

How Catholics Adapt to Changes in China: A Missiological Perspective

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Abstract: The Church is missionary by nature. Vatican II has shifted the Church's attention from the object of faith to the greater discovery of the interlocutor to whom mission is aimed. This article aims at knowing the China situation better. Since China introduced the reform and opening-up policy 40 years ago, she has experienced the biggest migration in human history with half of her poverty-stricken rural population moving to the cities. Social changes have been enormous. There are many challenges for the country. The Church is also adapting to the changes.

The first part of this article is dedicated to an analysis of the mission of the Church particularly formation among the laity and the youth in recent decades. They have played an active role in evangelization in the process of urbanization. There are many positive experiences. For instance, urban-rural mobility has helped exchanges and reconciliation between official and clandestine communities.

The second part is on the adaptation of the local church in China to the changing situation today. The local church needs to adapt to social changes and to cope with the implementation of new

religious regulations and restrictions. However, the improvement in the Holy See-China relations gives new signs of hope. An increase in cultural exchanges leads to subtle changes in the relationship of Catholics with other people in China. As Pope Francis encourages Catholics in China to be authentic Christians and good citizens, he also affirms that we are an integral part of the universal Church. Giving testimony along this line could generate a desirable dynamic change of relationships at different levels and spheres.

The third part is on the prospect of walking together towards a culture of care. The Pope calls on everybody to have a new vision of care with an integrated approach dedicated to ecology, to the poor, and a new economy. At the same time, China is committed to the goals of poverty alleviation and ecological civilization. The COVID pandemic brings the Church's attention to care for the needy and generates creative thinking to find new possibilities. There are many positive experiences in China in this regard. The Holy Spirit has guided the Church throughout history at times of light and shadow. Catholics in China could respond actively to these callings and be an instrument of peace for the good of the human family.

[摘要] 教會在本質上賦有福傳的使命。梵二將教會的著重點從信仰本身轉移到對福傳對象的瞭解上。本文旨在更好地瞭解天主教在中國的情況與近代的轉變。中國自全面實行改革開放政策以來，經歷了人類歷史上最龐大的人口遷移和城鎮化，四十年前農村的貧困人口半數以上都向城鎮遷移改善生活。中國經濟社會發展發生了巨

大的變化，同時，宗教狀況也有很大的轉變，在中國的天主教也要適應這些變化面對挑戰。

本文的第一部份主要分析近幾十年來天主教在中國的信仰生活和教會使命，特別指出在城鎮化的過程中，平信徒和青年人發揮著積極作用，分享他們在福傳和培育上一些值得參考的經驗。譬如，城鄉互動交流也有助於地上和地下團體間的修和經驗。

第二部份有關地方教會如何面對今天中國內外形勢的改變，地方教會需要把握社會動向、適應新的宗教條例落實帶來的限制。然而，聖座與中國關係的改善也帶來新的機遇，相互文化交流增加，使到宗教關係和教徒與非教徒之間的關係產生微妙的變化。教宗方濟各鼓勵中國的天主教徒成為真正的基督徒和好公民，同時也肯定中國天主教徒是普世教會不可或缺的部份。以此指引身體力行可以引發不同層面上關係改善。

第三部份有關一起走向「關愛的文化」前景。教宗要求每個人以全新的關愛視野，以整體的方式，致力解決生態和貧窮的問題，發展新經濟。與此同時，中國政府也致力於脫貧和生態文明的目標。新冠肺炎疫情使教會集中注意需要幫助的人身上，也引發了創造性思維以尋求新的可能性。中國在這方面也有許多積極經驗。聖神不斷引領教會走在光明與黑暗交錯的歷史長流中。中國天主教徒應積極回應這些召喚，為世界以及人類大家庭的福祉作出貢獻。

On May 24 this year, after praying the *Regina Caeli*, Pope Francis made two very significant announcements. It was the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Help of Christians and Patroness of China; the Holy Father entrusted the Catholic faithful in China to Mother Mary so that we may be “promoters of charity and fraternal hope, and good citizens.” With a special Apostolic Blessing, he assured us that we are “**an integral part of the universal Church**” and prayed for “a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” with the light and beauty of the Gospel “shining from within.”

Another entrustment to the intercession of Mary is all those who work for peace, dialogue, and service to the poor, for the care of creation and of disease of body, heart, and soul. As the Church commemorated the fifth anniversary of the Encyclical *Laudato Si'* that heeds the cry of the earth and the poor, Pope Francis announced a Special Year to reflect on the Encyclical, from May 24, 2020 until May 24, 2021. He invited all people of goodwill to participate, to take care of our common home, and our most fragile brothers and sisters. He ended the occasion with a beautiful prayer dedicated to this special year, pleading for creative solidarity following the pandemic, seeking common good and solidarity, in particular, listening and responding to the cry of the Earth and the poor.¹

Following these two pronouncements of Pope Francis, one for the universal call for a “**culture of care**” and the

1 Pope Francis, *Regina Caeli*, Library of the Apostolic Palace, May 24, 2020.

other, for emphasizing the Church of China as an integral part of the universal Church, I reflect on the life of the Church in China from a missiological point of view with the following points: Mission of the Church in China in the context of urbanization, adapting to the changing situation today, and towards a culture of care and new opportunities.

1 Mission of the Church in China in the Context of Urbanization

The Church is missionary by nature. The Second Vatican Council has brought our attention, not to the object of faith, but to the subject of the Church herself, and not only that, but also to the greater discovery of the interlocutors, the recipients whom mission aims at.² How is the situation in China? She has witnessed the biggest transformation in human history in the last 40 years when half of her poverty-laden rural population moved to the cities by way of migration or through urbanization.³

When China inaugurated the reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s, the Christian faith was mainly preserved and spread in rural areas. In the 90s, the trend of migrant workers entering cities emerged. There are distinct experiences of different groups in the last 20 years, among

2 cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (1965), no.5.

3 The urban population has grown from about 18.6 percent in 1979 to 57.9 percent in 2017. See “China – Urban population as a share of the total population,” *World Data Atlas*, retrieved on April 17, 2018.

Catholic students and youth, migrant workers, professionals, and entrepreneur Christians; of city-countryside exchange and pastoral care dedicated to them.

For the Catholic youth, accompaniment according to different stages of life and age groups is very important. In the rural areas, many youths have gone through the experience of the so-called “left-behind children”;⁴ they have faced similar problems of lack of communication with parents. Several dioceses in the northern province of Hebei have started an initiative called the **100-day formation program** for the youth, boys and girls separately. The program concentrates on human promotion and formation and is offered to youths who are free from commitment, work, and studies for a while. It is a good opportunity to take a break from the usual highly competitive environment and discern the direction of their life. As for students, university or college, it is a time for academic pursuits; at the same time, independent thinking and seeking a meaning for life are important. The youth go to big cities for their studies. In some provinces where traditional Catholics are concentrated such as Hebei, Sichuan, Shanxi, and Shaanxi, during holidays in their hometown, they have Church activities like group sharing and exchanges. During the school year, the exigency of getting together grows. They meet at Mass

4 These are children left behind with their grandparents or relatives in the countryside while their parents work in the cities. It is a phenomenon due to the economic and social conditions of China especially from the 1980s to the 2000s. They are also called home-staying children.

during Sundays in a parish at the host city where they study. Little by little, faith and friendship groups are born spontaneously for students and youth, sometimes on their initiative; other times they are helped or encouraged by the diocese of their origin, or formed around a priest who is dedicated to youth ministry in the host parish. Many **faith and friendship groups for students** are formed in big cities, especially at church premises. There is also a group called YCS that cares and pays particular attention to the needs of high school students. According to its guiding principle, the youth should animate the youth themselves, although they have priests as spiritual directors. In the light of the Gospel, the teenagers are accompanying one another in the process of see-judge-act⁵ review of life, and benefit from this group experience. As they grow spiritually and in age, some feel the call to dedicate themselves to help the younger ones. Therefore, senior high school students will help junior student groups, and some will remain to animate the high school students even when they enter college or labor force.

As for adults, there are formation centres in many dioceses. Formation programs and activities are regularly held for specific groups such as pastoral workers, married couples, or professionals such as teachers. These programs are important in helping these adults to witness the Gospel in

5 “See, judge, act” is a method of analysis developed by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn of Belgium that helps young people to review situations that occur in their daily lives, assess the causes and consequences, and explore actions that can bring about positive change.

specific fields and environments. As for migrants to the cities, the late Bishop Jin Luxian of Shanghai (1916-2013) in his Chinese New Year 2011 pastoral letter praised the experience of the faithful from Wenzhou residing in Shanghai. They are fervent Catholics who organize many activities in Shanghai. A priest of the Shanghai Diocese is assigned to them as the spiritual director for their formation. Jin encouraged priests in the parishes to dedicate some time to pastoral care aimed at these parishioners coming from other provinces and rural areas. “Let them experience that **the Church is really a family and we are brothers and sisters.**”⁶ Some dioceses such as Xianxian, Handan, and Wenzhou even sent pastors to visit and care for their faithful in the host cities.

Many of those coming from Wenzhou are business people who try to offer Christian testimony in the business environment. Apart from them, there is also an enterprise at Ningjin in the northern province of Hebei that employs several thousand workers. The owner of the business is an “**entrepreneur Christian**”⁷ and with the whole family, they are fervent Catholics. A Christian spirit is instilled in the corporate culture and management. The employees are well treated with paid holidays. They can join wholesome activities organized by the company, working in a family

6 Aloysius Jin, “Advancing with the Times,” Chinese New Year 2011 Pastoral Letter, February 2, 2011.

7 Chinese scholars have started to call a type of “entrepreneur Christians” (*laoban jidutu*), emerging at economically developed coastal areas. Cf. Cunfu Chen – Tianhai Huang, “The Emergence of a New Type of Christians in China Today,” *Review of Religious Research* (Dec. 2001): 83-200.

atmosphere, and feeling happy. As a consequence, some are attracted to the Christian faith.

A very positive aspect of the **urban-rural mobility is the exchange and reconciliation** brought about in Catholic communities in the last 20 years. At the beginning, many fervent Catholics are concentrated in the rural area, for historically it has always been the priority of the Church to help the poor and the marginalized. Due to urbanization and social mobility, the number of students and well-educated Christians in the city increased. One of the challenges of the Catholic Church in China has been the division between the official and the non-registered (clandestine) communities. One positive effect of urbanization and social mobility is that there are more contacts among the faithful in the city despite their original affiliation. It happens especially among young people who are **not burdened by the baggage of divisions of the past**. Students come to study in big cities, as mentioned above, they come together at Church premises, sometimes at schools, to form “faith and friendship groups” or fellowships.

Faith is not just something personal but lived together with others. They bring their experiences of communion with others back to their respective province and diocese of origin. Also among adults, groups of laity spontaneously spring up in the local church in search of a modern-day relevant spirituality. There are ecclesial communities with spirituality and mature experiences of formation; their

influence is limited but effective. While they can offer their services and cooperate with local dioceses or parishes, local clergies in turn can offer them facilities to form the Christian community to share authentic Christian experiences for the growth and the benefit of the local church. These experiences of exchanges help bring about reconciliation among Catholic communities. As Pope Francis emphasizes sharing **“the joy of the Gospel”** and **“walking together”** (synodality), it is important to reach the full and visible unity of the Catholic community in China, so as to overcome the divisions of the past that have caused suffering to the hearts of many Pastors and faithful, to create gradually openings to accommodate “the surprises of the Lord.”

2 Adapting to the Changing Situation Today and New Challenges

In recent years, new religious regulations are formulated that apply to religious groups of the five religions officially recognized in China, namely Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism. According to Chinese authorities, it is in response to socio-cultural changes and development in recent decades; and the regulations emphasize following the leadership of the Communist Party and supporting the policy of adapting to Chinese culture and situations. There are new regulations on the management of religious groups, registration of religious venues and personnel, limitation of religious education for minors, and the revised regulations will go into effect gradually.

As a consequence, parents and parishes should adjust and find new ways of teaching catechism to children. The transmission of faith to the children to a certain extent relies more on the responsibility of parents. Although minor seminary is no longer very familiar in the developed world, some dioceses with long Catholic tradition in China still run their minor seminaries. It is but normal for the Church to adjust to social changes. The government is taking care of free rural compulsory education, as it is a normal practice in developed countries. Looking from another perspective, it could also be positive and healthy for young boys at a tender age to be educated in a mixed and more diverse environment instead of an overprotected one. However, genuine priestly vocation is fostered in a caring community in the family and in the parish. It is up to those concerned to be active. The boys could make a more discerning choice when they have come of age. As the social environment is changing, the local church is adapting to the times.

The Second Vatican Council affirms a trinitarian vision of the Church that she is missionary by her very nature since it is “from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father.”⁸ The Holy Spirit through the magisteria of recent popes is guiding the Church in her mission in China to meet the changing times.

8 Second Vatican Council, *Ad Gentes, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church* (1965), no.2.

There is a **continuity of recent pontiffs in the process of rapprochement between the Holy See and China**, and they give special attention to China and Chinese Catholics. Saint John Paul II took on the spirit of openness of Vatican II; he encouraged finding new language, new ardor, and new models for a new evangelization in mission lands like China where Catholics are a small minority. The 2007 letter of Pope Benedict XVI formed solid theological bases for dialogue with China and help reconciliation within the Catholic Church in China. Under the Papacy of Pope Francis, with a humble spirit of reaching out to China, there are promising signs of normalization of relations, for the good and the development of the Church in China.

Just to cite a few illustrious facts that make history. First, by signing the “Provisional Agreement on the appointment of Bishops” on September 22, 2018, Chinese authorities recognized the role and involvement of the Pope in appointing bishops in China. Considering the Holy See is an authority from outside, this concession from Chinese authorities is quite exceptional. Therefore the agreement is indeed historic. Second, from April 29 to October 9, 2019, the Vatican participated in the International Horticultural Exhibition (Beijing Expo) with the Vatican Pavilion⁹ highlighting the theme contained in the Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'* of Pope Francis “on care for our common home.”

9 I was assigned by the Pontifical Council for Culture to be the director of the Holy See Pavilion at the Beijing Expo 2019 for the six-month period from April to October 2019.

It is the first time the Holy See participated successfully, exhibiting for more than five months, in such a high-level international event held in China under the official invitation of the Chinese government. Third, in addition to the Holy See Pavilion, the Vatican Museums held an exhibition entitled “Beauty unites us” at the Palace Museum in the Forbidden City for a month and a half from May to July 2019, exhibiting a collection of 78 Catholic and Chinese artifacts as signs of friendship and cultural exchange. The Expo and the exhibitions, which received millions of visitors, are very significant because the Chinese public could have direct contact with the rich patrimony and contributions of the universal Catholic Church to humanity in history, art, culture, and values. On these occasions, the public could have a direct perception of the Catholic Church in a very positive light. This direct contact helps dispel prejudice of the past, creates acceptance, trust, and liking in the public, offering **a favorable image of the Catholic Church in the eyes of the Chinese public.**

In my observation, under the principle of subsidiarity of the social teaching of the Catholic Church, with normalizing and improved relations between China and the Holy See at the higher level, it could also help in a certain way Catholic communities to settle past issues and difficulties at the local level and in their dealings with the authorities. In this way, Catholics can more readily give testimony, to be leaven in society as good Christians and good citizens in the eyes of the general public.

3 Towards a Culture of Care and New Opportunities

As a secular government, China has lifted 740 million people out of poverty in the last 40 years. The World Bank data indicates it was unprecedented, accounting for 70 percent of the world's total poverty reduction figure.¹⁰ The country had set the goal to wipe out poverty and become a moderately prosperous society (小康社會) this year,¹¹ although the target has fallen back due to the impact of Covid-19 and the recent trade war issues. However, Li Keqiang recently revealed in the annual press conference that there are still over 600 million people whose monthly income is barely 1,000 yuan (US\$146). While China is close to eliminating absolute poverty, experts say figures released by the Premier show that much work needs to be done to give many Chinese people a decent life.¹²

In this regard, I would like to narrate an experience. A couple of years ago, Prof. Holownia of Poland read a book about evangelization in China¹³ by chance on one of his trips to Zambia for a philanthropic project. He knew little about

10 Xinyong Liu, et al., "China Focus: Reform, Opening-up Create New Wonders in Human History," *Xinhua Net*, December 17, 2018.

11 "Grinding poverty in China – is Xi Jinping's Alleviation Campaign Making Any Difference?" *South China Morning Post*, March 25, 2018.

12 Lei Li & Shou Zou, "Challenge remains as the nation tries to scrap absolute poverty," *China Daily*, June 10, 2020.

13 I happen to be the author of this book. See Kin Sheung Chiaretto Yan, *Evangelization in China: Challenges and Prospects* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2014).

China but became interested and asked for information about the social services of the Catholic Church in China. Rather than poverty alleviation, he is keen on spiritual poverty. Now he is involved in a project of Yahve' Caritas that Fr. Xue is running. A psychological consultation clinic and training center in Hangzhou offers concrete help to people in need. As an age-old saying goes, "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

In recent years with the advent of the efficient high-speed railway systems in China, three billion passenger trips are expected during the Spring Festival season. It has been called **the largest annual human migration in the world**. It is also a long-held tradition for most Chinese people to reunite with their families during the Chinese New Year. As news of the Coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan came last January, many people were stunned by the drastic measures of the government of locking down the city of Wuhan together with other cities of Hubei, and the restrictions of travel on January 23, just two days before Lunar New Year, while this travel season just started.

A question naturally came to mind. What could be the meaning behind this incidence in China, and could there be a blessing in disguise? In the face of danger and suffering, there is much solidarity among the people. Perhaps we have been moving too fast and God wants us to stop and think within ourselves. People need more time to stay with the family. There are some beautiful experiences from

Wuhan and other parts of China during this period. Some Catholics are sustained by faith and hope and feel peaceful. As testimony, some faithful, Sisters, and even a bishop were doing voluntary work in their neighborhood. Catholic institutes in China and abroad are also involved in donating money and sanitary goods to people in need in China. Specialized personnel organized online counseling for people. When the situation was more or less brought under control in China two months later, Covid-19 had become a pandemic and the situation abroad got worse. Motivated by a non-Christian friend who wanted to donate 10 thousand sanitary masks to Italy, I personally got involved with Jinde Charities and Yahve' Caritas in sending several tens of thousands of sanitary masks and protective gear to Italy and other countries. I have witnessed that the power of love is even more contagious and goes beyond the distinction of creeds.

It was a happy coincidence that last May 24 on the feast day of Our Lady of Sheshan, so dear to Chinese Catholics, that Pope Francis also launched a year to live and reflect on *Laudato Si'*. He voiced out his closeness to the Chinese faithful and their country.

Pope Francis emphasized that the Chinese faithful are an “integral part” of the universal Church. He assures us of his love and the strong bond with the universal Church. Although there are difficulties, he encourages us “to be strong in faith and steadfast in fraternal union, joyful witnesses, promoters of charity and hope, and good

citizens.” For the particular period that Italy and other parts of the world were under lockdown because of Covid-19, the daily mass of the Holy Father at Santa Marta was transmitted online worldwide. Simultaneous translations in Chinese are offered through several WeChat platforms. It has been a marvelous experience for many Catholic faithful in China, to experience the **strong spiritual bond and direct contact with the Holy Father**, following his homily, receiving his blessing, and his catechesis. This difficulty of lockdown somehow became an opportunity.

In this time of profound humanitarian crisis, due to the virus, a new vision is emerging. Pope Francis reminds the whole world of the need for a “culture of care.” We are a human family. In his encyclical letter *Laudato Si’*, the Pope projected a vision of hope for our future, our common home. Not only does he appeal to us to care for nature and the environment, he also invites us to care for the poor and marginalized, and to care for others. He also involves young people and invites economists, entrepreneurs, and change-makers to commit, in the spirit of Saint Francis, to making the economy of today and tomorrow fair, sustainable and inclusive, with no one left behind. Some experts call it a kind of new ethical agenda. There is the need for a new way of acting and living, taking care of and being responsible for others, for society and for the planet. The ethics of caring has to do with the dignity of the person and with human development. It has a social as well as a planetary dimension. At the same time, one has to act at the local level taking

care of others. It is precisely in personal relationships, in the neighborhood, and in society that one acts.

Initially when religious services were suspended due to Covid-19, some priests were reluctant at the beginning to offer services online. With the example of Pope Francis, many become more active in their pastoral work in a new way. There are many **new initiatives** like giving online catechism classes to children and praying together assisted by teachers and parents. There are many beautiful experiences shared among children. With **creative thinking**, many online platforms for meetings, webinars, religious classes, and formation courses were born, even for defending authentic Catholic teachings, so important for this time, when creative, as well as critical thinking, are needed.

Apart from the culture of care, Pope Francis speaks so often of the tenderness of God. God is the creator of heaven and earth. We pray to God through Christ, under the loving gaze of Mary, Help of Christians and Patroness of China, that the Holy Spirit will guide the Church in China to be a living witness of the Gospel and to be promoters of charity and fraternal hope, and to be good citizens.