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“Searching for the Narrow Door”

11th European Catholic China Colloquium deals with the situation of young people in China

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Prof. He Guanghu talking to young people at the 11th European Catholic China Colloquium.
Photo: China-Zentrum.

More than 100 participants from 13 countries and regions met from 22–25 August 2024 in the Catholic-Social Institute in Siegburg/Germany, to discuss the future of the Church in China. Chinese persons from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong formed half the participants – including priests and religious, as well as Christian lay persons, of whom many currently live in Europe as students or pastors. Contributing to the diversity of the dialogue was the fact that the participants belonged to different Christian denominations. Speakers at the conference included among others Cardinal Stephen Chow SJ of Hong Kong and Msgr. Mirosław Wachowski, Undersecretary for Relations with States in the Secretariat of State of the Holy See. Cologne Cardinal Rainer Maria Woelki celebrated Holy Mass with the conference participants. The 11th European Catholic China Colloquium was organised by the China-Zentrum in St. Augustin.

How are young people in China, in society as well as in the Church? Their concerns and wishes are often more similar to those of young people elsewhere in the world than to those of older generations in China, according to several conference contributions. Since the pandemic, many young persons feel exhausted, depressed and disoriented. At the same time they are worried about not finding work. Unlike their parents' generation, they no longer believe that they can achieve a constantly higher standard of living through their own efforts. Suicides among the young have increased. At the same time, more and more young people in China are refusing to meet the traditional expectations of their parents – marriage, family, career, property. In a world full of uncertainties, they are looking for the “narrow door” to their own, individual path in life – that is how a young Catholic woman from China described it. From Taiwan, Ms. Sun Shu-Kuan from the Youth Ministry Office of the Divine Word Missionaries in Chiayi reported that some young people have not wanted to take off their face masks since the pandemic and have retreated behind their mobile phones. At first, it is difficult to persuade them to build relationships and allow community.

While in Mainland China the government tries to keep young people away from religion and often prohibits the participation of minors in religious activities, the churches in Taiwan and Hong Kong have their own schools and universities and can offer a variety of youth programs. Fr. Robert Wong SVD, a student chaplain at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, said he moved his office to the lobby of a student dormitory to be closer to students. In Hong Kong, the number of young detainees has risen drastically since the major protests of 2019. The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong founded for them the project “Light up.” According to Cardinal Chow, the aim is to enable young people in prison to continue their studies, to prepare them for entry into working life and to support their reintegration into society. Hong Kong society needs reconciliation and healing, the Cardinal said. In addition, the massive emigration from Hong Kong is also noticeable in the parishes. Often, 40- to 45-year-old couples emigrate with their children, including many lay guides.

Bruno Lepeu MEP, a French priest working in Hong Kong, drew hopeful conclusions from his survey among young committed Catholics in Mainland China. While the Church in China is still very clerical, according to Lepeu's observation, young people want a fraternal Church in which they can actively participate. In this way the young renew the Church, said Lepeu. On the other hand, Chinese Catholic students in Europe experience the churches there ambivalently, as the Chinese Jesuit Ren Andao reported. On the one hand, they value the freedom and plurality of religious expressions, but on the other, they often feel that European churches are too institutionalized and that disputes between religious conservatives and progressives are “too political.”

The protection of children and adolescents from sexual abuse was also a topic at the conference. The Chinese priest Josef Gao presented his draft of a prevention concept for the Chinese Church, which he developed at the Catholic University of Applied Sciences of North Rhine-Westphalia in Cologne. It is true that no cases of abuse have been officially reported in the Chinese Church so far. But it must be prepared and act to protect children and prevent sexual abuse, Gao said.

Again and again during the conference, the pressure on the Christian churches in Mainland China by the very restrictive state religious policy was addressed. Catholic, Protestant and also the few Orthodox communities in the country are experiencing massive surveillance, ideological pressure, regimentation, restriction and sometimes even the prohibition of their work. However, the social anthropologist Mark McLeister of the University of Edinburgh was able to identify in his studies of Protestant churches in China that the official requirements at the local level are sometimes treated with a pragmatism that creates room for manoeuvre. In the city he examined, two pastors had even set up a small church group only for cadres and party members. Their existence is kept secret because members of the Communist Party in China are not allowed to participate in religious activities.

Theology must not remain silent about the suffering of the people, said the well-known researcher in Christianity He Guanghu, professor emeritus at Renmin University in Beijing. In view of wars and tensions in the world, he called on Chinese theologians to develop a comparative “theology of nations” and “theology of systems.” It is particularly necessary to analyse Chinese nationalism – he said – which has long been penetrated, supported, distorted and manipulated by an overpowering State (statism).

China and its Catholic community are particularly close to Pope Francis and the Holy See, assured Msgr. Wachowski, the last speaker of the Colloquium. For the future, he regarded the unity of the Catholic community in China and a good preparation of its bishops as the most important concerns, together with a good formation and training of the clergy, women religious and lay faithful.

The first European Catholic China Colloquium was held in Verona in 1992. Since then, these colloquia have been an important setting for the networking of people and institutions associated with the Christian churches in China.

China-Zentrum, 28 August 2024

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