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Interview with a Chinese believer who fled from China, currently residing in the Netherlands, and still fears for her life

HRWF (28.02.2019) - Zhao Y, whose full name is withheld for security reasons, was forced to leave China because of her Catholic faith. As she sought refuge in Switzerland, she found a new spiritual home in The Church of Almighty God.

Zhao Y was denied asylum in Switzerland and lives in constant fear of her life if forced to return to China. Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l interviewed her.

HRWF: Ms Zhao, it's not easy to leave your home and family behind. What prompted you to make this difficult decision and come to Europe?

Ms Zhao: I became a Catholic in October 2011, and since that time I have suffered threats to my life because of my belief. I was not arrested or imprisoned myself, but after my mother was arrested my family was put under surveillance by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). I was forced to leave my home and to go into hiding. In January 2016, Li, a faith sister, was arrested and so heavily tortured that she gave my name to the police. Afterwards, the police went to my home several times to look for me. There was no other option for me to flee from China.

HRWF: In China, how free were you to practice your faith publicly?

Ms Zhao: Before my mother was arrested, we attended mass twice a week in a private home. A priest could only be present for one of the weekly meetings because the situation was too dangerous to attend more often. Other meetings were run by a "godmother". We sang songs quietly, read the Bible, and prayed for people who had difficulties.

HRWF: Can you tell more about the circumstances surrounding your mother's arrest?

Ms Zhao: My mother was arrested in May 2015 and detained for fifteen days. During her time in custody, she was severely tortured and forced to sign three letters to recant her faith (Letter of Guarantee, Letter of Penance and Letter of Rupture). She was released only after my uncle bribed a police officer with money and gifts.

However, her freedom is an illusion. My family is still being under surveillance and she is shunned by our neighbors. While I still lived at home, the village cadre came to my house every few days to see if my mother went outside to worship. Our neighbors did not dare visit her and pushed us to give up our beliefs. The village cadre also let it be known

everywhere that our family believe in God. So, we often suffered from discrimination, ridicule, and depreciation from our neighbors and some of our relatives.

Later on, I was forced to leave home and stayed at my church member's house and lived a dark life. Every day, I stayed in a small room without opening the window. When I heard footsteps or a police car, I was filled with fear and had nightmares almost every night. I couldn't go back home, but I couldn't leave the house.

HRWF: That sounds like quite the ordeal. What did you do to make it through that difficult time?

Ms Zhao: When I think back to that period of life, without God's companionship, protection, and the strength God gave to me, I really couldn't have survived in such conditions. I never knew what would happen the next day. I lived in fear and suffered mental torture every day. Then, through the grace of God, I fled to this free and democratic country, fortunately.

HRWF: Is anyone else in your family a Catholic, and, if so, have they ever experienced any problems with the CCP?

Ms Zhao: My brother was a Catholic for a time, but he gave up his faith because of the acute persecution from the CCP against Christians and he was afraid of losing his job. However, he still supported my mother and me in our belief. Sometimes he listened to us talk about our religion and he believes in the existence of God.

My auntie was arrested in 2012 for preaching the gospel; she was reported by someone. She was detained for approximately a month and only released because her husband paid a lot of money for her release. But after her release the police still controlled her; they pushed my uncle to make her stop believing in God and even threatened him with the future of their son. So my auntie was persecuted by her own husband, and he even used violence to make her stop believing. He kept her under surveillance, restrained her with an iron chain, and didn't let her leave the house. My uncle also threatened to report all the Catholics he knew if she was found to still believe in God. Hence, my auntie lost all her freedom.

HRWF: Did anyone else in your religious community face persecution from the police?

Ms Zhao: Yes. One day in May 2015, one of my church members was reported by a neighbor when she attended mass. She was detained for approximately fifteen days and tortured severely by the CCP. During her detention, the Chinese police made threats against her family members' livelihoods if she didn't release the names of other church members. They told her they would monitor all her movements and she was not allowed to sleep.

Furthermore, in January 2016, another church member, Li, was reported when she attended mass and was arrested. After enduring half-a-month of torture, Li was exhausted. Because the police couldn't get any more information out of her, they threatened on her five-year old grandchild, saying that if she didn't cooperate the CCP would ensure the child would bear the burden of his family's crimes and live with constant bullying. Due to this threat, Li betrayed me.

HRWF: Is there anything else you want to share about the pressure you felt to renounce your faith?

Ms Zhao:Yes. Because the CCP is an atheistic party, I was educated with atheism since I was young. The CCP lavishly promotes atheism on television, in newspapers, and via other media outlets. It condemns Christianity, Catholicism, and other religious beliefs as superstition. To believe in God in China means you not only face arrest and persecution, but also discrimination from others.

HRWF: How did you come to join The Church of Almighty God?

Ms Zhao: In April 2016, I escaped to Switzerland to ask for asylum. In July of the same year, I met sister Si Ma, a Christian of the Church of Almighty God in Switzerland. She told me about The Church of Almighty God. Over a period of four months, I researched and read a lot about the teachings of the church and I officially became a member of The Church of Almighty God in December 2016.

HRWF: Your asylum claim in Switzerland was rejected. Do you still fear for your life if you are sent back to China?

Ms Zhao:My experience in Switzerland has brought me to live in fear again. My asylum application was rejected by the Swiss government. Even worse, some Christians were repatriated to China. I am scared I will also be also repatriated, and then I will be arrested by the CCP, tortured, and sentenced.

Recently, I saw a report about my fellow-Christian, Wang X. I knew her when I was in Switzerland. She was arrested by the CCP after she was deported back to China by the Swiss government. She was sentenced to three and a half years in the name of "participating in cult activities". I am now more worried than ever about my situation.

I have submitted the asylum application in the Netherlands, but I don't know what the result will be. I hope it will be a good decision.

Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF) recommends that the Dutch authorities grant Ms Zhao Y. political asylum. HRWF is in possession of the details of her case (full name, date and place of birth, certificate of membership of The Church of Almighty God, composition of her family, dates and places of incidents, etc.) and can help the Dutch authorities dealing with applications for political asylum.

Interview taken by Elisa Van Ruiten with a translator Chinese-English.