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Catholics in China's Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region have called on fellow believers to pray for them today, the World Day of Prayer for the Church in China.

The Asian Church news agency UCA News reported that sources told them the Catholic community in the region has faced a series of suppressive acts by authorities aimed at forcing clergy from the clandestine, or underground, Catholic community to join the government-sanctioned Catholic Patriotic Association.

"It is very likely that the faithful have to quietly pass Pentecost this Sunday, one of the four major church feasts widely celebrated in China, as they did so at Easter," a source told UCA News.

To avoid arrest, underground priests remain in hiding and cannot carry out normal pastoral work because they have refused to support the patriotic association, the source said.

Fr Joseph Gao Jiangping, an underground diocesan administrator, has been confined in isolation at a detention centre in Hohhot since he was taken into custody on February 15. Church sources said the priest, in his 40s, is in poor physical condition because of torture and continuous interrogation.

Local officials may continue his detention without charge, “worrying that his influence among local Catholics would be enlarged, or they would incur international criticism if he is sentenced,” one source said. “On the other hand, if he is released, it would affect expansion of the official Church community.”

Meanwhile, the government-sanctioned church is gradually taking over large churches previously administered by underground priests.

One source said a newly built Gothic church was taken over by a government-approved priest from neighboring Baotou diocese, while its pastor was forced “to leave and disappear under government pressure”.

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