

Priest, nun found murdered in Inner Mongolia; police search for layman

WUHAI, China - The vicar general of Ningxia Diocese and a nun co-worker were murdered in their rooms at a church-run home for the aged where they worked in Wuhai, Inner Mongolia.

The Asian church news agency UCA News reported that Father Joseph Zhang Shulai and Sister Mary Wei Yanhui, director of the home, were found stabbed to death after they failed to appear for early morning Mass July 6.

Police sealed off the crime scene and, after door-to-door inquiries, were looking for a Catholic layman suspected in connection with the killings, church sources told UCA News.

A Catholic neighbor said he was shocked to hear the news about “the nice priest who cared so much for his parishioners.”

Father Zhang and the diocesan administrator have handled local church affairs for several years since the retirement of Bishop Joseph Ma Zhongmu, 92. Bishop Ma was recently hospitalized with breathing and heart complications. He has not been informed of the deaths, for fear that it might worsen his condition, sources told UCA News.

The Catholic community in Wuhai was shocked by the news.

“Our numbers are small here. The incident would only make nonbelievers hesitate to come to the church,” one Catholic said.

The Ningxia Diocese has not registered with the Chinese government.

Bishop Matthias Du Jiang of Bameng, the government-approved diocese that covers Wuhai, was in Shanghai at the time of the murder but was staying in contact with

local police.

Some Chinese Catholic communities have registered with the government - and therefore operate under certain government-imposed limits - and some Catholic communities practice the faith in a more clandestine fashion. In some parts of China, such as Wuhai, both communities operate in the same area.

Pope Benedict XVI and a special Vatican commission have worked to promote unity between the registered and clandestine Catholic communities.