

Police take Chinese bishop as China church commission meets in Rome

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

Chinese church sources told the Asian church news agency UCA News that five police officers took Bishop Jia, who has not registered with the government, from Christ the King Cathedral in Wuqiu, a village near the provincial capital of Shijiazhuang.

The Vatican commission was holding its second plenary meeting March 30-April 1 in Rome. Pope Benedict XVI established it in 2007 to study issues related to the Catholic 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 diocese’s two Catholic communities: those registered with the government and those not registered.

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. The Shijiazhuang Diocese, created by the Chinese government in the 20th century, includes the Vatican-established dioceses of Zhengding and Chengting.

Sources said the government rejects “external interference” in church affairs and insists that unity in the church 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 two current bishops to retire.

Sources quoted Bishop Jia as saying that he and the 150,000 Catholics of the Zhengding Diocese will continue following the papal call for unity between the church communities, even if it means he will be jailed and suffer persecution again. Bishop Jia was detained several times in the past.

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

Last year, authorities detained the elderly bishop from Aug. 24, the closing day of the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, until Sept. 18, one day after the Beijing Paralympics Games ended, so he could not meet with international visitors. Hebei province borders the municipality of Beijing.

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

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