

Catholic Women in Modern China: A Personal Perspective

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I first came into contact with the Catholic Church in Mainland China at the beginning of the 1990s. In this article, I would like to share what I know about the Catholic Church in China, although my experience of the life of the Church is very limited.

1. The Contribution of Catholic Women to the Church in China

Due to the government's restrictions concerning religion and other historical reasons, the Church in China was more active in the north than in the south. The Church is particularly active in the rural areas of northern China, where many lay Catholics live. The majority of the lay people were women from the local villages. They were not very well-educated, and some of them were even illiterate. However, these simple women made great contributions to the Church in China throughout its history.

1.1 The Church under Persecution — Preserving and Transmitting the Christian Faith

As we all know, the Church in China underwent great persecutions for over 40 years, starting from the 1950s. All religious activities were banned. Priests and bishops were imprisoned. In this difficult period, the faith of the Chinese Catholics was severely tested. Nevertheless, these women stood firm in faith and hope. They recited prayers privately, and preached the Christian faith to their children with great courage.

A young priest from Shanxi recalled, "When I was a child, I

saw my mother reciting prayers at her bedside every time I woke up in the middle of the night. When I grew up, my mother told me that my parents and relatives were all Catholics. She taught me to pray. When the parish priest was released from prison, my mother woke me up every morning before dawn, and urged me to attend the morning mass with her. She even encouraged me to be an altar server.”

1.2 Rebuilding the Church — Generous Sacrifice

1.2.1 Vocations — Offering their Children to God

Towards the end of the 1980s, some of the bishops and priests were released from the prison. They were allowed to return to their respective dioceses and parishes. It was an age of revival, and support from the younger generation was urgently needed in rebuilding the Church. The Catholic parents were very generous in offering their children to God. They encouraged their sons to learn from the experienced priests, so that they themselves might become priests in the future. Later on, some of the seminaries closed down by the government in the 1950s were reopened. The young Catholic men finally had a chance to receive formal training for priesthood. They provided the Church with a new generation of pastors. Catholic parents also encouraged their daughters to become nuns, who participated in the rebuilding of dioceses and the establishment of new religious orders.

Currently there are more than 100 priests and 300 nuns in the diocese of Xianxian in Hebei Province. Some priests and sisters come from the same family. This is also very common in Shanxi and Shaanxi provinces. The generous support of the lay Catholics helped to revive the Church, which was paralysed by the great persecutions. Their children became the leaders of different churches, professors in theology schools, rectors and directors of priestly formation in seminaries.

1.2.2 The Establishment of New Religious Orders in Difficult Situations

There is a so-called “culture of celibacy” in the Chinese

Church. This means that female Catholics were encouraged to devote themselves to the service of God through a life of celibacy. Although the life of the Church was very challenging, many young girls demonstrated the great patience and perseverance characteristic of Chinese women. They established religious orders in different dioceses, and served God, priests, lay Catholics and sick people with unceasing effort.

In the beginning of the 1990s, Sr. She Shenghua, the foundress of St. Joseph's Home for Handicapped Infants in Xianxian, and a group of virgins who followed her dedicated themselves to the service of handicapped children, who had been abandoned by their parents. In the 2000s, when these children were growing up, she made plans for the time when they would get married and set up their own families. She established St. Joseph's Home for the Elderly. She sent the young boys in her care to this new establishment, so that they could learn how to serve the elderly. I believe that those who see the work of the nuns in different parts of China will be greatly touched by their spirit of sacrifice. Their example deserves our admiration.

1.3 The Development of the Church — Evangelization, Parish Activities and Charitable Work

1.3.1 Evangelization

(a) The Evangelical Work of the Lay Catholic Women in the Diocese of Weinan:

In the middle of the 1990s, I joined a pilgrimage to the Diocese of Taiyuan in Shanxi Province. I discovered that there were many lay catechists at the cathedral there, who were very active in the catechumenate. The parish priests said that, in the remote parishes, there were women catechists who organized themselves into groups of three and four, and went to the surrounding areas to preach the Gospel.

In 2007, I organized a seminar for the priests and nuns in the same diocese on catechetical instruction for adults. I invited two guests from Taiyuan to share their experience: Fr. Zhang Jinqing and Ms. Duan, a female catechist. At that time, Fr. Guo, the parish

priest of Nanbai Village, took the opportunity to ask them to talk to his parishioners about their experience in preaching the Good News. After that, Fr. Guo encouraged the parishioners to set up a fund for evangelization. He also organized the adult women in his parish into groups of three, and sent them out to preach the Good News in nearby villages. So every weekend these women went to the villages on bikes and carried out their evangelical work. Other parishioners supported them with their fervent prayers.

From then on, lay Catholics from other parishes in Weinan followed their example. They went out to preach the Good News every weekend in groups. Some Catholics even closed their shops on weekends --- they would rather spend the weekend preaching the Gospel than earning money from their businesses.

Fr. Bai Hanqiang, a priest at the cathedral in the Diocese of Weinan, prepared the catechists every week before sending them out to teach the catechumens. It was reported that, in recent years, catechumens were baptized every year on Easter in all the parishes. The active participation of the Weinan Catholics in evangelization is an excellent example for all the churches in Shaanxi Province.

(b) Evangelization through Dance:

Most of the village women in China love to do the Rice Sprout Song and Dance. The woman Catholics from the parish of Geda in Fanjia, Xianxian, are famous for preaching the Good News through the Rice Sprout Song and Dance. Although the chairlady of this parish is illiterate, she has established a group of woman evangelists, with herself as the leader. She gets up at 4 AM every morning to work in the fields with her husband. Then at 10 AM she goes back home to make lunch. In the afternoon, she goes out with her evangelical team members, divided into groups of three, by bicycle to nearby villages. There they perform the Rice Sprout Song and Dance with the local women. Through the dance, they interact with the village women and share with them the Catholic faith. Their work of preaching the Good News through dance is very successful.

1.3.2 The Growth of the Parish

The parish of Hejian, Xianxian, is a parish in the rural area of

the province. The old church was confiscated by the government during the Cultural Revolution. The church was reclaimed by the lay Catholics after many years of negotiations. It was not easy to get the money needed for rebuilding the church, especially when the government put many obstacles in the way.

Ms. Gao, the chairlady of the parish council, is illiterate. Nevertheless, she proved to be full of wisdom. She did not want the parish priests and the male Catholics to get into direct conflict with the government. Therefore she mobilized the female Catholics in the parish to parade every Sunday around the church land, while reciting prayers for the parish. The government did not want to exacerbate the matter, and so it finally reached a compromise with the parish.

Ms. Gao was also a far-sighted woman. She understood that, besides the reconstruction of the church building, it was necessary to provide formation for the lay Catholics. So she asked the parish priest to organize different courses for the lay people, especially the young mothers who had the responsibility to pass on the Christian faith in their families.

1.3.3 Charitable Services

Although the livelihood of the Catholics in rural villages has improved a great deal, there are still many beggars and vagrants in the area. Following the example of Mother Teresa, the female Catholics of the Hejian parish provide them with clothes and food. If one of the homeless so desires, the ladies will bring him to St. Joseph's Home for the Elderly and support his living expenses. Once there was a young mentally-ill vagrant, who fell sick on the street. The government refused to help him, but the Catholic ladies showed compassion to the stranger. They brought him to St. Joseph's Home for the Elderly and, under the care of the Sisters, this young man eventually recovered and could walk around without difficulty.

2. The Challenges of Modern Chinese Women

Life in the rural villages of China has changed dramatically.

Many middle-aged and younger Catholics go to work in the cities, leaving their children under the care of their grandparents. They can only meet their families once a year, during the Lunar New Year. Since many of the Catholic village women are illiterate, they do not know how to educate their children, who are frequently not interested in the old ways of prayer. In addition, the faith formation of Catholic children is lacking because the parishes do not have Sunday schools. After finishing primary school, these children often immediately go out to work. They do not go to secondary school. They often forget about their Church life, and their faith gradually becomes weak.

Moreover, parish priests often put more emphasis on quantity, rather than on quality in evangelical work. Although Catholic lay women are very enthusiastic about evangelization, the quality of catechetical instruction is often neglected, as is follow-up training for the newly baptized. Soon the zeal of the newly baptized Catholics diminishes, and their attendance at church gradually decreases.

3. Revelations to the Lay Women of Hong Kong

3.1 Christian Formation in the Family

The Chinese Catholic lay women continue to try to pass on the Christian faith to the younger generation in spite of many difficulties and life threatening dangers. When compared with the situation in China, the life of the Church in Hong Kong is much easier. There are more than 600 catechists and 1000 Sunday school teachers in the Diocese of Hong Kong. In recent years, more than 3000 catechumens have been baptized each year. Most of the Catholic parents have a high level of education. However, the quality of Christian formation in the family remains a problem. Life is often hectic in Hong Kong, and in most families both the father and the mother work. Parents pay more attention to the academic achievement of their children than to their Christian formation. Perhaps they think that their material needs are more important than their spiritual growth. They may even think that it is not their responsibility to pass on the Christian faith, since Sunday school

teachers will do this job. The outcome is that their children do not attend church any more soon after finishing Sunday school.

3.2 The Promotion of Vocations

The generous sacrifice of lay Catholics in China helped tremendously to rebuild the Church. In Hong Kong, however, vocations are few, in spite of the fact that there are many lay people serving in different parishes or diocesan organizations. In view of the serious shortage of priests worldwide, are the Catholics of Hong Kong generous enough to respond to God's call, like the Catholic women of China did? Nowadays, many people are satisfied to stay single and to live as a lay person, rather than to join the seminary. They do not have enough courage to respond to Christ's call. Each of us should seriously think about this, and ask ourselves the question: is God calling me to do His work too?

3.3 Living Testimony of the Christian Faith

Today, Catholic women in China are still working tediously for the growth of their parishes and serving the needy in their everyday lives. At the same time, the lifespan of Hong Kong people is very long. Many retired people are still healthy and energetic. They are well-educated and take part in different activities after their retirement. Besides spending the "golden years" travelling around the world and enjoying themselves, they may participate more in parish activities. This may help to strengthen their faith and missionary zeal, thus enabling them to live out the spirit of the Gospel in their everyday lives. They can break through the barriers of communication and show their love for those around them, especially for the poor. In this way, they can help bring God's salvation to the world.