

China steps up pressure on new generation

BEIJING (CNS) — As China's veteran bishops die, the government appears to be stepping up pressure on the new generation of church leaders.

Many of the older bishops spent time in prison during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution and found the strength to resist government pressures once China began allowing Catholics to practice their faith in the early 1980s, said people familiar with the situation of the Catholic Church in China.

But the new generation of bishops — most of whom are in their late 30s and early 40s — find it more difficult to resist. Several young bishops indicated they realized the pressures they would face when they accepted the job, and at least one indicated that it was his way of bearing Jesus' cross.

Many of China's young bishops spent time studying and traveling abroad before their appointments; at least four have studied in the United States. The vice chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Anthony Liu Bainian, said the Chinese church has sent more than 30 bishops to European countries or South Korea to learn church administration.

Yet some report that after they have been named bishops their movements are restricted.

One bishop in his mid-30s indicated he could hardly leave his diocese since being consecrated, even though he is acknowledged by the government as well as the Holy See.

One young priest in another diocese said he was quite glad when his name — originally proposed as a candidate for bishop — was discarded, because that allowed him to pursue his academic research, for which he needed to travel.

Last September, Bishop Joseph Wu Qinjing of Zhouzhi, who was 38 at the time, was taken by force from his cathedral compound and held by government officials for

five days. The bishop, who is approved by the Holy See but is only acknowledged as a priest by the government, suffered a concussion when he resisted the officials as he was shoved into the car. During his captivity, he was forced to sign papers saying he would not function as a bishop.

Bishop Wu had been secretly ordained the sixth bishop of Zhouzhi. He made his episcopal status known to all his priests May 22, just three days before Bishop Anthony Li Du'an of Xi'an died of liver cancer. Bishop Li served as administrator of Zhouzhi after the death of the previous bishop in 2004.

The Chinese government said Bishop Wu's management of the diocese and his presiding over church activities as bishop violated the Chinese government's religious affairs regulations. Several times officials have taken him for questioning and to attend classes on the regulations that took effect in 2005. At times he has reported being under house arrest.

Earlier this year, a Chinese new year greeting — purportedly from the young bishop — went out to all parishes in the Zhouzhi Diocese, and inside was a letter very critical of the government, falsely attributed to the bishop. Bishop Wu denied any involvement and went to the police right away to say he did not write the letter.

One source said the incident illustrated the continued strain and pressure from the government the young bishop faces.

The pressure is not just restricted to bishops appointed by the Holy See. Media reports last fall indicated some young bishops already recognized by both the Holy See and religious authorities in China were tricked into participating in the ordination of a new bishop not approved by authorities in Rome. Several of the ordaining bishops were invited to attend a meeting about church properties in one city and instead were driven to Xuzhou for the ordination. One young bishop called his secretary to come pick him up and managed to escape.