

# *Journeying Deep: A Call for the Catholic Church in China To Be More Rooted in Society*

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*Sr. Lina delivered this paper as part of a panel of Chinese Priests and Sisters at the U.S. Catholic China Bureau Convention, October 4-6, 2013, at Loyola University, Chicago*

When I first left China in the year 2000 to take up theological training in the Philippines, China was in the midst of rapid change. She was trying to leave poverty, filth and shame behind, to take a place on the international stage with a new image, an image full of energy and force. China finally joined the World Trade Organization in 2001 after fifteen years of applying for membership. In 2002, most people in China were no longer living in hunger or without shelter. China was ready to move to the next stage of economic growth.

The Catholic Church in China then was in desperate need of almost everything: good formation and theological training for the clergy, religious Sisters and lay people, the integration of belief and daily life, the call to express and live out their faith on a social level, and to communicate and dialogue with non-Christians.

When I returned to China in August, 2012, the needs of the Catholic Church in China were still vast and urgent. But I also noticed that quite a number of differences had emerged in the last ten years. First, theological training in general had improved quite a lot. Moreover, candidates of religious communities and seminarians were now crossing diocesan and provincial borders, which was not the case previously.

Secondly, the role of the laity in the Church had become more and more indispensable, and was recognized as such. Lay people also feel a general need to study the Bible and theology, beyond the catechism level. They make an effort to find time to study their faith more deeply, to take guided retreats, and to form Christian communities.

Thirdly, there is a general awareness that we should deepen our Christian faith within the Chinese context, and together. This is the only way that the Catholic Church in China can have some social impact.

On the social level, people's lives have improved to the extent that they are no longer satisfied with just being capable of meeting their basic daily needs, but rather they want to live quality lives. A most common, noticeable phenomenon now in China is that in every park and open space, even in villages in the country side, groups of people are singing, dancing, and exercising, in the evenings and on the weekends. It seems that China's pace has slowed down and now is the time to get more rooted.

Dr. Leopold Leeb, SVD, who since 1995, has been studying Chinese philosophy and teaching ancient languages in Beijing, said that China is now experiencing a new period of Renaissance. He reckons that every Chinese should get more familiar not only with ancient Chinese culture, but with Western culture as well, to be able to appreciate both and to integrate them. I agree with him wholeheartedly. For China to grow in a healthy and mature way, she has to be more rooted in both Chinese and Western culture, and in traditional values, like honesty, trust, generosity, compassion, flexibility, and tolerance.

I believe that the Catholic Church in China can contribute something to this process, and that Christian values have to be really integrated into Chinese culture. I am going to share five interrelated points in this presentation that I think the Catholic Church in China should focus on: the call to cooperate, the importance of discernment, the necessity to inculturate Christian values into Chinese society, the way of dialogue, and for the Church to become a house of prayer.

## The Call to Cooperate

I would like to describe the Catholic Church in China with an image: we are like a bucket made of bamboo clappers of different lengths; how much water this bucket can contain does not depend on the longest bamboo clapper, but on the shortest. The better formed religious communities, seminaries and dioceses have to help the lesser developed ones. This is not simply an obligation, but it is our mission, a “must,” the essence of being Catholic.

“Cooperation” here does not simply mean “working together”, for example, the dioceses with more priests sending a few to the places where priests are scarce, or the better formed religious communities helping those in need, in terms of helping to organize a general chapter. Advice is also needed regarding maintaining a delicate balance between a diocesan religious community (as most of the religious communities in China are) and being independent and autonomous. Religious communities also need to get together and share their formation programs and management skills. We have been doing these important tasks for a number of years. Now we need to cooperate on a deeper level.

By “cooperation” here I mean that we need “to work as a team.” To put it into other words, we are not only doing things together, but we are united in the effort to integrate Christian faith and social life, for the wellbeing of both the Catholic Church and Chinese society. We need to plan our future and put our resources together. This is difficult to achieve since there is no organization in China, like the Catholic Bishops’ Conference, to plan strategies on the national level. But that does not mean it is impossible. We need a vision that is inclusive of others, and a genuine spirit of generosity. That is the spirit of a real missionary, to think on behalf of the other.

We have to consider the benefit of the local community as the priority of our mission, not our own benefit. It is by generous giving that we receive, not to receive first so that we can give later. This requires us to think on a broader plane than ourselves, as individuals and communities. However, we are still in the learning process. We still need to find effective ways to “work as a team,” and to “put our resources together”. How we shall do these things brings me to my second point: the importance of discernment.

## The Importance of Discernment

Discernment is vital for the Church in China, on both the personal and the communal levels. This is the point I want to stress the most. The Catholic Church in China needs to grow on several aspects in this regard:

First, there is still a rather high percentage of Catholics who consider faith as a means to gain things. These things may not necessarily mean only material things. They may refer to spiritual gains, like peace and tranquility. Nevertheless, the focus is on gains and on self, rather than on having a relationship with God, on committing one's life to God. Discernment is essential to form responsible believers with authentic faith.

Second, some devout Catholics have a sense of superiority and "doctrinal security", a feeling of somehow being better off. This makes it difficult to form communities of trust, compassion and tolerance. Fr. Thomas Green says very well in his book on discernment that humility and charity are essential qualities of truly discerning persons. A soul "truly open to the Lord is never marked by angry self-righteousness or restless intolerance."<sup>1</sup> We need to form accommodating and encouraging communities where all types of people feel welcomed and accepted.

Third, there is the tendency of "working for God," rather than "doing God's work." One has to be a very prayerful person, sensitive to God's will to be able to distinguish between the two. Discernment makes this possible.

Fourth, in personal and communal decision making, the focus is on solving emerging problems, instead of finding out where our inner energy is leading us. So the decision made is not based on strength as in good discernment, but on weakness. Meanwhile, communal decision making becomes following the opinion of the majority. This is "'the tyranny of the majority,' a way of attaching God's name to what most of the group want, or believe He must

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas H. Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1984) pp. 69-70.



want... a way of manipulating God to agree with our convictions concerning action and decision making.”<sup>2</sup>

In order to make the Catholic Church in China a discerning community, we need first discerning individuals, individuals that are rooted in prayer and in tune with the way that God works.

### **The Necessity to Inculturate Christian Values into Society**

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Matteo Ricci finally succeeded in sowing the seeds of Christianity in China. He emphasized the inner connections between Christianity and Chinese culture. He did not introduce Christianity as entirely foreign or new, but affirmed that the Chinese people always believed in God, and that Christianity is the completion of their faith. Ricci and his Jesuit confreres adapted the Chinese Confucian scholars’ life style and accommodated the Chinese rites of venerating one’s ancestors into Christianity. This approach proved effective. However, it was not readily accepted by the Catholic Church as a whole. The Chinese Rites controversy, which had a long negative effect, lasted for several centuries.

One of the negative effects is that Christianity remains a foreign religion in China up to now. The Catholic Church in China does not have her own theology. There is still a long way to go to fully integrate Christian and Chinese values. The “cultural Christians” in China have been trying to bridge Christianity and Chinese culture on the intellectual level. However, they avoid the most important aspect of Christianity, namely, faith. Chinese Catholics, on the other hand, still approach Catholicism from a Western point of view. Biblical and theological formation in the Catholic Church in China remains mainly Western-rooted. Thus there is a gap between “cultural Christians” and Catholic believers.

I think that in order for Catholicism to become more rooted in China, we Chinese Catholics have to adopt the method of Matteo Ricci. We must affirm the values of Chinese culture, dialogue with Chinese intellectuals, and make the Christian faith our very own. Our current way of teaching theology and the Bible is within the Catholic or Christian circle. However, we have to be more open and

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find new ways to study and do theology in a Chinese way. We must make our Catholic faith more enriched by our Chinese culture, so that it can be more accessible and understandable to the ordinary Chinese.

### **The Way to Dialogue**

Dialogue is an attitude of life; it requires openness, honesty, and a humble realization that I am not holding the whole truth. Real dialogue can only happen between equal partners. At the present time in China, the Chinese Catholics need to have a dialogic attitude in life. The traditional way of evangelization with an emphasis on only baptized Catholics can be saved is not theologically correct, and it definitely cannot foster dialogue.

Chinese society in general still does not understand Catholicism. This is partly due to the social and political situation in China, and partly because Catholics are not used to introducing their faith to the general public. Catholicism exists on the margins of Chinese society, but many Catholics still think that others have to come to the Catholic Church to be baptized in order to have eternal life. They try to convince others of the truth of Catholic faith. They do not listen to their problems and difficulties first. When Eugenio Scalfari interviewed Pope Francis, the Pope said that proselytism is solemn nonsense; you first have to meet people and listen to them. This should be the meaning of evangelization in China, to “meet people and listen to them,” and to be dialogic partners with them.

### **To Become a House of Prayer**

Samuel Balentine wrote that the Church has no higher calling than to realize its commission to become a house of prayer. Prayer is of itself an act of ministry that ties together God and humanity.<sup>3</sup> He says that prayer is not “just a preparatory ritual antecedent to real ministry. It is one of the principle means by which the Church

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Balentine, *Prayer*, pp. 272-288.

participates concretely as a co-worker with God in accomplishing the divine will for the world.”<sup>4</sup>

The role of the Church as a house of prayer is extremely important for Chinese society. On the one hand, the Church has to keep the community and the world together in God by proclaiming a transcendent reality that pervades all of life’s experiences. By doing so, the Church promotes and enables an ongoing dialogue between God and humanity, and helps humanity to turn away from the self and to focus on God, in both pain and joy. On the other hand, being committed in prayer enables the Catholic community to have fidelity on earth, and to live out God’s justice and compassion in different situations.

The Catholic Church in China has to be continually shaped by the reality of God; it then can in turn shape the reality of China.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 272.