

In the Tent of Meeting: Conference on Inculturation of Catholicism in China (天主教在中国的本地化) Held in Jilin

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Participants of the Conference on Inculturation of Catholicism in China. Photo: Jilin Seminary.

The conference was held from June 21–22, 2018 at the Seminarium Catholicum Chilinen-sis (吉林天主教神哲学院) in Jilin City of Jilin Province, organized by the Seminary and co-sponsored by Fu Jen Academia Catholica (辅仁大学天主教学术研究院) of Fu Jen Catholic University in Taipei. This was also the closing event to mark the celebration of the 30th anniversary of the seminary's re-opening (1987). Given the actual circumstances in China, that a seminary could successfully organize a conference on such a scale, with concrete co-operation crossing the boundaries of the Mainland, is something rather rare, if not entirely unparalleled. As a matter of fact, this was actually the second time that the two institutions joined forces for such an event. The first time a similarly organized con-

ference was held from June 15–16, 2015 on the theme of Cross-cultural Scholasticism (跨文化的士林哲学), held also in Jilin.

The presentations of papers and discussions were divided into three sessions, featuring a total of four speakers from the seminary and six from Taiwan. Each speaker, with the exception of one special report, was given 20 minutes for the presentation and at the end of each session, a 30-minute discussion was held with the possibility of raising questions to all the speakers for that session.

The conference was opened with a welcoming remark from the rector of the Seminary, Fr. Qian Li 钱利, followed by brief speeches from Fr. Zhu Changyou 朱长友, general administrator of Jilin Diocese, and Dr. Jiang Hansheng 江汉声, president of Fu Jen University. The first session featured three scholars: Fr. Niu Zhixiong 牛稚雄, a professor of Bible at the seminary, presented a paper on the theme of Sabbath, titled “The Holy Time: Past and Present Understanding of Sabbatical Spirit” (神圣的时间—安息精神的古今认识), examining the provenance of the important biblical concept Sabbath as well as its important significance both then and now, with a particular attention to the Chinese situations. Prof. Chen Deguang 陈德光, director of the Center for Scholasticism at Fu Jen, offered a synthesis of some important Chinese (primarily from Taiwan) scholars’ contributions to theological inculturation, with a paper titled “Chinese Inculturation of Theology: a Scholastic Approach in Taiwan” (中国神学本位化: 台湾士林学派观点); Prof. Chen Fangzhong 陈方中 of Fu Jen gave a very intriguing account and analysis of the so-called Tianjin Movement under the influence of the famed missionary Fr. Frédéric Vincent Lebbe (Lei Mingyuan 雷鸣远), a summary of his paper “Tianjin Movement: Its Critical Importance in the Catholic Inculturation Movement at the Beginning of the Republic Era” (天津运动—民初天主教本地化运动的重要关键).

The afternoon session saw three presentations. Mr. Li Jianqiu 黎建秋, president emeritus of Fu Jen University, in his presentation called “Contemporary Challenges Facing Moral Theology” (伦理神学在当代的挑战) provided an insightful overview of the current challenges facing Catholic ethics today, especially in the bio-ethics areas, encouraging the Catholic Church to pay more attention and effort to education and research in the area of modern technologies. Fr. Gong Gaode 宫高德, assistant professor of Jingyi University (Jingyi daxue 静宜大学) of Taiwan, focused on the pastoral approaches of Gregory the Great and its modern implications in his paper “Inspirations for the Modern Church in Saint Gregory the Great’s *Liber Regulae Pastoralis*” (圣教宗大国瑞的《牧灵指南》对现代教会的启示). Finally, Fr. Jia Shaoxian 贾少先, professor of dogmatic theology at Jilin Seminary, reflected on the theme of evangelization and dialogue with his paper “Mission and Interreligious Dialogue” (传教和宗教之间的对话).

On the second day, the third session began with Dr. Jiang Hansheng’s featured report “The Mission and the Future of a Chinese Catholic University Hospital” (一所华人天主教大学医院的使命和未来) in which the inception, preparation and establishment of the newly opened Fu Jen Catholic University Hospital was recounted. Particularly touching was his sharing of the vision of building “a hospital with a soul” (*yi suo you ling de yiyuan* 一所有灵魂的医院) that focuses on holistic care for all patients, so as to fully demonstrate the hospital’s Catholic characteristics and actualize its evangelical potentials. For

many it was truly an eye-opening and an inspiring experience in terms of how a Catholic institution could integrate new technologies and evangelical mission in its service to modern society.

Following this presentation, another triad of speakers spoke on different topics. Prof. He Jiarui 何家瑞, an associate fellow of Fu Jen Academia Catholica, presented a comparative study of different understandings of “truth” of two renowned philosophers, namely Jacques Maritain and John Dewey. In her paper “Truth and Education: A Comparative Study of Maritain and Dewey’s Concepts of ‘Truth’” (真理与教育: 马里旦与杜威之“真理”概念比较研究), Prof. He attempted a harmonization of their theories, which had been commonly understood as contradictory to each other. The second speaker was Fr. Gan Ruibin 甘瑞斌, director of the Spirituality Department (*lingxiubu zhuren* 灵修部主任) of Jilin Seminary, who, as a seasoned spiritual director and teacher, shared his thoughts on inculturation in the context of seminary formation and his paper was called “The Inculturation of Priestly Formation from the Perspective of the Implementation of Magisterial Teachings” (从教会训导的落实谈司铎培育的本位化). Finally, the rector of the Seminary, Fr. Qian Li, offered his reflections on the Church’s inculturation and seminary formation in China, in a summary of his paper entitled “Brief Reflections on the Church’s Inculturation and the Formation of Candidates for Priesthood in Seminaries in Mainland China: With Jilin Seminary as an Example” (浅谈教会本位化与大陆修院司铎候选人的培育—以吉林修院为例). In the end, the conference was concluded with a 45-minute general discussion where all ten speakers were invited on the stage to respond to various questions raised by the audience.

The conference, on the one hand, was by and large academic in its content, just like many other scholarly meetings; yet, on the other hand, it was also one of a kind in its own way. First of all, the seminarians took a vivid interest in the conference and raised many questions, some of which were rather challenging and thought provoking. In addition to being the questioners, two students’ choirs, as a prelude to the conference, performed two beautiful religious songs at the very beginning and set a prayerful and harmonious tone for this two-day event. Secondly, it felt very much like a familial celebration: Besides the faculty, staff and students from the seminary, in the audience there was also a large number of priests and religious sisters from the diocese, which constituted a large part of the 150 or so total number of participants present during the event.

Last but not least, this entire event was held in a large tent structure set up on an outdoor basketball court. In doing so, the organizers took full advantage of the beautiful scenic environment, refreshing summer climate as well as the smog-free fresh air, something not given nowadays in most parts of China. Of course, one important reason behind such an arrangement was the limitation of facilities and restraints of financial resources. One cannot help but give a thumbs-up to the creative genius of Jilin Seminary. Yet, given its obvious vulnerability against inclement weather, all were truly grateful that during these two days, in defiance of the weather forecast, no torrential storms, which had been a guaranteed daily visitor in the previous week, disturbed the peaceful proceeding of the event. More significantly, nothing could have been more fitting than a tent for a gathering held in the name of theological inculturation. As Fr. Qian Li had pointed out in his presentation,



The open atmosphere in the Tent of Meeting. Photo: Jilin Seminary.

the ultimate source, driving force and motivation for inculturation lies in the Incarnation of the Divine Word. The original Greek word used for this divine action is no other than *eskenosen*, literally meaning “to pitch a tent.” Indeed, the presence of something beautiful, sublime, harmonious in these two days was strongly felt by all flocked together under this Tent of Meeting – the Tabernacle, the Abode of the Divine.