



Opinion

My father is a political prisoner. His letters give me hope.

Faith guides Jimmy Lai's struggle against tyranny.

41 minutes ago

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Drawing made by Jimmy Lai while in Stanley Prison in Hong Kong. (Jimmy Lai)

By Claire Lai

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Claire Lai is Jimmy Lai's daughter.

Since 2020, my father, Jimmy Lai, has been held in solitary confinement for the crime of defending democracy. Though his jailers in the Chinese Communist Party have kept us apart physically, I have received regular letters from him. Reading his words, I have come to see why prisoners of conscience have written some of the most renowned moral and spiritual

reflections in history. Isolated and stripped of the world's comforts, they are able to achieve a unique clarity.

One can see this in Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in the letters Saint Thomas More wrote when he was awaiting execution in the Tower of London, in the prison diary Saint Perpetua kept in the 3rd century and in the missives Natan Sharansky and Alexei Navalny wrote from Russian prisons. Like many of these writers, my father has drawn on his faith in his struggle against tyranny.

My father arrived in Hong Kong at age 12, a penniless stowaway from the Chinese mainland. The first chapters of his life read as a classic rags-to-riches story. Hard work and ingenuity led to his remarkable success as an entrepreneur — first in retail, then in media. He understood that the economic dynamism and opportunity from which he benefited relied on political freedom and the rule of law.

In 1995, he started Apple Daily, which quickly grew to become the city's largest pro-democracy newspaper. It was a time of uncertainty. The British would hand Hong Kong back to mainland China only two years later. In his first editorial, my father made clear the purpose of his new endeavor. Apple Daily would never minimize threats to freedom or hesitate to call them out: "We are afraid, but we don't want to be intimidated by fear or blinded by pessimism."

In 1997, the year of the handover, my father was confirmed in the Catholic Church. He had always felt God's guiding hand in his life, and thanks in part to the faithful witness of my Catholic mother, he finally found his spiritual home.

As Beijing grew more oppressive, my father didn't cower and neither did Apple Daily. Pressure from authorities and the private sector mounted. Beginning in 2020, he was arrested, tried and convicted on several sham charges, including illegal assembly, simply for lighting a candle at an annual prayer vigil for the victims of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Prosecutors used footage of him leaving Mass as evidence against him. Later, his journalism led him to be tried and convicted under Hong Kong's draconian and arbitrary national security law.



Drawing made by Jimmy Lai while in Stanley Prison in Hong Kong. (Jimmy Lai)

My father has now spent more than five years in solitary confinement. Last month, he was sentenced to an additional 20 years. For most, this would be a time of despair. But in his tiny prison cell, without any access to fresh air or natural light, my father's faith continues to bear fruit. He loves his neighbor, forgives those who have wronged him and hopes to bring others to the truth. He has written to me about God's steadfastness, and he has sent me the pictures he drew with colored pencils — the only artistic implements the guards allow him. Here are a few selections from his letters:

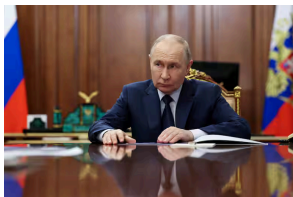
- I am most grateful to God for putting me through this suffering in order that I might draw closer to Him. What a joy and

treasure this is. God's action confounds us but always turns out to be marvelous.

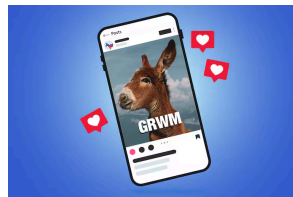
- Your eyes, O Lord, are in every place. You are ever with me. You are present and conscious of all I think. Every deed or act, however slight; every word, however quick and casual; every thought of my heart, however secret, however momentary, however forgotten. You see it all, O Lord. You see and note it down, and the leaves will be filled and turned over and the book at length finished. "Where can I go from your spirit?" (Ps. 139:7). I am in your hands, O Lord, absolutely.
- I can never be thrown away. ... My sickness, or my perplexity, or my sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end which is beyond us. He does nothing in vain. Lord, deign to fulfill Your high purposes in me whatever they may be. Work in me and through me.
- Why is my mood not down at all, sometimes even quite lighthearted? I guess because so many people whom I have never even met are praying for me. ... I am always in God's presence because of their prayers.
- "The eyes of all look hopefully to you; you give them their food in due season" (Ps. 145:15). To the beast of the field, You give meat and drink. But as to us, Your children, nothing can satisfy us but You. Therefore, You have caused Yourself to be meat and drink to us. O most adorable mystery! ... You know well that nothing else would support our immortal natures, our frail hearts, but You.

Reading my father's words reminds me of how clearly he sees God's mercy from the confines of prison. I pray daily that we will soon be reunited, and that I may learn from his absolute trust in divine providence as he faces trials and persecution. I hope, too, that those who enjoy freedom will use it as well as he is using his captivity.

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