

## **Universal Day of Prayer for the Church in China**

by Susan Brinkmann, OCDS

Staff Writer

(April 28, 2008) Imprisoned Christians being tortured with cattle prods and forced to work 10 to 12 hours a day making soccer balls for the Olympic Games are only a few of the horror stories emerging from China as the opening of the Summer Games draws near. For this reason, Pope Benedict XVI has named May 24, the Feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, as a Universal Day of Prayer for the Church in China.

While most of the world's attention has been focused on the Chinese persecution of Tibetans, the on-going oppression of Christians in that country is also on the rise. Various international aid organizations are reporting increased numbers of Christians who have been arrested, beaten, tortured or told to leave the city before the games begin.

According to John Whitehead, president of *The Rutherford Institute*, although China is officially an atheist country, the government says it allows religious freedom but only if it is exercised within the walls of state churches.

“What this merging of church and state means is that the government dictates religion,” Whitehead writes.

Because Christians don't like this, a growing number of underground house churches have sprung up, attended by anywhere from 50 to 100 million believers. The government considers these churches to be illegal, which is why so many church leaders have been “visited” and asked to leave the city before the games.

“Chinese authorities routinely swoop into home churches, dragging worshipers out in the streets in some instances and beating them. Some have even been killed,” Whitehead writes.

Scores of priests and bishops are being detained at any given moment in this country. Many of them have either died in custody or have simply disappeared without a trace.

As recently as 2006, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun of Hong Kong confirmed that Catholics in China, whether they are members of the underground Church, affiliated with the Vatican, or of the official government-sanctioned China Catholic Patriotic Association, still face daily persecution.

These churches are constantly supervised by the government, which means they are not necessarily controlled by bishops but rather by select lay people who are used as “instruments of the government” within the congregations, Cardinal Zen said.

“The Communist Regime is afraid of any contact that is not under their control,” he said.

The government has stepped up its abuse of Christians in the last year and the number of horror

stories mounts daily.

For example, Liu Huiwen, a Chinese Christian, was arrested last year for distributing “Christian literature” to Muslims in the Gansu province. Huiwen was reportedly severely beaten before his arrest and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Pastor Cai Zhuohua was imprisoned for three years for “illegally printing” Christian literature. He was tortured with a cattle prod, held in a cold and cramped cell with 27 other prisoners and forced to make soccer balls for 10-12 hours a day for the Olympic Games.

Yianan Zhang, a Chinese Christian church leader, was sentenced to two years of “reeducation through labor” for “subverting the national government” after his prayer journal was discovered by officials.

“These are not isolated incidents,” Whitehead writes. “When it comes to dealing with dissidents, whether political or religious, Chinese officials seem to consider torture part of the routine. This is graphically illustrated in a series of disturbing photographs, smuggled out of the country . . . These photos depict Chinese policemen, hoping for a promotion, who allowed themselves to be photographed torturing Christians.”

One photo shows a Chinese policeman standing over a Christian woman who has been forced to kneel on a brick. The policeman is gripping the back of her head with one hand and applying an electric cattle prod to her cheek. Great pain is evidenced on her face.

Another photo shows a shirtless man lying on the floor while a policeman digs his boot heels into the prisoner's arms, forcing him to wince and open his mouth. The next photo reveals three policemen forcing water into the man's mouth in an attempt to swell his stomach. Again, the pain is evident.

While the persecution of Tibetans has been the main focus of news stories about religious persecution, little is said about the on-going persecution of Christians in that country.

“ . . . (I)t is on par with, if not worse than, the harsh and oppressive treatment of demonstrators in Tibet that has received widespread news coverage and caused public outrage. And it's been happening for years,” Whitehead said.

“The 2008 Olympic Games were awarded to China in July 2001, with the expectation that the Games would act as a catalyst for the improvement of human rights in China and cause China to change its image,” Whitehead writes.

This hasn't happened, and Whitehead is calling on all American Christians - from the President to the corporate sponsors - to pay attention to these atrocities.

“It's time that Christians in America gain a moral backbone and fight for their fellow Christians.”

In his 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics, Pope Benedict XVI named May 24, the Feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, as a Universal Day of Prayer for the Church in China. On this feast, which is held in particular esteem by Chinese Catholics, the Pope is asking all the faithful to join their hearts in prayer for an in praying on this day for our brothers and sisters in China.

© All Rights Reserved, Living His Life Abundantly/Women of Grace.

<http://www.womenofgrace.com>