

From Non-believer to “Disciple” of St. Paul

Faith Press

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From August 17-19, 2012, the Eighth “Friends of Faith Press” exchange seminar was held in Shijiazhuang, Hebei Province, China. A Catholic lady wearing a long skirt, gave an eloquent and lively talk, without notes, for a whole afternoon. She shared about her miraculous conversion, about her re-birth after going to Rome on pilgrimage, and about traveling all over China preaching the Gospel in the spirit of St. Paul. She made a deep impression on the members of the audience. They broke up into small groups of 3-5 persons, and spent a long time discussing what she had said. It was as if they entered into her world and became part of her. The speaker was a Catholic from Tianjin’s Xikai Church by the name of Wang Yifang.

I. A Mysterious Conversion

In 1994, a wave of unemployment swept through Tianjin. One day when she went to work, an irate worker stormed into the office looking for he manager. At that time Wang Yifang was a clerk in that office. Earlier the manager had given her instructions: “If someone comes into the office looking for me, say I am not here.” Thus, in accordance with the manager’s instructions, she told the worker that the manager was not there. By coincidence, just as the words left her mouth, the manager unexpectedly walked into the office. That worker suddenly throttled the manager’s throat, and shouted: “You fired me. Now the two of us are going to jump out the window. You bosses get fat by drinking the blood of the workers, and destroy our business. There is nothing we can do but kill ourselves.” As he was being dragged over to the window, the manager feared for his life. So he quickly promised the worker that he would hire him back. In that way he avoided a lot of trouble.

For someone who had just graduated from university, and entered the working world, that incident was a great shock to Wang Yifang. She could not help but think of a previous matter. One time when the manager was entertaining the leaders, he spent 10,000 yuan on one meal for 6 people. Another time, for the alleged purpose of examination and study, they traveled all over China, touring famous mountains and rivers. Her conscience continually bothered her. She felt that she could not continue with this way of life. Therefore, she began to come in contact with religion. She went to Tianjin's Temple of Great Compassion. The abbot gave her the book *An Introduction to Buddhism*. As she read the book, she became more and more interested in Buddhism. She hesitated for 7 years, thinking about whether or not she should enter the abbey. She did not do so then, but, she did burn incense on the big feasts several times.

In 2001, she prepared to enter the Buddhist monastery. The abbot asked her to memorize the "Incantations of Great Compassion." She memorized the first 13 sentences, but then choked up when she got to the 14th. She tried for three days, but still could not memorize it. The abbot said: "Let your heart quiet down, then you can do it." But the young novice's heart would not calm down. She became disheartened.. She said to herself: "Old men and old ladies can memorize the text, why can I not do so? It must be because the Buddha does not want me." Crestfallen, she began the journey back home. On the way, she passed the Sikai Church. A sign on the door caught her attention. It read: "Class begins today." She immediately went in and registered. Wang Yifang was attracted to the Catholic faith from the first day's lecture onwards. She attended the classes for three months, and did not miss a day. On April 23, 2001, she and the 50 brothers and sisters in her catechumenate class were baptized, and she entered the great family of the Catholic Church.

II. Someone Who Touched The Pope's Clothes

How was she to become a fervent Christian? A passage from the Scriptures came to mind: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." (Mt. 5:3) She stored her fashionable

clothes and got rid of her jewelry, including her ring. She then wore simple clothes bought off the rack. She also cut her hair short. In April 2005, making use of the opportunity to go abroad to visit relatives, she made a pilgrimage to Rome. Afterwards she went to Assisi, where she stayed for one week. While she was praying in front of St. Francis' grave, a person like her, who never cried, suddenly found tears pouring from her eyes. On the train back to Rome, she heard that Assisi has another saint. She got off the train at the next stop, returned to Assisi, and spent another week at the home of St. Clare.

On May 15, the Feast of Pentecost, she went with a crowd of pilgrims to participate in the inauguration ceremony of Pope Benedict XVI. As the Holy Father was walking towards of St. Peter's Basilica, everyone began to yell: "Baba, Baba." Wang Yifang asked people standing nearby: "Who is that?" Everyone answered: "That's Pope Benedict XVI." She was sorry that she did not see the Holy Father's face. When the ceremony was over, she squeezed up to the front. In the midst of the crowd, the Holy Father spotted an Asian face, and his footsteps took him in Wang's direction. Wang Yifang was able to touch the Pope's vestments, and she thought of the woman with the hemorrhage in the Gospels. She hoped that she could be cured of some terrible headaches she was having. After her stay in Rome, she went to Lourdes in France, and her headaches completely disappeared.

She became more fervent in Lourdes. She decided to imitate the volunteers there, and spend the whole year serving the pilgrims. A Chinese priest she met there told her that she could serve the Church in many places around the world. Why not return to China and preach the Gospel there?

III. A Happy Evangelist

When she returned to Tianjin, the pastor asked her to share with the Catholics what she had heard and seen on her pilgrimage to Rome. She spoke with ease for two hours. The Catholics were greatly moved. When the pastor saw the good results, he scheduled three more lectures. The venues were all filled to capacity. Later, when the parish held a catechumenate, they arranged for Wang

Yifang to take some of the classes. After teaching for a short period of time, her consciousness of the faith became very strong. When she met someone who did not yet know Jesus, she could not hold herself back from preaching the Gospel to that person.

She had previously known many Buddhist friends. So she first preached the Gospel to them. She would first describe her pilgrimage to Rome, and then she told them about the spiritual uplift she received after being baptised. When her friends heard her words and saw her actions, they were greatly impressed. Over 30 of them received baptism.

A short time after she returned from Rome, a Catholic introduced her to a non-Catholic relative of his, who was suffering from cancer. This sick person liked to talk to her and trusted her very much. One day the sick person went to the church to look for her. Just at that time, Wang Yifang had gone to teach a doctrine class outside the city. In the afternoon of the same day, the son of the sick person went to Wang Yifang's home, and in a choked-up voice told her: "My mother jumped into the river today from the Guangming Bridge." This tragedy greatly shocked her. She beat her breast and regretted that she had not gone first to visit the sick person. Now a soul was lost. From that time on, she made the salvation of souls her priority. In order to conveniently contact people, on her mobile phone Wang Yifang had the names of over 30 godchildren, of non-Catholics who have asked for her help, and of persons who are seriously ill. Every month, her phone bill amounts to over 300 Rmb. The Catholics are always bringing their non-Catholic relatives and friends to her. Intellectuals also seek her out. After listening to Wang Yifang preach the doctrine, many of them receive baptism and enter the church. In the past seven years, more than 100 persons have been baptized after studying the doctrine one on one with Wang Yifang.

Moreover, much of her time is spent in each parish of the diocese teaching catechism classes or leading Bible study sessions. Thus, in her limited time, she is saving many more people.

Wang Yifang grew up smothered in the love of her mother and father. School and work both went smoothly. She grew up to be a formidable person in the family. Her opinion carried the day, she had an overbearing attitude, she did not respect her mother-in-law,

and she did not know how to love others. After taking up the work of evangelization, she gradually changed. She said: "I was not acting very well, so how could I preach the Gospel!" After that she would return home with a smile on her face. She took the initiative to do the household chores. Relations with her mother-in-law improved. She became friends with her children. Her family saw that she had cast off her old self, and had become a new person. They greatly admired her, and supported her in her work for the Church.

In 2007, her fame had spread far and wide. Priests from outside the Tianjin Diocese invited her to give lessons in their places. Her footprints were left in Henan, Shanxi, Shandong, Jiangsu, Guangdong, Sichuan, Inner Mongolia, Shanghai, Fushun and other places. She went to Hebei at least more than 20 times.

One time she went to a country village on the border between Nanjing and Zhenjiang. to give doctrine classes. The village leader sent someone with a bicycle to receive her. It had just rained and the road had turned to mud. The bicycle fell into a fish pond. She was covered with so much mud that she looked like a "Terracotta Warrior." But in order to not waste time, she continued on her journey. When she arrived at her destination, she took off her outer garment, wiped the mud off of it, and walked into the classroom.

Wang Yifang had grown up in a big city, and she was used to big city ways. She specially disliked country toilets. However, she thought of Saint Francis and St. Clare, and about how they grew up in houses of nobility. Yet, for love of God, they went out on the street to beg. So, with a stiff upper lip, she sallied forth. Her sisters said of her: "The delicate Wang Yifang can sleep in a hotel, or in a chicken coop."

Wang Yifang can also sing and dance. After becoming involved in evangelization, she is completely happy. Her happy attitude and words are infectious for everyone who hears her. She is a firm believer in St. Paul's words about "becoming all things to all men." She advocates adapting the teachings of the Scriptures to the environment and to the times, in order to save souls. In catechism classes she likes to use jingles, or rhymed verses, to get across the doctrine. She also likes to use song and dance to more easily allow the contents of the faith to enter into the daily life of city dwellers.

Everyone likes to attend her classes, which are almost always completely filled.

From 2010 onwards, at Wang's initiation, the Catholic community of Raoyang County in Hebei Province have put on Catholic cultural performances on the street on several hot summer evenings. Over 100 non-Catholics participate in them each time. Many of them eventually become baptized. Under her inspiration, the Sisters of Anguo, Hebei Province, have likewise organized cultural street performances for evangelization. These have created a lot of good feeling. Her "inculturated evangelization methods" have been well received by all, and have produced a lot of good fruit. She is very familiar with the psychology and personality traits of women. In seminars, she analyzes the reasons for the contradictions between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law and the arguments between husbands and wives. Her presentations are reasonable, clear and factual. They compel agreement among the listeners. Whether from near Tianjin or from far away in other parts of the country, many church communities vie with one another to invite her to their women's classes or marriage preparation classes. The results of her classes are all very satisfactory. For seven years Wang Yifang has participated in over 100 doctrine classes, summer camps and Bible study groups. She has also given lectures to priests and Sisters. By word and example, she encourages them to get involved in evangelization, and many of them do so.

IV. Actions Speak Louder Than Words

Wang Yifang, who has just turned 50, has a happy family. Her husband is a well-educated, disciplined intellectual. He realizes that his wife is doing a righteous work. He not only does not oppose her, but he has also supports her. He only told her: "Do not accept money from anyone." In seven years, only once did she receive money for a plane ticket. That was because some one had secretly put the money in her luggage, and she only discovered it when she got home. Sometimes, the neighbors wonder why Wang Yifang leaves home so frequently. Her husband has told them: "The Catholic Church has Ten Commandments. If you violate any one of them, you will go to hell. So, I am completely at ease when my wife

goes away.” Actually, since his wife’s fame has spread far and wide, he is very proud of her. However, he has not yet received baptism.

For the sake of the Gospel Wang Yifang has undergone a lot of pain and suffering. The neighbors may criticize her, but they have seen that she has given up a good job and a good salary to go forth to preach the Gospel, using only her own family’s money. They have been deeply moved. Moreover, they have been convinced of her genuineness by her sacrificial spirit.

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