

Women Religious in China

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In the past few years some Sisters in Hong Kong have been studying the situation of religious congregations of women in China. They have gathered information on more than 80 congregations of Sisters working in 79 dioceses in China. Some of these congregations were founded before the establishment of New China in 1949. The bishops of those dioceses, both Chinese and foreign, founded many of the congregations, but a few of them were established by Sisters themselves. The earliest foundations took place in 1855, and continued right up until 1950. Some Sisters belonged to international congregations, while the rest were diocesan congregations. All the congregations were established according to the conditions regarding religious life laid down in Canon Law. Each congregation had its own Constitution, which spelled out the congregation's distinct aims, charism, spirit and mission. In the days before 1949, foreign Sisters trained many of the Sisters in both the international and local communities. This was a great help to those communities, as well as to the whole Church in China. Unfortunately, the government disbanded those congregations in the 1950s, and deported the foreign Sisters. During the years between 1950 and 1980 the Church and the Catholics suffered many hardships. After the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), conditions changed for the better in China. In the 1980s, after the government implemented new religious policies, diocesan bishops made great efforts to revive those Sisters' congregations.

During the 1980s the government of the People's Republic of China implemented new religious policies. All religions were required to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau, which

oversees the activities of all religions. When Catholic churches began to open in the early 1980s, they had to agree to be registered with the Patriotic Association. This meant that the government would supervise their religious activities. Many churches refused to join because they felt that, besides patriotism to the government, they also owed loyalty to the Pope and to the Holy See. The churches that have refused to be registered are often referred to as the “underground” or “unregistered” church. The abovementioned study also came across congregations, which have not registered with the government. Foreign missionaries established some of these before 1949. But most of them were founded in the 1980s and 1990s by local bishops. Because they have refused to register, life is not easy for them. The bishops established these congregations for the sake of spreading the faith and for the needs of pastoral ministry. These congregations “rose because of the demand”. Some of the bishops did not fully understand the consecrated life of a woman’s religious community. So the formation of many of these Sisters was insufficient and incomplete. Instead of developing a consecrated life, many Sisters attended to trifling matters and neglected the essentials. Fortunately, the Sisters gradually realized the need to remedy the situation. The bishops and priests also seemed willing to help the Sisters. The biggest hurdle is the government; so the works of these Sisters must be carried out in secret. As long as they are not “registered,” all their pastoral works are considered illegal.

As of this year, 2010, the reported number of women religious in the open, or registered Church is 3,600 Sisters. The underground, or unregistered church has 1,350 Sisters. The congregations that we know of can be as large as 300 members, or as small as fewer than ten members. There are still other congregations in China, but it is not easy to contact them. The Sisters in the registered church are relatively free to do the pastoral work of the Church and some of those Sisters are also engaged in a variety of works in their local areas, such as serving as nurses in local hospitals. When the Sisters of the registered community are working in the local areas, they

usually keep their identity of being a member of a religious congregation to themselves.

As for the Sisters who belong to the unregistered church, they are not free to work either in or for their local churches, or to do other ministries in the areas they live in. Since these Sisters and priests do not accept the supervision of the Patriotic Association or the Religious Affairs Bureau over their activities, they cannot openly do any kind of pastoral work. The Sisters can possibly find work in the local communities, but not as women religious. If any of the Sisters and priests are caught doing pastoral work, they could be fined, arrested, or even imprisoned. Their churches, or places of worship are sometimes destroyed, and their church funds, books and holy objects are frequently confiscated.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of China grants freedom of religion for all, but in reality when it comes to religious and pastoral efforts, the government watches the priests and Sisters closely. That goes for the registered as well as the unregistered churches. In the recent study of the life and works of the religious women mentioned above, I have been impressed by what the Sisters in the registered churches have been able to accomplish for both the church and society. The Sisters in the unregistered churches have also been able to do much good, but in another way. The pastoral and social works of the registered churches can be carried out openly, with certain restrictions. But the pastoral and social works of the unregistered churches have to be done in secret, and not always in the same place every time. This includes Mass and the other sacraments.

The Sisters of the registered churches have been able, for the most part, to freely establish their congregations and grow in spirituality, vocations, organization, and education. They try to accept only young women who have graduated from high school. Many of these congregations are sending their Sisters to places of formation connected to seminaries. They have the same professors as the seminarians. Some congregations have even been able to send their Sisters for further education both in other parts of China

and abroad. With higher education the Sisters acquire a deeper understanding of their vocations and of world issues. They also acquire the skills needed for the organization and operation of their works for the church and society.

In the late 70s after the government issued the new religious regulations, bishops were anxious to establish new congregations of Sisters. So they often accepted young girls who only had a primary school education. They were very dedicated and made many good contributions. But since schools and universities were opening up all over China, families wanted their children to have an education. As time went by, many people looked down on people who did not have an education higher than primary school. Even good Catholic families wanted their young daughters to leave the congregations and go on for further studies. Now that many religious congregations are growing in number, and their members are getting a higher education, their standing in society has also become more positive.

The women religious of China have been accomplishing many good works for the church and for society for many years. They are dedicated to spreading the Gospel and establishing the Kingdom of God. Congregations of Sisters can be found in cities and country villages, in the mountains and in very remote areas. For pastoral works, the Sisters teach catechism classes, give retreats to young women, conduct prayer groups, visit the sick and the poor, take care of the altar and sacristy, and in some places they look after diocesan guest houses and columbaria. Besides pastoral work and helping the development of local church communities, the Sisters have established orphanages, homes for mentally and physically challenged children and adults, homes for the elderly and clinics. They help people with AIDS and with Hansen's Disease. The Sisters also administer kindergartens, teach music to church choirs, have training programs for young people and run printing presses. Their contributions are variegated and multifaceted.

In the last few years, Sisters have gained a great reputation because they rushed to the areas of China where earthquakes and

floods had inflicted much suffering on people, leaving them in great need. The Sisters, in their capacity as doctors and nurses, helped the people in their distress. They stayed on to serve after many other agencies left. The dedication of the Sisters, and the care they showed for the victims of the natural disasters got into the media, and made their vocations and work more well known throughout the whole country.

To support themselves, the Sisters are engaged in many enterprises. They make vestments, and religious articles to sell. They make burial shrouds for the dead. They do embroidery work, along with tailoring. Some Sisters' congregations even raise pigs. One congregation was able to acquire a piano, and a Sister learned how to play it. Now she gives lessons to others, which is also a source of income for her congregation.

The Sisters still face many difficulties because they lack funds, chances for a higher education, proper religious formation, training in nursing and other medical fields, and knowledge of financial matters and of how to write up proposals for receiving grants from international charities.

The congregations of the registered churches have Motherhouses and Novitiates where the sisters can assemble for meetings, feastdays, vow-taking ceremonies, retreats and general assemblies, when they choose their next Superior. The unregistered congregations do not have regular places where they can assemble. Many of the Sisters live two by two in the homes of Catholics, and rotate quite frequently. They are lucky to be able to meet once a year in a secret place for an assembly to choose a new superior or to discuss important congregational matters. Contacting the Sisters of the unregistered churches is difficult, because they do not freely give out their addresses or telephone numbers. They are always wary of possible government crackdowns on their places of worship, homes and workplaces.

This study of women religious in China continues as more contacts are made with them. We greatly admire the wonderful spirit of these women, their total dedication to the Gospel and the

multiplicity of areas they are involved in. The women religious in China live very simply, and they carry out many works of mercy. But funding for their many projects is still a big problem. At times the Sisters can get a visa to visit Hong Kong. Then get a chance to talk with them about their lives and works. The visit of Hong Kong friends to China also gives us the chance to learn more about the Sisters lives and works.

To respect the circumstances of many of the Sisters, we have not mentioned the names of their congregations nor the names of individual Sisters. Nor have we mentioned the areas in which they live and work. Our hope is that more people will become interested in the women religious of China and in the great deeds they are doing.