derailment. Yet his record showed otherwise: this train driver, though frequently battered and bruised, managed time and again to steer the train into landscapes no one had ever seen before.

How could someone as obsessive and deeply flawed as Jimmy Lai possibly be a Catholic? One might assume that his “faith” like that of many wealthy members of the middle class, was merely ornamental—a social accessory, a tool for networking with power, another golf club membership or elite circle. At any moment, he could become a liability to the Church; one misstep, and his fellow believers would already be offering sacrifices to avert misfortune.

But I was wrong. Completely wrong. Throughout this long trial, every word he has spoken has proved me so.

In Jimmy Lai’s home hangs a statue of Jesus without arms. Such statues often bear the marks of war or deliberate destruction. Many believers meditate on them with the words: “*Christ has no hands but yours.*” It is a call to assist Christ, to build the Kingdom of God on earth through action. If, in the era of *Apple Daily*, Lai’s faith was expressed with passion and force, then in these years of imprisonment his faith has become a testimony that is silent—and yet resounding.

In a confined space where time is stretched, choices compressed, and the future suspended; in illness, in solitary confinement without sunlight, he has still refused to yield. Some have called him a “martyr.” Yet in such a condition, an older and more restrained term from the Church’s vocabulary is in fact more precise: a confessor.

In Catholic tradition, confessor is not a heroic title. It does not refer to a glorious death or to bloodshed. It describes something far simpler—and far more difficult: under pressure, one does not withdraw one’s confession of faith. Jimmy Lai has not been ordered to renounce Christianity, to burn sacred objects, or to deny God. Instead, he faces a more modern and more insidious demand—to push faith back into a space

where it no longer carries public weight, to reduce conscience to a private silence.

Thus, in the Church's own language, he is not someone executed *because* of faith, but someone who continues to *confess* faith under persecution. He could have exited early, admitted so-called “mistakes,” and chosen another path. He did not. That is the true meaning of a confessor.

At the time of writing, his sentence remains uncertain. For an elderly man, any long imprisonment may well mean never seeing his family again. Some ask: if Jimmy Lai were to die in prison, would that constitute martyrdom? In Church tradition, martyrdom is often described in colors: Red Martyrdom, where believers are killed for their faith and bear witness through blood; and White Martyrdom, where one “dies to the world” by renouncing worldly goods or enduring prolonged suffering in witness to Christ.

White martyrdom is an ancient spiritual concept. It does not describe a single dramatic sacrifice, but a prolonged, untheatrical offering. In white martyrdom, death is not the endpoint; time itself becomes the cross. For Jimmy Lai, sacrifice is not completed in a moment. It exists in every repeated morning—freedom deferred, speech silenced, the body gradually aging, while the outcome remains unknown. This is a silent yet supreme witness to truth. It does not require physical death, but it demands the total offering of the self.

The cruelty of white martyrdom lies in this: it requires a person to choose fidelity again every single day, rather than completing the mission through a single act of heroism. More importantly, it demands that one does not become distorted under prolonged oppression—that one does not become a replica of hatred, that suffering does not corrode the conscience.

For authoritarian regimes, martyrs can be frozen, defined, and safely placed into the completed past. What truly unsettles them is the confessor who is still alive. The confessor does not incite, does not arm himself, does not construct a myth. He simply exists—and refuses to submit. This existence does not rely on slogans of resistance, yet it presents an indelible fact: that under sustained pressure, a human being can still refuse to deny himself. To any regime that demands inner submission, this is not merely a threat—it is a thorn that cannot be removed.

To name Jimmy Lai a confessor, a witness of white martyrdom, is not to turn him into a religious hero, nor to theologize politics. On the contrary, it is a restrained and humble

act of naming—one that rejects both sensationalism and forgetting. It simply says this: in our time, some people leave their weight not through death, but through living—enduring, unwarped. For Jimmy Lai, truth holds the highest value, even above his own life. Such a life, in itself, already constitutes a witness.

“He said, ‘For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37). When the world hates the disciples, it is in truth because it hates Christ; persecution therefore becomes a sign of union with the Lord and of steadfastness in truth.

Jimmy Lai’s witness reminds believers that martyrs are not confined to ancient texts. They live among us today—every day, every minute, every second, at every decisive moment—choosing God again and again.

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