

Chinese officials monitor cathedral in effort to find Catholic bishop

BEIJING – Government officials continued ongoing surveillance of the Cangzhou cathedral because Bishop Joseph Li Liangui did not show up for the Eighth National Congress of Catholic Representatives in Beijing.

The Asian church news agency UCA News reported Dec. 8 that police cars were patrolling the vicinity of the cathedral and diocesan compound in Xianxian. Movements of all personnel in the cathedral compound were restricted, and even nuns were forced to show identity cards when leaving the compound, UCA News reported.

The Dec. 7-9 Congress was expected to elect new leaders for the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, amend the constitutions of the two bodies and listen to church reports and speeches by government officials.

Pope Benedict XVI has said the patriotic association and the bishops' conference, whose statutes promote "the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the church," are not in line with church doctrine.

However, in a 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics, he also recognized the difficult situation of bishops and priests under pressure from the government and said the Holy See "leaves the decision to the individual bishop," having consulted his priests, "to weigh ... and to evaluate the possible consequences" of dealing with government pressures in each given situation.

UCA News reported that in the days before the Congress, clergy in Hebei province – which surrounds Beijing and has been a stronghold of Catholic communities that have not registered with the government – reported increased pressure to attend the congress.

Bishop Li has been missing since his appearance at an illicit episcopal ordination in

Chengde Nov. 20. Some diocesan priests believed he was detained or unwilling to face priests and faithful.

However, on Dec. 6, dozens of religious officials and police officers went to the cathedral in Cangzhou and gave local priests an “ultimatum” to hand over the bishop, UCA News reported.

The diocesan vicar general, chancellor and two other priests who work at the bishop’s house were taken away and questioned for information on Bishop Li’s whereabouts. They were warned that if the bishop could not be found his family and the diocese would face trouble.

The following day, officials even entered the bishop’s house to question everybody, including the doorkeepers and kitchen staff.

Also Dec. 6, government officials forcibly removed Bishop Peter Feng Xinmao of Hengshui from his house to escort him to Beijing. UCA News reported that when police officers and government officials tried to break into the bishop’s house, there were physical conflicts with the nuns and laypeople guarding the building.

“The very crackdown and re-instigation of repressive tactics against the church and the bishops in China testifies to the enduring fidelity of the China church – especially the so-called ‘official’ (registered) Catholic communities,” said Maryknoll Sister Janet Carroll, who founded and led the U.S. Catholic China Bureau for 20 years and continues to work with Chinese priests and nuns who travel to the United States to study.

“They truly need our prayer and understanding – not a rush to judgment and condemnation. They also need our prayer for their safety and well-being – as there is also the anxiety that something terrible can happen, just due to human negligence,” she told Catholic News Service, giving the example of a “security guard thinking he can score points for himself by a violent attack on a person in his custody.”

UCA News reported that a Chinese Catholic website on the mainland indicated 314 Catholic representatives attended the congress, including 45 bishops. Church sources confirmed to UCA News that Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi of

Shanghai was among those who attended.

Before the meeting, some people speculated that Bishop Xing, who is known for his strict adherence to church principles, would not attend.

The Beijing congress follows controversy surrounding the November illicit ordination of Father Joseph Guo Jincai – the first bishop ordained without papal approval in four years. The Vatican called government pressure on other bishops to participate in the ceremony a “grave violation of freedom of religion and conscience.”

Belgian Missionhurst Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, who directs the Verbiest Institute at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and is one of the most authoritative experts on Catholicism in China, said in a recent newsletter that many people thought the government needed Father Guo as a bishop so he could be elected to an import position during the congress of Catholic delegates.

“I am his former teacher,” Father Heyndrickx wrote. “I trust him and I know that he has tried hard to avoid this.”

Speaking of the pressure on Chinese church leaders, Father Heyndrickx said: “Eight bishops, all appointed by Rome, were picked up from their home against their will. They were isolated, their mobile phones were taken away, they were put in a car and brought to the old mission of Pingquan. There they were ordered to preside at the illegitimate bishop’s ordination in front of communist leaders and a small local community of faithful. These are the facts and what is worse, China undertook this action precisely on the day when Pope Benedict XVI was meeting in Rome with about 120 cardinals. The whole Catholic world was shocked and upset.”

He referred to bishops as “the prophets of the church in China today” because they “are carrying on with great patience and suffering. We admire them. Their goal is to have only one church in China; no more the ‘unofficial’ (underground) church community, nor the ‘official’ (patriotic) church community, but simply the Catholic Church in China.”