

## *Chinese Believers' Views on Pope Francis' Church for the Poor*

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Pope Francis was elected on March 13, 2013 and inaugurated six days later as the 266<sup>th</sup> pope to lead the 1.2 billion Catholics worldwide. At the inaugural liturgy, the new Pope urged all the faithful to be guardians of creation and of the environment and to serve the most vulnerable and poorest people. He declared that he chose the name “Francis” because St. Francis of Assisi was a man of poverty, a man of peace, and a man who loved and protected creation “How I would like to see a Church which is poor, and for the poor!” he declared. ([www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)) The 76-year-old Holy Father is the first Jesuit pope and the first pope from the Americas, and from outside of Europe. He gives an example of leading a simple life in the Church by carrying his own briefcase and not living in the Apostolic Palace. He demonstrated his care for the weak and the poor by washing the feet of inmates during the Holy Week, and embracing the weak and the disabled. He criticized economic systems, and prayed at Lampedusa, in southern Italy, where illegal migrants died and buried in the seawaters. Some media have described Francis as “a Pope for the Poor.” (*Times*, July 30, 2013). Like his predecessors, Pope Francis stresses the importance and the power of prayer.

As China has developed rapidly in recent decades, the nation has emerged to be the world's second largest economy. The lives of the Chinese people, including Catholics, have greatly changed. How do the Chinese Catholics view Pope Francis' desire to have “a poor Church for the poor?” *Tripod* sent questionnaires to Catholics in China between April and May 2013 to seek their opinions. The following questions were asked:

1. Pope Francis said: "How I would like a Church which is poor and for the poor!" From the experience in your local Church, how do you respond to his call? How can this be promoted in China?
2. On Pope Francis' call for a poor Church, how will such a way of life influence the Church in China? How does it challenge the lifestyles of Church leaders in China?
3. Pope Francis said that if the Church is not Christ-centered, it will remain as a charitable NGO. Do you see signs of this in your local Church? How do you avoid this crisis?
4. Pope Francis said: "The Church in China is always in my heart." What is your expectation of him? How can he help develop the Church in China?

About 20 responses were received, including from bishops, priests, Sisters, a deacon and laypeople from both the open (official) and underground (unofficial) Church communities. The responses came from Tianjin municipality, Gansu, Hebei, Hubei, Inner Mongolia, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Shanxi and Yunnan provinces. Most respondents had a seminary or religious formation background. Some were returnees from overseas studies. Due to the diverse background of the respondents, it was not easy to summarize and consolidate their opinions. The findings showed: (1) Most of them agreed that serving the poor is of utmost importance to the Church. They appreciated Pope Francis' simple life and his care for the poor in words and in deeds. (2) With an improved economy and livelihood, China is faced with a serious disparity of wealth that is causing a lot of social unrest. Such realities have an impact on Church development and on Christian values in China. (3) Clergy and Sisters in China, who have had a weak formation, are affected negatively by a materialistic life and secularized values. (4) Few Church people or communities in flourishing areas are taking initiatives to help Church communities in poverty-stricken areas. (5) Churches in economically developed areas should actively help those Catholics living in impoverished areas with scarce resources. This will eventually help evangelization work in China as a whole. (6) Few respondents attempted to answer the question on NGOs, probably because they did not fully understand the question or the

concept of non-governmental organizations. The following excerpts are taken from the responses on the issues.

### **1. Pope Francis' call for 'Church for the Poor' appreciated**

On the call for “a poor Church for the poor” and living a simple life, Bishop John Wang Ruowang of Tianshui, Gansu, said: “This is the problem faced by the Church in China today. A Church of simple life brings about stability and development in the Church. Located in an impoverished area, our diocese has long been poor and backward, with no source of income.” As in other parts of the country, he said, their local Church had been severely damaged by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Like other parts of China, his Church was restored after the Chinese government implemented the reform and open door policy in the late 1970s. However, since then, some Catholics have viewed the Church hierarchy in a different way: “We love Jesus, but not His Church,” they say. They did not understand the nature of the oneness of the Church and they caused divisions. The Church suffered tremendously in addition to its problem of having no resources. An urgent need for his diocese, Bishop Wang, ordained in 2011, said “was re-formation for the priests, seminarians and Sisters. They need a clear direction in life. Serving the poor and living a simple life can be the goal of their consecrated life.” He noted that the Church must “resist vigorously a secularized life and serve the suffering. Richer dioceses in China should generously help the poorer ones.”

Other respondents agreed that the Church should counter secularization, and that parishes and dioceses with more resources should help those in poverty. Bishop Wu Junwei of Yuncheng (Xinjiang), Shanxi, said, “The Lord Jesus always defended the poor and the weak. Today’s Chinese Church does not take good care of the poor, as its human and material resources are insufficient for evangelization. On the contrary, some Church communities have spent lavishly on church buildings and celebrations. If there is a real need for such events, they can do it in a simple and more practical manner.”

## **2. The Clergy should lead a simple life**

As mentioned above, an imbalance in economic growth in recent decades has given rise to problems of a disparity between rich and poor, and in the areas of corruption, health, education, and housing. With desires for an improved livelihood, young adults from rural areas are migrating in huge numbers to the cities and the coastal regions. This widens the gap between the rural and urban areas economically and socially. Father Zhang Jingfeng of Chifeng, Inner Mongolia, described the Church in Chinese society as “like a small boat floating in a wavy sea, going forward with difficulties. The Church is weak and has limited space to grow.” Chinese Catholics traditionally resided in the countryside. Most of them are not well off. This is also the case when they move to the big cities. No matter where they are, Catholics should care more about poor people, and bring them to Church. Actually many of the rich suffer emptiness in life, he said. Father Zhang suggested clergy “must first give good example by living in the spirit of the poor, and serving the weak and marginalized. Concrete actions can be offering material support to students in poor regions, providing free medical services and relief aid, and helping the disabled and the elderly. Better-off Churches can establish funds to assist the poor and develop plans for longer term projects. For Catholics living in poverty-stricken areas, they can serve the poor too by their living witness of bringing Jesus to the people.”

Other respondents agreed that clergy must live a simple life. Father John Mi Shen of Zhaoxian diocese, Hebei, noted that the Pope's call was timely and urgent. The Church in China is much affected by materialistic and consumerist values, he thought. Some clergy have neglected to live a simple of life and have forgotten to take care of the poor. He accepted the Holy Father's call is to ask all Catholics to “examine” the real meaning of our mission. In China, the Catholics, especially the clergy, should show more concern about social problems and help the people at the grassroots level to give voice to their needs and interests.”

Father Mi said that the Chinese people's personal growth and the pace of a fast-developing economy in China seem disproportionate. Some people become “heartless” when they get

rich. "That certain people get rich first is not bad, but the problem arises if the rich have no heart, and are unwilling to share their possessions with others. It creates a situation of 'more money, less love; more wealth, less heart.'" Father Mi wrote, "We need to defend the dignity of the poor, and help the rich to attain a goal in life, and nurture a loving heart. The Church can use the media to spread the values of the Gospel and the idea of spiritual poverty. The faithful have to bear witness to spiritual poverty in their daily lives. They should follow the example of Pope Francis, who took a bus and cooked his own meals. This is not a question of how much we possess, but a matter of how much we have, and how effectively we use it. It is a question of attitude in our lives."

President Xi Jinping's "Chinese Dream" is a way for China to promote the Chinese spirit, and to create cohesion for Chinese power, as the Chinese government has said. Likewise, Father Joseph Li, also from Hebei, has described the Pope's saying "a poor Church for the poor" as "a dream of the Church" and a way of promoting Gospel values in today's society. Jesus begins the Beatitudes with "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs." (Matthew 5:3) It articulates the characteristics of the Church, he said. "All Christians should live with a body and a soul, being on earth but with our hearts in Heaven. This journey is a challenging invitation. We must always see Jesus in the poor."

A priest in northern China also highlighted the importance of the spiritual life. "In China, we still have poor people, such as abandoned babies and abandoned children, and people living in remote mountain regions. Christians should show more love and hope to them to help them to overcome spiritual emptiness. Pope Francis brings good news to the Chinese people because he lives and cares for the poor. He is a model for Church leaders."

Father Cao Laichao of Zhouzhi, Shaanxi, added that serving others is an expression of the virtue of charity. He agreed that the Church in China needs to promote charitable work, such as clinics, homes for handicapped children and educational institutions. Church people should also visit the sick and the elderly.

### **3. The poorest are those deprived of an education**

Sister Mary Shen of Shanxi responded: "I'm touched by Pope Francis' call to have a Church for the poor. Saint Francis of Assisi and Pope Francis seem to be the same person. Both are insightful, and able to see the shortcomings of modern society. Both are compassionate towards the poor." She said that she herself did not experience extreme poverty in her area. Instead, she grew up in a resourceful environment. She made the point that the poorest are those who are denied the right to an education, the right to taking part in social affairs and the right to have an identity. "There are people in spiritual and emotional poverty, as they suffer from a lack of support from others. These people are increasing at all levels of society. Families neglect their elderly members due to a busy life. Working parents do not give proper care to their children. Loads of schoolwork prevent the youngsters from enjoying leisure activities and from being involved in social concerns."

Father Tao Zhibin of Dali, Yunnan, who administers the sacraments and does pastoral work in mountain areas, said: "What Pope Francis mentioned is what our priests here are trying to do. We often visit Catholics living in impoverished and scattered areas, as we drive a total of about 60,000 kilometers a year. Some villages are not accessible by car. We have to climb hills, and walk three or four hours before reaching the villagers. The roads on the high mountains are dangerous." Father Tao hoped Church members become more concerned about small Church communities, like those which exist in the remote regions of the Dali diocese.

Among respondents, there are some who feel impatient about the material poverty of Catholics for many generations in the Church. A young priest, in his 30s, in Shanxi, said: "The Catholics in China mostly live in rural villages. They are always regarded as poor and weak people in society. Why and how can the poor Catholics serve others, who are relatively affluent? The Catholics themselves are powerless. A poor Church is always presented as a people of low capability and little competence. He thinks the Church has suffered enough in poverty. Church members often adhere to the thinking "The Catholic Church since the time of their ancestors has never desired to be rich and strong." So, he said,

“Church services in poor and rural areas are merely sacramental. Priests even have to find their own food and means of livelihood.”

#### **4. A spirit of sharing in the Church is hoped for**

A deacon in an underground Church community said that one cannot make a general statement about service to the poor in China because the economic and political situations in various places are different. He observed that the Church “is not poor materially, but it lacks a spirit of sharing.” He had been to poor parishes and the basic food of the priests was not guaranteed. “But I also visited other priests, who were driving luxurious cars and living in deluxe houses. I just hope that Church members can support one another!”

A priest in northern China, with the pen-name “Sheep,” said poor in spirit is a sign of the Church, especially in the face of widespread materialism and money-consciousness. Corruption is present in both society and the Church. Wealthy parishes do not help relatively poor ones. Well-off parishes abuse and waste resources, whereas poor parishes, or underground churches, suffer want. With a small number of faithful in their communities, the underground Church exists in poor and difficult circumstances. Priests and Sisters may just have enough money for food and clothing. To build a prayer house, they have to solicit funds from others. Father Sheep recommends that a well off diocese in China link itself to a poorer one. This is called “twining,” where the better off dioceses provide more assistance to smaller church groups.

A Sister from the underground Church wrote: “I feel that the Church in China is increasingly distancing herself from the poor. The understanding of the Word is getting more and more self-centered and shallow. Secular thoughts have misguided and even distorted the thinking of Church people. Pope Francis, as the representative of Christ on earth, has implored us to go back to the poor. Through Bible study, we can deepen our understanding of the meaning of poor in spirit and of service to the poor. The Sister said that a parish priest should not confine his concern for poor to homilies only, but that he should try to understand their sufferings and help them to solve their problems. At least he should offer the encouragement of Christ to them.

## 5. Expectations for Pope Francis to visit China

Pope Francis, on the second day of his inauguration, told Cardinal John Tong, Bishop of Hong Kong: "The Church in China is in my heart". Later, the Pope twice publicly expressed his concern for China. The first time was in April 2013, when he called for prayers for the earthquake victims of Ya'an, Sichuan Province. The second time was on May 22, 2013, when he called on Catholics worldwide to pray for the Chinese Catholics, praying to God specifically for the grace, humility and joy to proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and to be faithful to His Church and to the Successor of Peter. Pope Francis also reminded the Chinese Catholics to serve their country and their fellow citizens by living out their faith. The Holy Father also exhorted them to make their actions consistent with the faith they confess. (*Vatican Radio*, May 22, 2013) Up to now, no Pope has ever visited China. In late July 2013, Pope Francis did tell the media that he hoped to visit Asia in the near future.

Many respondents expressed hopes that Pope Francis will improve relations with the China, and will come to visit his flock in China. They said they were very grateful to the Popes for their concerns for the Church in China. They were particularly moved by Pope Francis' words "The Church in China is in my heart". They noted that the Church in China, in many ways, are poor and backward, but their spiritual life is even worse. "I hope the Holy Father will help the Church in China build a temple of spiritual life and send experienced spiritual formators to guide our clergy and faithful."

A Sister wrote that the Church in China has never been cast out of the Universal Church. The Popes' words about China are a comfort to the Catholics there. She hoped that the Pope would some day come to China in person and get to know the Chinese Church better. Then, she said, the Chinese Catholics will "have more understanding and acceptance, and less critical remarks among themselves." She expressed the thought that the Church in China has been a suffering Church, whose pressures mostly came from within the Church. She said. "We hope the Pope will hear the voice



of the Chinese faithful, stand on Chinese soil, and tell our people that he loves us.”

Bishop John Wang said, “The testimony of the poor in spirit should be the primary task of all Christians. The Catholics in China must put into practice Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to the Chinese Catholics of 2007. This will help the Church in China to grow and to live out the spirit of Christ.” He and other respondents expressed the hope that Pope Francis will continue to pray for the Church in China, and that the Chinese Catholics will be united, and soon enjoy the fullness of the freedom of belief.