

Christmas in China: without young people and under police supervision (I)

The growing tension created by the authorities does not stop Christians from preparing their church and heart for Christmas celebrations. Artistic representations, catechesis, visits to the sick, gifts and above all "to prepare a clean manger in our hearts for the coming of the Savior".

Rome (AsiaNews) - *This year's Christmas is different from that of the past because "the official authorities have created a growing political atmosphere of tension": this is what a Chinese priest told AsiaNews, telling how his community prepare for upcoming parties. The ban on young people under the age of 18 entering church; the prohibition of carrying out religious activities outside the registered buildings pushes Chinese Catholics to find new ways to celebrate Advent and Christmas, evangelizing and communicating the joy of the birth of the Redeemer to society. Here we present a first series of testimonials received from China these days. The ones we publish today all come from the north of the country.*



This year's Christmas is not like that in the past. The official authorities have created a growing political atmosphere of tension. To avoid unnecessary headaches, the parish abolished the Christmas Eve Play, turning it into a meeting of prayer and evangelization. Before the Eucharist on Christmas Eve, the parish provides each member of the faithful with a bowl of lamb soup with special sandwiches to brighten the atmosphere. Then we pray, we sing, we listen to the Word of God and then we celebrate the Eucharist of the night. Since the authorities do not allow children under the age of 18 to participate in the Eucharist, the parish provides them with a room in the courtyard of the church where they are entertained and cared for by supervisors. At the end of the Eucharist, the priest goes to bless them. The parish has also abolished the tradition of touring the village to distribute "peace fruit" [1](a package of apples) to non-Christians. Liturgical ceremonies take place on a regular basis, although the civil authorities send guards to supervise and monitor them. The baptism of children is shifted to Christmas Eve, while that of the adults is held in the morning mass on Christmas day.

Don Pietro

Here, the majority of the faithful are new and for various reasons do not attend church: some did not have a good catechumenate before baptism; others have asked for baptism without the right motivation, or have left because of secularization. For this reason, before Advent, for two weeks together with two community leaders I visited these families to exhort and encourage everyone to resume their life of faith.

During Advent, we again try to foster greater participation in the faithful: I pushed godparents or godmothers to go to the home of their godchildren to exhort them to come to church, to renew their repentance and to recite the Holy Rosary every day at home. This week we have already seen good results: a good number of faithful who rarely attend the church have come for confession.

Every evening the members of the choir gather to practice the Christmas and Epiphany songs. In the third week of Advent, every afternoon with the leaders of the community I visit the elderly and indisposed faithful who cannot come to church for Mass to listen to their confessions, bring them the Eucharist, administer the oil of the sick.

For the children of the parish, for the choir, the association of readers and altar boys, I prepared a small Christmas present.

These are some of the most important and significant initiatives. Furthermore, in the daily sermons and especially in the Sunday ones, I urge the faithful to prepare a clean cradle for the coming of the Savior in the heart.

Don Gioacchino

Every year after the third Sunday of Advent, the faithful begin the Christmas Novena to await the Savior in prayer. The parish priest invites two nuns to help the parish to prepare for Christmas. After the arrival of the sisters, with the help of the lay leader of the community, Christmas ceremonies are prepared and the church is decorated. December 24th is Christmas Eve: from 7am to 9am there is the Christmas Eve party with performances attended by the elderly, young people and children. There are songs, dances, recitations, dialogues for two and monologues accompanied by music, etc. in order to create the atmosphere of Christmas joy. At 11.30 at night, the Child Jesus is welcomed and the procession begins towards the church with the setting off of firecrackers and with the band in the front line, followed by the choir, the group of altar boys, the priest, the Infant Jesus, and finally by the faithful with candles in hand, while we play, sing and pray. After doing so the tour of the village you enter the church for the Eucharistic celebration. At 5 am on December 25, the dawn Mass is celebrated; and again at 9 am Christmas day.

Don Zhengping