

## Sacred art needs more attention in China



Teresa Bai (second left), Brother Peter Chen (second right) and two visitors of the sacred art exhibition. Organizers of an art exhibition at downtown Beijing's Immaculate Conception Cathedral say they hope the event, the first of its kind and one that attracted thousands of visitors, will spark greater interest in the creation of religious artwork and serve as a tool for evangelization.

More than 80 pieces were displayed inside the century-old Baroque cathedral from June 4 to 12, the work of 15 contributors comprising priests, nuns, seminarians and laypersons. The pieces included traditional Chinese paintings, oil paintings, works of calligraphy, sculptures and paper crafts.

Teresa Bai, an organizer of the exhibition, said thousands of local and foreign Catholics attending the Mass of Pentecost on June 12 stayed to view the artwork.

The Beijing diocese began its Year of Evangelization in April, she said, adding that “we believe sacred art can play a certain role in evangelization.”

Too few people in mainland China devote themselves to sacred art, Bai said.

“By organizing the exhibition we hope to attract more artists to create works rooted in Christian themes, as well as to provide a platform for encouraging more works by artists already engaged in this field.”

Brother Peter Chen, a student of traditional Chinese painting at the People's University of China in Beijing, had four artworks on display at Immaculate Conception. He characterized painting as a window on the Church and a tool for spreading the Good News.

“The exhibition provides an opportunity for artists to get together. However, I hope that we can form a group or association of Church artists and have a permanent exhibition venue,” he said.

Brother Chen described most Church artists in mainland China as amateurs lacking the proper environment to improve their skills because Church authorities have offered little support to the creation of sacred art.

He added, however, that this was not always the case. Church artists and students were active in creating Christian art in the early 20th century, but their efforts were disrupted by war and years of internal strife.

Brother Chen also noted that many elderly Chinese Catholics have yet to embrace the representation of Christian figures, such as Jesus and Mary, in ancient Chinese styles, though this was an important part of expressing Christian faith in Chinese form.

Encouraged by foreign visitors to the Immaculate Conception's exhibition, who showed marked interest in the Chinese paintings on display, Brother Chen said that "we will uplift our standard by making persistent efforts."

Father Paul, who attended the exhibition while visiting Beijing from northern China, said he experienced a special beauty and warm spiritual atmosphere from the artworks and regretted that more has not been done to support the production of Church art in China.

He said that he has met numerous self-taught Church artists who have had to abandon sacred works in favor of ones that were easier to sell.

"This pains me a lot. Can we do something together to help them?"

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