



## NEWS RELEASE

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### Hebei underground Catholic priest arrested

**A group of law enforcement officers stopped Fr. Song Wanjun of the clergy of Xiwanzi, while driving his car at 4 in the morning. Place of detention unknown. The Northern Province, stronghold of Catholic China, still targeted by the authorities.**

**AsiaNews August 10, 2013**



Beijing (AsiaNews) - A group of police officers from Qiaodong District, in the northern province of Hebei, have arrested and taken to an unknown location an underground priest of the diocese of Xiwanzi, Fr. Song Wanjun. The priest had already risked arrest some time ago, but had managed to escape. He was stopped and detained by 10 law enforcement officers at 4 in the morning of August 7 last while he was driving his car.

Fr. Song Wanjun, 39, was ordained a priest 11 years ago. He carried out his pastoral mission for years in Zhangbei county before being assigned to Chongli county. The news of his arrest was confirmed by the Joseph Cardinal Kung Foundation, based in the United States.

The Diocese of Xiwanzi is located in the northern part of the province. In recent years, the Chinese government has clamped down harshly on the local underground Church: many priests and bishops were imprisoned, placed under house arrest or forced to undergo "study sessions" to convince them to join the Patriotic Association, a government organization that Benedict XVI described in his letter to the Chinese Church as "incompatible" with Catholic doctrine.

In recent years other arrests of clergy include Msgr. Yao Ling, who has since died, Fr. Li Huisheng, sentenced to 7 years, Fr. Wang Zhong, sentenced to 3 years. Two underground

bishops from Hebei province were also arrested several years ago, whose fate remains a mystery. The first is Msgr. James Su Zhimin, almost 82 year, bishop of Baoding (Hebei), arrested by the police on October 8, 1997. The charges against him, whether he was given a trial or where he is being held remain unknown.

In November 2003, he was located by chance while receiving hospital care in Baoding, but he was surrounded by police. After a brief and hurried visit from relatives, he once again disappeared in police custody. The second is Msgr. Cosma Shi Enxiang, 92 years old, bishop of Yixian (Hebei), arrested on 13 April 2001. All traces of his wellbeing or whereabouts have been lost, despite the constant pleas of his relatives and faithful to the authorities for the smallest amount of information. Some time ago AsiaNews launched a campaign for their release.

Hebei is one of the strongholds of the Catholic China: the diocese of Baoding alone, one of the largest and with a strong presence of underground Catholics, has at least 50 thousand Catholics. There are 120 priests, official and underground. For several years the government has launched a campaign to force Hebei priests and bishops of the underground community to officially register, along with their inscription as members of the Patriotic Association.

According to AsiaNews sources, over the past 20 years at least 20 Catholic priests of the underground area of Zhangjiakou (Hebei), in the diocese of Xuanhua and Xiwanzi, have been tortured and suffered tremendous pressure join the Patriotic Association (PA) , controlled by the Communist Party of China.