

'Underground' bishop taken away as Vatican's China Commission meets

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HONG KONG (UCAN) -- Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding, 74, was taken from his residence in Hebei province on March 30, the day the Vatican's Commission for the Catholic Church in China began its meeting in Rome.

China Church sources said five police officers took Bishop Jia, who is not affiliated with the government-approved "open" Church community, from Christ the King Cathedral in Wuqiu, a village near the provincial capital of Shijiazhuang.

The Vatican commission is holding its second plenary meeting from March 30 to April 1 in Rome. Pope Benedict XVI established it in 2007 to study issues related to the Church in China.

A Catholic source said provincial government officials in the Shijiazhuang area "wanted to meet Bishop Jia, and the prelate would be away for a few days."

Several sources said they believe the action is related to a recent move toward reconciliation between the "underground" and open Church communities in the diocese.

Late last year, Bishop Paul Jiang Taoran of Shijiazhuang, who had been ordained a bishop without papal approval, reconciled with the Holy See and now accepts Bishop Jia's leadership as head of the diocese.

Sources said the government rejects "external interference" in China Church affairs and insists that unity in the Church here should be achieved under the government's guidance and instruction.

They added that the government plans to have a new bishop elected within six months and for the current two bishops to retire. However, Bishop Jia insists that only the pope has the authority to name bishops, they said.

Sources also quoted Bishop Jia as saying that he and the 150,000 Catholics of Zhengding diocese will continue following the Pope's call for unity between the open and underground Church communities, even if it means Bishop Jia will be jailed and suffer persecution again.

The prelate has vowed to follow the instructions the Pope gave in his 2007 letter to all Catholics in China, they said. One quoted the bishop as saying he is willing to suffer "imprisonment and sacrifice for good of the Church of Christ, for Zhengding diocese and for [his] Catholics and clergy."

Bishop Jia had anticipated he might be taken away any time around the China Church commission meeting, a source said.

Last year, authorities detained the elderly bishop from Aug. 14, the closing day of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, until Sept. 18, one day after the Paralympics Games ended, also in Beijing.

After his release, surveillance was relaxed for some time, but has been tightened since early March, the Church sources said.

The bishop was detained several times in the past.

Meanwhile, the vicar general and some priests of Zhengding diocese have been under 24-hour surveillance since Bishop Jia was taken away, sources said.