

# *The Yeast of Evangelization: A Study on the Contribution of the Virgin Catechists*

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## **1. Overview**

Catechists play an important role in the evangelization of the Catholic Church. When the Christian faith came to China, there were not enough clergymen for the job. Since foreign priests were not familiar with the concrete situation in China, the assistance of local catechists was greatly needed. Catechists were chosen mainly from those lay Catholics who had a strong faith in God, and who were educated and experienced in management. Depending on the nature of the mission and the targets of their service, the catechists were divided into male and female groups. This article focuses on the role and the contribution of the virgin catechists—in other words, on those who belonged to the female group, and who were dedicated to the celibate life.

### **1.1 What is a Catechist?**

A catechist is “a baptised Catholic and a child of the Catholic Church”. (*The Rules of Catechists* 《傳道員規則》, 1934, p.441) He is also a person who teaches the Catechesis (the Catholic doctrine) to other people. The Early Church believed that all Christians had the responsibility to pass the Catechesis on to other people. In the age of the Church Fathers, however, only the clergy and a few outstanding lay Catholics could teach. After the Reformation, the Catholic Church paid special attention to catechetical instruction, and encouraged lay Catholics to take part in this work. In 19th-century Germany, for example, many communities of lay catechists were established. They met regularly for discussions, conducted academic seminars and published journals on the Catechesis of the Church. A magazine especially for

catechists was published in Austria. (林淑理, 2007, pp. 21, 27)

As the Church in China continued to develop, lay catechists became part of its system. At the initial stage, most of the catechists were male Catholics who followed the missionaries wherever they went, assisting them in reading Chinese documents, and writing teaching materials for catechetical instruction. Some of the outstanding catechists became priests. Luo Wenzao (also named Gregorio Lopez, 1616 - 1691), for example, was baptized by Fr. Antonio de Santa Maria Caballero, O.F.M. He became a catechist and devoted his whole life to the service of God. He was the first Chinese priest to be ordained and, years later, he became the first Chinese bishop.

## ***1.2 The Qualities and Work of the Catechists***

As evangelization in the Church continued to develop, catechists could be found in almost all parishes. The catechists' work became increasingly detailed and systematic, and hence the Church expected the catechists to be better qualified. They must meet the following criteria before they could be sent out to teach:

**Education:** Catechists must attain a certain level of knowledge. "They must study hard every day. Newly trained catechists must also prepare themselves for monthly exams. Experienced catechists must be assessed four times a year. Examinations were to take place in missionary schools, and all catechists must take them.... They should read for four or five hours a day, study the Doctrine carefully, and wisely plan their time to include private studies and homework."

**Lifestyle:** Catechists "should never live a life of extravagance. Rather, they should follow the customs of the local people and lead a frugal life."

**Work:** The catechists should keep a record of their work in the parishes and villages they serve. The record should include the lay people's "names, baptismal names, relatives and god-parents, birthdays, dates of baptism, the names of the priests who baptized them, and marriage and burial records". They were also to keep a diary in which they recorded the details of their missionary activities. The catechists reported their activities to the parish priest

every month, together with the records of the lay people's names, the record of distribution of sacraments and of the financial accounts of the parish. When there were only a few priests working in an area, the work of the catechists became even more tedious. Sometimes they had to help out with marriages and funerals. (*The Rules of Catechists*, 1934, pp. 446, 448, 449, 450)

The virgins, who adopted the celibate life for the sake of spreading the Christian faith, had a strong sense of mission. They worked passionately for the Church. However, the work of a catechist was very demanding. In order to do the job well, the virgins had to undergo systematic training in the Doctrine. In this article, the term "virgin catechists" refers to the female catechists who had a higher level of education and who received rigorous catechetical training. They were well qualified for missionary work and devoted their whole lives to the Church's work of evangelization.

### ***1.3 The Emergence of Virgin Catechists***

The European missionaries who came to Mainland China during the Ming dynasty were cautious about women's participation in missionary activities. The more affluent church communities were divided into male and female groups. Sometimes only a curtain separated the two groups. In Chinese society, men and women were not supposed to get together in the same space. Women "lived in seclusion from the outside world, and so it was very difficult for the missionaries to get in touch with them and to preach the Good News to them." (燕爾思, 1976, p. 81) Evangelical work for women was not very successful, even in those churches where they were separated from the male audience.

Since it was impossible for the clergymen, who led a celibate life, to contact Chinese women, it goes without saying that preaching the Good News to them would be even more difficult. The safest and most effective way, therefore, was to recruit female catechists who would be able to reach out to Chinese women. However, since married women were bound by family duties, the corollary of this was that only unmarried women catechists could catechize the other women. During the Ming and Qing dynasties,

some of the virgins had already developed a deep sense of apostolic zeal. It was said that maids in noble families in Beijing would preach the Catholic faith to the women around them. (殷弘緒, 2001, p. 206-207)

However, the work of these virgin women was not very well organized. Since they had not received formal training, they could not be regarded as qualified catechists. In the middle of the Qing dynasty, the virgins in the missionary district of the Dominicans had already begun teaching the catechism to local women. They were also required to observe a code of conduct. (燕肅思, 1976, p. 45) In Sichuan, “when the lay people gathered on Sunday, the virgins served as commentators and cantors. They read passages from spiritual books to the congregation, and even explained the doctrines of the Church like priests”. The virgins who took part in teaching the Catechesis were already playing the role of catechists. At this point, however, the Church’s formation program was not yet fully developed. The influence of the virgin catechists was thus quite limited.

#### ***1.4 The Selection and Qualifications of Virgin Catechists***

The virgin catechists were part of the church community. They had to be trained in theology, Scripture, Dogma and other cultural subjects. Therefore, the virgin catechists were the crème de la crème in the community of virgins. They were also the backbone of the evangelical work of the Church.

Generally speaking, the basic criteria for selecting virgin catechists were work capability and level of education. The maturity and character of the person were also taken into account. In the Church of Shandong, for example, the criteria for the selection of virgin catechists were very strict:

The teachers for catechumens must be chosen from the best and most capable virgins. According to the laws of our apostolic vicariate, female catechists must be at least 36 years old. Their mission is to teach female catechumens about the Catholic faith. The social customs of the people prohibited men from performing this task. The virgin teachers were highly respected by

catechumens and the local people, especially because of their state in life. They had received a higher level of formal education, and they set a good example for others to follow. Here we have many elderly virgins who work in an exemplary way, and they devote their whole lives to their vocation. Through their good example, many newly baptized girls aspired to be virgins, and their parents respected their decisions. (Lange, 1929, p.101)

The work of the virgin catechists carried more responsibility than that of ordinary virgins. The difference between the work of ordinary virgins and that of virgin catechists in the Diocese of Zhili (Hebei Province) can be taken as an example. The statistics of the diocese at the end of the 19th century showed that “there were 408 virgins, among whom 283 were teachers”. Most of the virgins took part in missionary work, but the contribution of the virgin catechists to the diocese was more important.

## **2. The Formation of Virgin Catechists**

After the Chinese government’s ban on Christianity in the middle of the Qing dynasty (during the reign of the Yongzheng Emperor in 1724), the activities of European missionaries were severely curtailed. Therefore, Chinese catechists were called upon to perform the work which European priests could not do. This strategy became one of the characteristics of the Church’s missionary work during this period. It was also at this time that the virgin catechists made their greatest contribution with their wisdom and positive qualities.

### ***2.1 In the Middle of the Qing Dynasty***

The support of catechists was paramount for the healthy development of the Church. Therefore, one of the major concerns of the Church in the middle of the Qing dynasty was to improve the content and strategy of its formation work. The systematic formation of virgin catechists began in Sichuan Province. According to a French source:

In 1773, the venerable Fr. Moÿe came to Sichuan. He had

already established a religious order in France before he came. The mission of this order was to provide education for the poor village girls in China. During the episcopate of Potier, the Bishop of Sichuan, Fr. Moÿe came up with the idea of building a school for girls, so that they might receive education and be freed from illiteracy. However, there were not enough female teachers available. How, then, was this project to be carried out? Since the virgins who worked in the diocese at that time were illiterate, Bishop Potier taught the students himself. From among his students he chose some young, clever and devoted girls to go on for further education. He trained them in their spiritual lives, taught them in class and wrote lesson materials for them. (Gourdon, Paris, p. 267)

In the second half of the 18th century, the Church in Sichuan had already accumulated some experience in the selection and training of virgin catechists. Fr. Moÿe was the most enthusiastic supporter of this project. He “knew very well the capabilities of these Catholic virgins, so he entrusted them with the mission of evangelization. A small school for girls was established with their help”. (沙百里, 2005, p. 231)

Fr. Gleyo, Moÿe’s French colleague, gave the following suggestion, “Our work must have a solid foundation built upon religious zeal and devotion to the Blessed Virgin. If we are allowed to do so, we should establish a community of virgins and call it ‘The Association of the Daughters of the Blessed Virgin’.” (沙百里, 2005, p. 232) Fr. Moÿe’s principles of formation included purity, obedience to the will of God, spiritual poverty and the performance of good works. (沙百里, 2005, p. 232) Based on these four principles, Fr. Moÿe selected virgin catechists for the mission.

Since the Church was forced to work in secrecy and there was a general shortage of teachers, it was difficult for the formation program of virgin catechists to reach its hoped for goals. Under these circumstances, in 1784 the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith issued the following rule: “Missionaries should establish novitiates, where the virgins may acquire not only the knowledge necessary for their work as catechists, but also the experience of life in religious communities.” (燕爾思, 1976, p. 173)

Taking into consideration the nature and scope of the virgin catechists' work, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, in 1832, issued another document, in which the concrete responsibilities of the virgin catechists were explained: "This document is issued in accordance with canon 252 CIC, the highest law code of the Latin Church concerning its missionary work." (Anton, 2002) From the perspective of the Church authorities, the most effective way to train these virgins was to organize them into female religious orders, like the ones existing in Europe, and incorporate the spirit of service and responsibility as the principles of their formation.

In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (1840-1860) a series of unequal treaties with the Great Powers forced China to open its door towards the outside world. The need for virgin catechists became even more urgent. The dioceses in China began opening schools for girls, where the full-scale formation of virgin catechists could be carried out.

## ***2.2 The First Schools for Girls in China***

In the second half of the 19th century, many dioceses established special schools or formation centers for virgin catechists. The pioneer in this project was the Jesuit-run Jiangnan Diocese. In 1855, Fr. Luigi Maria Aica, S.J. organized the virgins in Huang Tang, Shanghai, into a community. These virgins were all dedicated to the missionary work of the Church. The other dioceses soon followed their lead:

Besides nurturing the lives and virtues of the virgins, the Church placed special emphasis on their intellectual training. The Church established schools for boys as well as for girls. In 1855, Fr. P. Sicca S.J. started a training program for virgins in Jiangnan. After him, Fr. P. Gonnet provided training for 9 virgins, and equipped them for their future career as teachers to other women, so that they might be able to win non-believers to the Christian faith. The Church continued this project in Zhili. Fr. P. Gonnet established a school in Xianxian in 1876. After that, he established a similar school in Wei-ts'uen. By cultivating the virgins' cultural knowledge and character,

they were able to win the respect of the non-Christians. The virgins studied the Chinese classics as well, but not a very deep explanation of the meaning of the texts was given. In addition, they received some training in the medical sciences. In 1857, Fr. Perny, M.E.P. established a school for girls in Guizhou, where the number of students reached 26 in 1864. (Beckmann, 1931, p.86)

After the First Opium War, the formation program for virgin catechists became more centralized and, at the same time, it became more focused on the techniques of catechetical instruction. All the aspiring virgin catechists had to leave their homes for missionary work in other dioceses, since those who lived with their families were deemed to be unsuitable for such a task. The dioceses differed from each other in the minimum age of the girls and the length of the formation process. In 1892, all students of the girls' school in the southeastern part of Zhili "were at least 20 years old. Those girls who aspired to be catechists or teachers must finish a 5-year course, and must have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. For other students, the novitiate offered a short course which lasted for two to three years. In the apostolic prefecture of Guizhou, the novitiate lasted for two to three years, after which the girls were sent out to serve in schools, or in centers for female catechumens." (燕肅思, 1976, p. 173)

Towards the end of the 19th century, schools offering training for virgin catechists were found in all dioceses. The most important mission of these schools was "to cultivate the spirit of faith and nurture the spiritual lives of their students". (費爾希, p. 11) At the same time, the development of Catholic education provided a reference point for the establishment of girls' schools, especially in the areas of curriculum planning and teaching strategies. The qualities of the virgin catechists were further enhanced by the help of the nuns from Europe.

### ***2.3 Learning and Preaching***

To raise the level of literacy among the girls, some dioceses used alphabet lists to help them learn Chinese characters. For example, Bishop Augustine Henninghaus, S.V.D. established two



religious orders: the Sisters of the Holy Family (a Chinese religious order) and another one made up of catechist girls living with their families. Most of these aspiring virgin catechists were not educated, and hence could not read Chinese. However, they could read the Bible and some Chinese prayer books written in Romanization. The use of the Roman alphabet made it easier for the girls to learn Chinese characters, and in this way they could learn at a faster pace. In the dioceses run by the Society of the Divine Word, all the virgin students and catechists who helped training them knew how to use these Romanization tables. Using a Roman alphabet, these virgins were now able to write letters to each other in Chinese. The same method was adopted by some other dioceses in China. In Fujian, for example, the method of using the Roman alphabet to teach Chinese can be traced back to the Ming dynasty, when Xu Guangqi was still alive. (Leeb, 2001, pp. 31-32) Since the major targets of their work were women and children, the virgin catechists adopted special methods for preaching the Good News. *The Rules for Virgins*, edited by Ma Qingshan in the middle of the Qing dynasty, and *The Rules of the Celibate Life*, published at the beginning of the Republic of China, were two manuals used for the training of virgin catechists. On pp. 17-18 of *The Rules for Virgins*, it is written that “the meaning of words must be adequately explained.... It is a teacher’s responsibility to love all students without favouritism, to teach poor children in the same way as teaching the rich. They should be more patient with those who are less intelligent than others, so that not one of them will be lost”.

In a 1873 pastoral letter, a bishop wrote about the virgin catechists’ work and their method of evangelization: “They should not preach in a way similar to the homily of the priest in the mass, but in a way that is like conversing with other people. They are not allowed to explain the doctrines of the Church to men, except when a man is in danger of death and no other suitable person available.” (燕爾思, 1976, p. 111) Considering that most catechumens were not very well educated, for the teaching method of the virgin catechists, the stress was put more on conversation, rather than lecture. The conversational method was more suitable for women and children because it was more relaxed and lively.

## **2.4 The Characteristics of Qualified Virgin Catechists**

The virgin catechists played an important role in the missionary work of the Church. As long as they had the training necessary for the task, they were the most suitable persons to preach the Christian faith to women, both young and old. (Note 25[24], 燕彙思, p. 110) However, not all the girls who received training in schools could become qualified catechists. Only those who were the *crème de la crème* could be selected as catechists. Since they were the leaders and “the core members among the teachers of the faith”, the Church expected more results from them. In 1784, the Curia gave the following instructions with regard to the age and qualifications of the virgin catechists: “The virgins entrusted with the task of teaching the Catechesis must be at least 30 years old. They must be outstanding in virtue, knowledge and wisdom.” (Coll, 1907, p. 351.) In 1793, Bishop Joannes Desiderius de Saint-Martin added some other points to the original rules: “The female teachers who are responsible for instructing female catechumens must be at least 40 years old. Besides, they must possess the level of knowledge and prudence required of a catechist.” (燕彙思, 1976, p. 111) In addition, this document stresses that the virgin catechists “must acquire adequate training in the Catechism of the Catholic Church”. (沙百里, 2005, p. 234)

Most of the dioceses followed the instructions of the Curia in the selection of virgin catechists. In actual practice, however, they differed from one another concerning the minimum age of the candidates. “In Jinan, in the northeastern part of Shandong province, the minimum age of virgin catechists was 36.” (Tiedemann, 2008 , p. 511) The Church believed that mature catechists must undergo the test of time and of experience of life, so that they could bear greater responsibilities and handle complex situations wisely.

The Society of the Divine Word was one of the most active missionary orders in modern China. In their missionary districts, they reported: “Nobody knows the exact numbers of virgins, because there were so many who were being trained by the nuns. If they had not received any training, they would not have been able to do any missionary work.” (Ortrud Stegmaier, 1975, p. 68) Later, when the government’s ban on Christianity was gradually relaxed,

the dioceses grew as more non-believers were converted to the Christian faith. This led to a demand for “missionary girls”. However, since manpower was still lacking, the Society of the Divine Word decided to change the minimum age of virgin catechists from 40 to 30. More detailed instructions were given on pp. 16-18 of *The Rules of the Celibate Life* with regard to the conduct of the missionary girls:

Missionary girls must be at least 30 years old. If there are not enough workers, even those who are under the age of 30 may go out to preach, but they must not go out without the company of other people. They are not allowed to teach the doctrine to men above the age of 9; but in case of danger of death, and no other suitable persons is available, the missionary girls may preach to them. When a man is serving as commentator in prayer meetings, the girls should not take up the same duty. When preaching the Good News, the missionary sisters should treat their subjects equally. They should not throw temper tantrums or show signs of impatience. They should teach the Catechesis to female catechumens with great effort. They should not engage in gossip. They should inform the priest about any dangers lurking in the dormitory, and in this way they will protect their purity and virtue. When female Catholics are sick or about to pass away, the missionary girls should be there to help, and in this case they may baptize children.

Although each diocese might have its own set of criteria for the selection of virgin catechists, the basic criteria were the same: maturity of age (mostly middle-aged), a reasonably long period of formation, strong faith and perseverance.

Through the formation programs at the girls’ schools and the assessment by church authorities, the communities of virgin catechists gradually matured. Just like their male counterparts, they left their families and went to live in different parishes. They even climbed high mountains and lived in rural villages with non-believers. They helped those who were in need of their love and care. Their hard work won the respect of people for the Church, hence contributing to its glory in human history.

## 2.5 *Types of Virgin Catechists --- Residential and Itinerant Groups*

After the Second Opium War, more and more religious orders came to China and established their missionary districts. The speedy development of the church led to a shortage of labor in certain dioceses. For example, when Johann Baptist Anzer, S.V.D. (1851-1903) came to China in 1880, it was extremely difficult for him to find a capable catechist. Three years after his arrival, he was still unable to find a good female catechist. He said, "I do not have any female catechists who can teach the women here, and that is really a problem. In Taiwangzhuang, the task has been taken up by a 10-year-old girl." (周華德, 1996, p. 64)

From the fact that a 10-year-old girl was asked to be a catechist, we can see how difficult it was for the Society of the Divine Word to spread the Good News in that area. This situation was only alleviated in 1905, when the Sisters of the Holy Spirit came to Shandong and started a training program for young girls. The first girls' school under the supervision of the Society of the Divine Word was established in Bolizhuang. Later it moved to Jining, in order to attract more girls who aspired to live as virgins. As the number of students increased, the length of study time was also increased. More subjects were added to the curriculum, such as the natural sciences which became popular as a result of the modernization of China at that time. (米格, 1997, p. 49)

In the beginning, most of the virgins who took part in the missionary work of the Church stayed with their families. As the Church continued to grow, the virgin catechists were divided into two groups. The itinerant group organized themselves in a parish and sent out catechists to nearby districts. The group called *Xiantanghui* (The Society of the Presentation) in Shanghai is an excellent example of this model. The second kind was the residential group. The virgin catechists lived in a parish where the parish priests celebrated Mass every Sunday. On other days, the missionary young ladies served as the actual persons-in-charge of the parish. Their duties were to organize female believers into groups and teach them the Catechism, attend to the administration of the church and hold catechism classes for children.

The virgin catechists who resided in the parish helped to solve the problem of a shortage of labor. During the late-Qing period, these virgin catechists played an important role in the administration of the parish and the formation of the lay people. There are many records of these residential groups in the Qing dynasty. For example, among the 24 churches in Chuanshating, 12 of them were run by 11 missionary ladies. The others were administered by Chinese or foreign priests. (《教務教案檔》第六輯(二), 1981, pp. 810, 811) From the fact that there were so many missionary ladies within one district, we can see the remarkable increase in the number of virgin catechists and the growth of the Catholic Church in the late-Qing period.

It became almost a norm in the late-Qing period to have one missionary lady managing one church. (There were even some missionary women who had to manage two or more churches.) Besides these residential virgin catechists, there were some communities of virgins who served as charity groups and church management teams at the same time. In Jiading, for example, “there was a church established by French missionaries in the town of Loutang near the Northern Road. The complex was made up of a church, and a building with 6 western-style rooms, male and female chambers, a children’s room and changing rooms. Altogether there were 46 rooms. Along the nearby street there were 39 stone houses, rented out for residence or for business. Altogether there were 91 houses in the same area. A number of virgins lived in the church managed by the French missionary diocese”. (《教務教案檔》第六輯(二), 1981, p. 846) It was obviously a huge parish. The community of virgins served in the school and the nurseries. There must have been some catechists among them.

### **3. The Salaries of the Virgin Catechists**

The rules of the Church governing the catechists did not draw a clear distinction between male and female groups. For example, Bishop Ma Qingshan’s edition of the rules says that catechists should be humble, patient and loving towards other people. Another cleric, named 古拉 thought that catechists should possess five virtues: holiness, love, trustworthiness, altruism and prudence. (林

淑理, 2007, p. 270-271). *The Handbook for Catechists*, edited by Bishop Charles Joseph van Melckebeke, states that catechists should be respectable, faultless, enthusiastic, exemplary in their words and actions, bold, optimistic, prudent and charitable. In the manuals, the basic requirements for catechists were roughly the same, though there may have been differences in the details.

Many of the male catechists were itinerary ones, who accompanied and assisted the priests in their missionary activities. Since the male catechists were married men, they needed to earn a living to support their families. Although male catechists were given a salary, those who were very enthusiastic about the job were rare. In the late-Qing period, it became increasingly difficult for priests to find a qualified itinerary catechist. A priest of the Society of the Divine Word talked about the situation of catechists in Shandong in one of his letters: "30 to 40 years ago, there were only a few Christians. A missionary had to manage one to five churches. Therefore, the parishioners often had to take care of themselves. Missionaries paid monthly visits to the parishes and lived with the Catholics there for a few weeks. It is impossible nowadays to know the cost of living at that time. It was easier back then to hire a good catechist, for there was a catechist in each church. Every month he received a salary of one to two dollars. Now the situation has changed. The number of Catholics in Shandong has increased from 150 to 150,000. The other dioceses have also witnessed a remarkable increase in the number of believers. Our method of preaching, however, has not changed much. This is because we do not have enough catechists. What we do have at the moment is a devoted villager who does not know how to read or write, and he is in charge of the catechetical and spiritual formation of the laity. There are some catechists who can serve as teachers, but they cannot teach in catechetical schools because they are not respected by the lay Catholics. Each month we pay them two to three dollars as their salary. These men, however, can only serve in winters. They have to tend their fields during the summer. Therefore, if we want to hire reliable, outstanding and educated catechists, we must increase their salary." (Stenz, 1928, p. 306)

The growth of the Church led to an improvement in the catechists' organization and management. One of these

improvements was the standardization of the catechists' responsibilities and salaries. For this reason, *The Handbook for Catechists* stated: "Catechist-missionaries who contribute to the evangelization of the Church should be given a salary. Their pay need not be very high, but it should be enough for one to support his family. The Church derives its income mainly from donations. The pay can be reduced if a catechist proves himself to be irresponsible. However, if the catechists are willing to take on jobs outside of his immediate responsibilities, his pay may be increased accordingly. Each month the priest should make a record of the salary paid. All of us, however, should not work simply for monetary rewards, but for God and for the good of the Church, as well as for one's eternal reward." (*The Rules of Catechists*, 1934, pp. 450-451)

Towards the end of the Qing dynasty, the economic power of the Church grew considerably. The Society of the Divine Word gave the male and female catechists (including orphans) a monthly salary of five to six francs. The catechists, however, used their salaries to "help the poor and the sick, to donate to primary schools or to help build chapels for prayer". (費爾希, pp. 241-242)

Generally speaking, the rules governing the payment of salaries in *The Handbook for Catechists* concern male catechists only. Compared with the male catechists who had to support their families, the remuneration of the virgin catechists was much easier to handle. The virgin catechists in Shandong, for example, "were less well-paid than their male colleagues, because they did not need to support their families. They could use the money in the way they wished. Some of them even owned land. Outstanding virgin catechists offered up their salaries to support missionary work or to decorate of churches. Very often they would offer all or part of their income to support those missionaries who needed financial assistance". (Lange, 1929, p. 101-102.)

Although their salary was very low--sometimes they received nothing for their work--the virgin catechists supported the Church with their humble income. In this way, they demonstrated their dedication to missionary work. In the diocese of Shanghai, it was part of the tradition for virgin catechists to work without pay. They "served the Church with one heart and mind. They did not get paid

for their work at the church, and they had to conduct small businesses to support themselves. They devoted their whole life to the service of the Church”. (金魯賢, p. 15) The virgin catechists showed their spirit of altruism, service and sacrifice through their hard work, and “the Church should never forget the contribution of these great women”. (金魯賢, p. 15)

## 4. The Role and Contribution of Virgin Catechists

### 4.1 *Their Role: to Serve the Lowest Stratum of the Society*

The roles of the virgin catechists were manifold. They were the bridge between missionaries and female believers, the spiritual teacher of children, the backbone of charitable work, and organizers and participants of the activities of the Church. Since the missionary young ladies worked in rural areas, it was easy for them to get in touch with the poorest people in China. They played an important role in carrying out the evangelical projects of the Church.

The virgin catechists embraced the evangelization work of the Church as their lifelong mission. The Church relied greatly on the virgin catechists because of their knowledge, capabilities, perseverance and sense of responsibility. However, this does not mean that the virgin catechists were just aloof catechetical teachers. P. 7 of *The Handbook for Catechists* specifies that they had to “prepare the children for their First Communion, encourage and admonish those female believers whose faith was not yet firm, and decorate altars”.

The first stage in the missionary ladies’ success laid in the most ordinary things. Since it was difficult for priests to enter villages, it was a wise choice to rely on the catechists for the management of village churches. At the same time, many of the “missionary men” were married, and their identity as husbands made it more convenient for them to preach in the villages. However, most of the time, the majority of converts were women. Therefore, the virgin catechists’ missionary work was indispensable. Not only was it a trend in the development of the Church, but it was also one of its missionary strategies. Most of the virgin catechists worked in impoverished villages. They served women and children,



the most needy strata of society and the “smallest of all”. Using their medical and scientific knowledge, the virgin catechists took turns to visit these villages and preached Christ’s love to the poorest brothers and sisters, who did not have a chance to catch up with modern civilization.

#### ***4.2 Their Contribution: Setting a Good Example for All Christians***

燕肅思 wrote, “In Chinese society where the customs governing the interaction between males and females were very rigid, the virgin catechists played an indispensable role in providing formation for women and in organizing religious activities for them.” (燕肅思, 1976, p. 111) The number of virgin catechists increased as time went by. In the apostolic vicariate of Zhili, the believers were more organized. From 1906 to 1907, the number of catechists (including both male and female groups) was 1048. (范文興、耿永順等, 2005, p. 111) In the 1930s, there were more virgin catechists than the male ones: “In the parishes, public schools, primary schools and nurseries, there were 620 male teachers and 680 female virgin teachers. They were the most capable helpers in the evangelical work of the diocese. They were very hardworking and continued to reap great harvest from their work.” (劉欽明, 1938, p. 817)

As lay people, the virgin catechists won the appreciation of the laity and the praises of their superiors through the contributions they made to the development of the Church. 林昭, a virgin catechist from Guizhou, was sent to preach the Good News among the Miao villages in Langdai. (1854-1856) The administrator of the diocese Paul Perny (代理主教童文獻) said of her work, “This parish would not have survived without her.” (沙百里, 2005, p. 236) The German Bishop Augustin Henninghaus, S.V.D also wrote in his report, “In recent decades, the Church in Europe has been increasingly aware of the important role of lay people. We are glad to see the same trend taking place in Church’s evangelical work in China. In spite of her limited size and poverty, she successfully utilises the power of the lay people in preaching the Christian faith. How could the missionary activities of the Church continue without

the male and female catechists, as well as their leaders? Yet these people are only lay members in the Church.” (費爾希, p. 109)

In modern times, the formation of the catechists became more systematic. This helped to increase their knowledge of culture, catechetics and theology. The missionary ladies in Shandong, for example, “taught things with accuracy and straightforwardness. Although the courses for men and women were the same, the virgin catechists excelled in their enthusiasm, dedication and exemplary behaviour.” (Lange, 1929. p.101.) The missionaries’ praise and affirmation of their work reflected the virgin catechists’ spirit of sacrifice. Their work was in many respects better than that of their male colleagues. The missionary young ladies proved that they were indeed “the best servants of the faith and a major force in winning new believers”. (Entenmann, 1996. p.186.)

In the beginning of the 20th century, Pope Benedict XV encouraged single women to serve the Church and society. In his famous encyclical on missionary work, he acknowledged the work of the virgin catechists:

We cannot go further without saying something about the work that is being done by women, for since the very earliest days of the Church they have always been remarkable for their diligence and zeal in assisting the preachers of the gospel. We want to single out here, and single out for our highest praise, those many women who have vowed their virginity to God and have gone on to pursue their vocation on the missions. There they have devoted themselves to the education of children and to a great many other works of charity and devotion. This recognition of their achievements will, we hope, encourage these sisters, and inspire them to make further efforts on behalf of the Church. We hope too that they will hold fast to the conviction that the usefulness of their work will increase in proportion to the care they give to their own spiritual perfection. (Pope Benedict XV, *Maximum Illud*, No. 30)

The virgin catechists were women who “broke through the cultural barriers of communication”. (樂培寬, p. 111) The foundation of their work was their calling to be “the salt of the earth

and light of the world". Their spirit was one of dedication to God, and their lives were governed by the virtues of sacrifice, poverty and service. They set an excellent example for all lay members of the Church to follow.