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Seven Chinese priests forced from parishes following illicit ordination

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HARBIN, China -- Chinese government officials have forced seven priests in Heilongjiang province who resisted the illicit episcopal ordination of Father Joseph Yue Fusheng of Harbin to leave their parishes, local Catholic Church sources said.

The action was taken, the sources said, to force the priests to "repent for their wrongdoing," reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

The priests are either staying with parishioners, returned to their hometowns or have fled to other provinces, according to the sources.

Prior to the July 6 ordination, religious officials within the Chinese government warned that disobedient priests would face dire consequences. In recent weeks, they ordered priests with "dissatisfactory performances" to take three months of leave for self-examination, sources said.

The seven priests were either absent from the ordination or openly expressed their opposition to Father Yue, who did not receive a papal mandate and is seen as being too close to the government.

The Vatican declared that Father Yue incurred automatic excommunication for participating in the illicit ceremony. Despite the action, he continues to celebrate Mass in bishop's garb.

Since the ordination, according to the sources, some priests are avoiding concelebrating Mass with Father Yue, while the number of Massgoers at the Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Harbin -- the so-called cathedral -- has dropped significantly.

The government is requiring the priests to submit a letter of repentance to Father Yue and concelebrate Mass with him within three months or face expulsion from the church in Harbin, the sources said.

One of the priests already has concelebrated Mass with Father Yue at the consecration July 16 of a new church in Bei'an, in Heilongjiang province.

Meanwhile, Bishop Joseph Wei Jingyi of Qiqihar in northeastern China, who is not recognized by the government, said he expects political pressure on the unregistered Catholic community in Heilongjiang to increase.

"In past decades, the unregistered community in Hebei province has been a major target of suppression. After Bishop Paul Meng Qinglu of Hohhot was ordained in 2010, the unregistered community in Inner Mongolia suffered a strong blow last year. We can anticipate Heilongjiang would be the next after Father Yue's ordination," he told UCA News.

The only Catholic church in Ordos, in China's autonomous region of Inner Mongolia, was destroyed June 7, 2010, and the priest and a lay leader were detained by police.

Although local Catholics clearly know church principles, church sources said, they are concerned that religious life would be negatively affected by any government incursion.

Several Catholics also expressed disappointment that Father Yue had taken no action to protect the priests.

Father Yue could not be reached for comment.

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