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Pope's message for G7 forum in Pescara about the role of missionaries in Africa

HRWF with [Vatican News](#) (05.11.2024) - On 23 October, Pope Francis sent a message to a G7 event on the role of missionaries in Africa, encouraging participants to "persevere in promoting a culture of encounter."

The event was entitled "Education for development in Africa: The role of missions". It was organised as part of Italy's presidency of the G7, as one of a series of meetings from October 22-24 focusing on development.

In a letter sent to the Italian Foreign Minister, Antonio Tajani, the Pope said he hoped the meeting would "strengthen the values of solidarity and humanitarian commitment of those who have at heart the cause of the least."

The letter – signed by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Holy See's Secretary of State – also encouraged participants to "persevere in promoting a culture of encounter, open to respectful dialogue, as true witnesses of the living Gospel of charity."

The Pope's message was read by Davide Dionisi, the Italian government's Envoy for Religious Freedom, appointed in June 2023 by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani.

The Pope's message was followed by an address of Antonio Tajani and a round table featuring a number of Italian bishops, as well as Pakistan-born professor Shahid Mobeen and Fr. Ibrahim Faltas, the Vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land.

The round table was then completed by a number of testimonies from missionary organisations which carry out educational work in Africa.

The G7, or Group of Seven, is an international organisation bringing together seven of the world's most advanced economies. Italy holds the rotating presidency of the G7 for the year 2024, and the Pope has sent messages for multiple events that have taken place over the year so far. In June, he became the first Pope to address a G7 summit.

Scandal: Lists of Church of Almighty God asylum-seekers in Italy published in China!

A site likely connected with Chinese intelligence services publishes lists of refugees who have applied for asylum in Italy. How does it get them?

By Massimo Introvigne

[Bitter Winter](#) (07.10.2024) - [The Church of Almighty God](#) is, along with [Falun Gong](#), the most persecuted religious movement in China, as recognized by numerous documents from international organizations and national governments. I dedicated [a book published by Oxford University Press](#) to this Christian [new religious movement](#), to which I refer for more information.

Because of the persecution, torture, and extra-judicial killings to which members of the movement are subjected, those who can flee abroad and apply for asylum. Even abroad, however, they cannot feel safe. As reported in a film produced by "Bitter Winter," China's "[Long Arm of the Dragon](#)" spies on and harasses refugees abroad as well.

To several previous episodes is now added a very serious scandal that unfortunately concerns the country where "Bitter Winter" is published, Italy.

Since 2017, a website called [大爱网](#) (Da Ai Wang) has been operating in China. It has been involved in attacking [The Church of Almighty God](#), [Falun Gong](#), Jehovah's Witnesses, and occasionally other groups blacklisted and persecuted in China. Chinese laws stipulate that any site dealing with religion must be authorized by the government and operate in cooperation with government agencies responsible for overseeing religions. So any Chinese site dealing with these matters is by definition connected to the government. Da Ai Wang is worse, though. It regularly posts texts against religious minorities (and against "Bitter Winter") widely believed to be produced by Chinese intelligence services. That Dai Ai Wang is one among several propaganda and disinformation sites run by the Chinese services is thus more than a guess.

Since 2022, Da Ai Wang has published lists of members of [The Church of Almighty God](#) who have applied for asylum in Italy. Refugees in Italy and their lawyers only recently became aware of what was happening. Da Ai Wang makes no secret of its purposes and [writes](#): "To prevent... other Chinese citizens from being deceived by cults and illegally leaving the country to seek asylum as refugees in Italy or other countries, and to protect the legal rights of affected Chinese families, as well as to urge the return of the individuals involved, our website has decided to publish, starting on May 16, 2022, lists of members of [The Church of Almighty God](#) who have illegally applied for religious asylum in Italy. To gather more information about missing persons, our website will regularly update the list of those who have illegally filed asylum applications until these people voluntarily return to their homeland. If you have information on any of the individuals listed, please contact us immediately to support future search activities abroad." The statement is signed by an

otherwise unknown “Chinese Delegation to Search for Missing Persons Abroad.”

The threatening tone is evident. Under Chinese law, any application for asylum in a foreign country is “illegal”—those who submit it commit the crime of defaming Chinese institutions—and the publication is intended to “urge the return” of refugees to China, where prison awaits them as numerous cases of repatriated asylum seekers show. It also encourages reporting asylum seekers, which under Chinese law can be rewarded with cash awards.

From 2022 to 2024, twelve batches of information have been published containing names, surnames, and precise data of Chinese nationals who are members of The Church of Almighty God who fled to Italy and applied for asylum here. We are not publishing them, but we keep copies and unfortunately as of today’s date they are still accessible on the Da Ai Wang website.

These refugees and others, whose names may be added in the future, if they were to be deported to China, would be exposed to a very serious danger. Not only does the Chinese government know that they are active members of [the Church of Almighty God](#), which is already a crime in itself, punishable by severe prison sentences according to [Article 300](#) of the Chinese Criminal Code, relating to those active in a movement banned as a “[xie jiao](#)” (“organization spreading heterodox teachings,” sometimes translated less accurately as “evil [cult](#)”). Those who apply for asylum can also be charged with endangering national security, a crime for which penalties range up to life imprisonment.

Refugees in Italy from [The Church of Almighty God](#) know the risks they face and the possibility of reprisals on their families in China. That is why The Church of Almighty God does not compile or maintain lists of asylum seekers. Nor does any lawyer have them because, partly for reasons of security, the Church’s refugees in Italy rely on several different lawyers.

We are therefore confronted with a scandal. Where do these lists come from? Only the Ministry of the Interior and other Italian institutions can have or compile these lists. Has Chinese espionage penetrated inside the Italian institutions? Or has somebody been bribed by money from Beijing? We are unable to answer these questions. But we are waiting to hear from those who can and should answer them.

An Evangelical Church deemed “a shop” and taxed 50,000€ goes to the European Court

The case was denounced at the OSCE Human Dimension Conference in Warsaw on

8 October

- **The Italian Supreme Court ruled against Christian community Breccia di Roma after lower courts affirmed that Evangelical places of worship “can look different” than other denominations.**
- **Represented by ADF International, the church filed an appeal against the discriminatory practice – government has no right to discriminate against churches based on perceived appearance.**

[ADF International](#) (08.10.2024) – Evangelical church Breccia di Roma, which uses a former shop as its place for worship, has appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to defend its freedom to worship in the place of its choosing.

The church community, represented before the Court by ADF International, obtained authorization to change the building’s intended commercial use – in part, so that the applicable taxation would align with the religious, i.e. non-commercial, nature of their activities.

“Why should the Tax Agency decide what a place of worship should look like? Our church is not worse or less spiritual, just because our architecture is different”

- Leonardo De Chirico, president of the church association

The Italian Tax Agency claimed that the interior architecture of Breccia di Roma’s worship space was not sufficiently religious in appearance. Therefore, it required the church to pay commercial taxes. Despite winning in the lower court, the Italian Supreme Court of Cassation sided with the authorities. With no further avenues for justice in Italy, the church’s case has been filed at the European Court of Human Rights.

“Why should the Tax Agency decide what a place of worship should look like? Our small space in the midst of Rome is the place of worship for our community. Every Sunday, we gather for service, our Bible studies are hosted there, and small communities meet in the building. Our worship doesn’t require specific architecture. But we are supposed to pay 50,000€ of allegedly accrued taxes only because we are Protestants. With the representation of ADF International, we are challenging this unjust discrimination at the European Court of Human Rights,” said Leonardo De Chirico, president of the church association.

ECtHR application: Italy violates international law and duty of neutrality

In its complaint before the Court, ADF International points to Article 9 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which protects the right to open and maintain places of worship. The classification as a “shop” and the imposition of the tax interferes with the exercise of these rights, creating a serious obstacle to the manifestation of the applicant’s religion.

“The right of the church to meet peacefully for worship in the manner prescribed by its Evangelical faith tradition is clearly protected by Article 9. While the church has no obligation to justify its appearance to the government, it has explained that the modesty of its architecture is rooted in its religion. Italian authorities have no right to assess the legitimacy of the ways this church’s religious beliefs are manifested in its physical appearance when clearly this is an authentic place of worship.”

“Breccia di Roma was exposed to unjust discrimination also contrary to Article 14 of the European Convention, because it did not look like a ‘conventional’ place of worship in the view of the authorities. The tax exemption granted to all other religious buildings in Italy was denied to this church on a purely discriminatory basis. The Italian authorities are in violation of their duty of neutrality towards this religious group,” stated Dr. Lidia Rieder, Legal Officer for ADF International, which is representing the church before the European Court of Human Rights.

Background: What makes a church a church?

The association bought and restructured the building in 2015. It was previously used as a shop. Upon application, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities, and Tourism authorized the classification as a church “without any internal or external building work.” Thus, like all places of worship in Italy, the building would receive a tax exemption.

After the Italian Tax Agency inspected the property, the reclassification was denied, and initially, more than 11,000€ in allegedly accrued taxes were demanded. The church filed a lawsuit against the Tax Agency and the lower court sided with them. Photos showed that the building could in no way be connected to commercial activity.

“Everyone should be free to live out one’s faith in ways prescribed by it. Failing to have a basic understanding of different faith traditions is detrimental to a country’s guaranteed right to freedom of religion. State agencies cannot evaluate the religiosity of a church based on its appearance and architecture. We stand with Breccia di Roma so that religious freedom can flourish, and churches need not fear discrimination in free societies,” stated Rieder.

Second instance: Comparing one church to another

The Tax Agency appealed the judgment to the second-instance court, presenting photographs of the Basilica of San Silvestro, the (Great) Synagogue of Rome, and the Great Mosque of Rome. They argued that Breccia di Roma does not look like a “conventional” place of worship.

In response, the Evangelical community asserted that Evangelical and Protestant places of worship tend to be bare and devoid of ornaments. The court received photographic examples of other Evangelical churches, which were architecturally comparable to the property at issue.

“We don’t make money —we bring people together closer to Christ. Granted, our building does not match the Great Synagogue, a mosque, or any of the basilicas in Rome. Also, because our resources are limited, we meet in a comparatively unspectacular building. But why would a state punish us for that? Our church is not worse or less spiritual, just because our architecture is different,” De Chirico asserted further.

The second-instance Tax Court of Lazio ruled the Tax Agency’s appeal unfounded. According to the court, the authorities had not only failed to consider the property’s owner, a religious organization, but also the Ministry’s authorization to use the building for public worship and the absence of furnishings needed to carry out commercial activity. For a proper assessment, these considerations were indispensable, the court said.

“Religious freedom is an essential good for everyone”

Again, the agency appealed. The Supreme Court of Cassation accepted the case and ruled against the church in May 2024. The decision referred to the absence of “structural interventions consistent with the characteristics related to the exercise of religious activities,” failing to define what those structural changes would have to be for an Evangelical place of worship.

Thus, the Supreme Court quashed the judgments of the two lower courts. Now the applicant is being ordered to pay the tax attributed to the church by the Tax Agency as if it were “commercial” property. By now the tax amounts to 41,580€. However, including penalties and legal costs, the church would have to pay approximately 50,000€.

“Paying 50.000€ in taxes and penalties is a great burden for a self-supported community of believers. Our hope is that the European Court of Human Rights will uphold our freedom of religion and equal treatment under the law. Urban space is not reserved for century-old institutions or wealthy communities. If we win our case in court, many other Evangelical

churches, in addition to the country as a whole, would benefit — religious freedom is an essential good for everyone. What if the Tax Agency decides tomorrow that due to the splendor of a traditional church, the property tax has to be even higher?” added De Chirico.
