

Promoting the Well-being of Women: The Contribution of Women Religious in China to Societal Development

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Sister Guo gave this paper as part of a panel of two young Chinese priests and one Sister discussing the topic "The Chinese Catholic Church in Ministry" at the 20th National Catholic China Conference held in Maryknoll, New York, November 14-16, 2003.

A few years ago, there was a movie called "Sister Act" which was extremely funny, yet it also raised a profound question of what the proper role for women religious in the secular world is. Today, as we reflect upon the response of the Chinese Catholic Church to social change, it is meaningful to ask what the role of women religious in the development of Chinese society is. In this paper, I attempt to give a brief answer to the question.

1) Women Religious as Foremothers of Women's Liberation in China

Long before religious life first emerged in China, Chinese women, oppressed and controlled by the patriarchal society, knew very little about the meaning of womanhood besides being a dutiful wife and giving birth to a son. They were deprived of the right to education and any participation in public life, because women were regarded as inferior to men. The patriarchal society also imposed on women strict moral requirements, which were best represented by the famous "Three Submissions and Four Virtues." Women were to submit to their father before marriage, to their husband after marriage, and to their son in widowhood; they were to cultivate the virtues of fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and action, and diligence in housework. The ideal image of a woman, imposed

by the patriarchal society, is to be obedient, chaste, quiet, self-effacing, ignorant, and to devote herself only to the service of the family.

It was in such a social context that the first Chinese women religious communities were born. Enlightened by the Christian understanding of women as precious children of God and equal to men, Chinese women were awakened from their state of being dominated and oppressed by patriarchal society. They also found liberating force and strength in the good news of the Gospel. At the beginning of the 20th century, the first group of women religious dared to challenge the old tradition by deciding their own future and choosing to enter religious life. Although facing tremendous obstacles from both family and society, their determination and faith in God helped them win the battle. In the religious community, they received formation in catechism, spirituality, professional skills, as well as a basic education in the liberal arts. Thus, they discovered not only the meaning of religious life, but also the significance of womanhood, that is, that women not only deserve equal rights, autonomy, and full participation in human society, but that they also have many talents to contribute to society.

In order to improve the life of their fellow sisters, Chinese women religious, with the help of foreign missionaries, devoted themselves to various forms of work besides teaching catechism to women and children in the local parishes. They opened schools for girls, organized literary programs for rural women, provided health care and promoted hygiene for women. Their tireless work not only promoted the well-being of women in the church, but also in society at large. Moreover, through taking on public roles, women religious presented to Chinese society a new image of womanhood with dignity and self-confidence. They also opened new possibilities for their fellow sisters to find their value outside the household sphere. By their courageous fight for the right to determine their own destiny, and by their living example and devoted service, Chinese women religious became an inspiration and harbinger to their sisters in the liberation movement.

2) Women Religious' Role Vital to Recovering the Church and Society

From 1950 to the late 1970s, while the Church was undergoing persecutions, women religious were forced to leave their communities and were sent back to the secular world. The Church regained its freedom to a certain degree in the beginning of the 1980s. Christians were able to resume public worship. Many women religious who had amazingly kept their faith and vocations throughout the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, also came back to the Church. The newly reopened Church with her teaching of hope, truth and love fascinated many Chinese who were in search of spiritual food. In responding to the great pastoral need, these women religious, although already in old age, took up the role of "mother" of the parish Church. Due to the lack of priests, it was these women who were always ready to receive whoever came to the Church with questions and difficulties. By their kindness and tenderness, people found in them the embodiment of Christian love. Gradually, they attracted more and more young girls who felt the call to religious life. With the help of the local bishops, these women religious re-started their religious communities with nothing but their faith and hard work.

From the end of the 1980s to the 1990s, vocations to the religious life and priesthood were booming. According to the statistics compiled by the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, by the year 2002, among 12 million Chinese Catholics, there were 6700 women religious including 1800 novices, whereas the number of priests is 2650, not including 1670 seminarians. Obviously, most of the pastoral work fell on the shoulders of the women religious. After only a short period of formation, newly professed Sisters were sent mostly to the local parishes to do all kinds of work: from maintaining the church building to teaching catechism; from cooking for the priests to visiting the sick and the elders; from organizing Church activities to planning formation programs for faithful of all age groups. Women religious, with the help of lay people, are playing a vital role in the life of the Church. Because the majority of believers are women, the life and work of women religious have a great impact on women Christians. They come to women religious not only to learn about the Christian faith, but also to seek counseling and guidance when facing challenges and difficulties in their lives. Women religious have also become the support in their spiritual lives. Through forming good Christians

among women believers, women religious are spreading the truth of equality, justice and love to society at large.

Moreover, women religious do not regard their vocation as confined to parish work only. They are also eagerly reaching out to society through other forms of service. These include opening clinics, nursing homes, orphanages, and kindergartens. In addition, whenever possible, women religious also actively engage themselves in social services. For example, during the SARS outbreak last spring (2003), many women religious from Hebei Province, who are medical workers, volunteered to serve SARS patients; others either helped to sew protective clothes for local health workers or provided counseling through phone calls to those who were isolated.

With their simple lives and devoted services, women religious become living witnesses to the truth of love. They are reminding people of the meaning of life beyond material bondage. Although non-believers may not know the profundity of religious life, they admire the self-sacrifice of women religious. Most of all, they see the value and dignity of a woman among them, and they are convinced that women, with their talents and strong spirit, are capable of changing society.

3) Women Religious are Challengers against Social Injustice

Within the past ten years, Chinese society has gone through dramatic social and economic change, which has made China an important figure on the world stage. Yet, material affluence is accompanied by moral decline. Chinese people are experiencing ever greater spiritual hunger. The economic development, although it brought fortunes to some people, has left many people unemployed and created a great gap between the rich and the poor. Women, without a good education, professional skill, and physical strength, become the weakest group in Chinese society. In order to survive, many women, especially young girls, are forced to become prostitutes, or are abducted and are sold to be wives in the remote countryside. Some women, unable to cope with the cruelty of life, commit suicide. A report shows that the rate of suicide among Chinese women is higher than that of men by 25%. Most of the

suicides take place in rural areas.¹ Women, as a marginalized group, hardly receive any attention from society, which is still dominated by males.

In the Church, women religious and lay women are playing an important role by actively engaging themselves in the work of the Church, but they are not given enough opportunities and recognition. Even though they have rich experience in evangelization, they play no part in the leadership of the Church. This situation is well described by an Asian woman theologian, "In Roman Catholic circles, women rarely serve on consultative bodies for bishops' conferences, participate in the decision-making process about vital issues of the Church, help to lead the Church in visible ways, or share in ministry and liturgy as equal partners."² Even the few laywomen leaders are still struggling to gain recognition and acceptance by priests and bishops.

How are women religious going to respond to such great challenges that come from both the Church and society? Although they have been working diligently to promote and improve the life of women, it seems to be not enough. However, they can only give what they have. In order to contribute more, they need to be empowered. Thus, women religious in the 21st century need to claim first for themselves the right of receiving more education, theological formation, spiritual formation and the development of professional skills. At present, the formation period for women religious is too brief because of the shortage of formation resources in China. Moreover, they deserve to be given more important roles and fuller participation in the ministry of the Church. This requires a new model of Church, in which the authority is not based on position and status alone, but on charisma, the ability to build community and genuine qualities of leadership.

The improvement of the situation of women religious in the Church will certainly promote the full participation and recognition of the laity, especially lay women. Empowered by the new model of Church, women religious, together with lay women, will be able to help women in society as a whole. The equality, respect and recognition that women religious and lay women enjoy in the

¹ David J. Lynch, *USA TODAY*, 3, December 2002.

² Kwok Pui-lan, *Introducing Asian Feminist Theology*.

Church will be a powerful example and inspiration for the marginalized and oppressed women in Chinese society.

Conclusion

There is a Chinese saying: “Women hold up half of the sky.” Women have the power to change societies if they introduce the concept of justice and love wherever they are present. From household to working place, from social gathering to formal meetings, the influence of women is substantial and penetrating. If they are convinced that things can be changed for the better, and if they are moved to action, they have the power to build a better society. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead has said so well: “Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world—it is the only thing that ever has.” Chinese women religious, though still small in number and weak in power, will keep fighting for the well-being of their sisters at large. We believe that our efforts will bear fruit. It is like a lamp hidden in a corner of the room. It keeps beaming and warming up the surroundings. Then one day, joined by many other small lamps, they make the room full of light.



Maryknoll Sisters Betty Ann Maheu and Agnes Cazale visited Bishop Pius Jin and the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Sister Matthias Guo's order, in Shenyang a few years ago.