

# Chinese priest held since April released, urged to join 'open' church

BEIJING - A young priest in northern Hebei province was released to his hometown after more than three months in detention, church sources said.

Father Joseph Chen Hailong of Xuanhua, who has served in the Yanqin parish on the outskirts of Beijing since his ordination in 2009, had been detained since he was seized by plainclothes police April 9, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

In recent years, government officials in the Zhangjiakou area have cracked down on priests who are not affiliated with the government-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

Two young Catholics who were taken away with Father Chen were released two days later.

Local church sources said authorities held Father Chen to question him about the whereabouts of Bishop Thomas Zhao Kexun of Xuanhua, who is in hiding from the government.

Chinese officials do not recognize the Xuanhua Diocese. Bishop Zhao, who is in his 80s, has headed the diocese since 2007 but has remained underground throughout much of his tenure.

Father Chen was held in isolation for nearly two months, during which time he suffered malnutrition, sources told UCA News.

They added that the priest's spirit nearly broke during his detention. To dispel loneliness and hunger, Father Chen drew the Eucharist on the wall of his room in a guesthouse and adored the Blessed Sacrament, the sources said.

In addition to questions about the whereabouts of Bishop Zhao, authorities also repeatedly urged Father Chen to accept the principle of a church independent from Rome, to receive a “priest card” issued by the “open” church known as the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and concelebrate Mass with other priests who are part of the officially recognized church.

Father Chen repeatedly refused the demands, the sources said, and he was later taken to meet a former underground bishop who has since joined the officially recognized church. The unidentified prelate, who has received government recognition, tried to persuade the priest to accept the officials’ demands, the sources said.

Authorities finally released Father Chen July 23.

Meanwhile, the whereabouts of three other priests from Xuanhua – Fathers Cui Tai, Yan Zongzhi and Simon Zhang Jianlin – who were taken into custody by authorities June 22, remain unknown.