

Hong Kong symposium raises religious rights awareness

Organizers hope to raise concern on the state of religious freedom in China



Organizers of a two-part series of talks on the church in China hope the symposium motivates Catholics in Hong Kong to take a keen interest in religious persecution on the mainland.

About 40 people gathered in the Our Lady Seat of Wisdom Chapel at the University of Hong Kong on April 15 where retired Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun of Hong Kong said he believes Pope Francis understands the sufferings of the church in China, referring to the pope's 2014 homily in South Korea in which Francis said there were many martyrs in the modern church.

However, Cardinal Zen noted that some Vatican officials believe negotiation and compromise with the Chinese government will ease sufferings of the church in China.

"In fact, it is a mistake," he told the crowd.

Catholics in China "are not afraid of suffering, but fear the Vatican's ambiguous attitude," he said.

Cardinal Zen later told ucanews.com that Catholics needed to discern news coming out of China as some stories concerning the church may not be accurate.

Arthur Tsang Man-Hin, a student organizer from Hong Kong University, said the symposium was inspired in part by a December editorial in AsiaNews by Cardinal Zen that asked "What will 2016 bring to the church in mainland China?"

"We hoped the event would give young Catholics here more information about the church in China and transform their concern into prayers," he said.

Tsang said many young Catholics are satisfied participating in parish activities but not engaging in issues on social justice and religious freedom. The symposium aimed to change that prevailing attitude, he said.

"The issues of the church in China are not just social affairs, but also concern the persecution of our own religion," Tsang said.

Cardinal Zen opened the April 15 meeting by lighting a paschal candle that was used to light candles held by participants.

An April 8 gathering, held at the City University of Hong Kong, featured Anthony Lam Sui-ki, senior researcher at the Hong Kong diocesan Holy Spirit Study Centre and Paris Foreign Missions Father Bruno Lepeu.

Catholic student groups from City University and the University of Hong Kong organized the event.

Father Lepeu congratulated organizers, saying events like these will help foster a better understanding of the plight of Catholics in China.

Paul Li, 22, a Beijing youth studying in Hong Kong, said he had strong concerns about the future of religious freedom in China, as the government of President Xi Jinping has sought to exert strict controls on faith groups and social organizations.

"We certainly hope the situation will improve in the future. But it is hard to be optimistic now, and to willfully wish there is exception on religious matters," Li said.

Li, who studies politics, said he believes that while concessions are important to any negotiation, "there is always a bottom line one should not cross."

"The boundaries of right and wrong could not be blurred. The principles should be set, so that the blood of predecessors will not bleed in vain," he said.

Or Yan Yan, project officer for the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission of Hong Kong, said Catholics in Hong Kong should treasure their religious freedom, and support religious freedom in mainland China.

"Some Chinese Catholics once told me, that they were encouraged to see the support of Catholics in Hong Kong," she said.

She also encouraged young Catholics to frequently visit China and see the situation of the local church for themselves.

ucanews.com reporter, Hong Kong