

and they will make it become "a sign and instrument of close union with God and of unity among men " (Constitution on the Church, para. 1).

NOTES

1. Luo Guang (ed.), Tianzhujiao Zaihua Chuanjiaoshi Ji, Tainan, 1967, p. 358.
2. Zhongguo Tianzhujiao, Beijing, No. 1, 1980, p. 52.
3. South China Morning Post, Hong Kong, September 23, 1986.
4. Asia Focus, Hong Kong, Vol.5, No. 9, March 4, 1989, p. 4.
5. Tianzhujiao Yazhou Tongxunsha Xinwen, Hong Kong, August 5, 1989, p. 3.

The Formation of Sisters in China

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According to church statistics, in 1948 there were more than 7,000 religious Sisters working in China.¹ Two-thirds of them were Chinese while the remaining one-third were foreign. After the Communist Party came to power, the foreign Sisters gradually either left the country, or were expelled. Some native Sisters also left their dioceses and went to work in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, or overseas. But the great majority of the Chinese Sisters remained on the mainland.

During the 1950's the mainland convents closed one by one. Some Sisters were jailed or sent to workcamps. Even today we do not know if some are alive or dead. Because of environment or pressure, some married. However, many unafraid of difficulties maintained their vocations at home. In recent years, since the government has implemented a more tolerant policy towards religion and because the church communities encourage it, Sisters again have begun to exercise their religious life publicly. They joyfully welcome young women to join them in their way of life. They try as best they can to give these young aspirants some formation with the hope that they will become their successors. In the mid-1980's, not long after the re-opening of seminaries for priestly vocations, Sisters' convents also gradually came into existence. Some opened with the explicit permission of the government, while others received the

government's implicit permission. Mr. Liu Bainian, vice-chairman of the Catholic Patriotic Association, told a group of foreign visitors in May of this year that up to the present 300 Sisters' convents have re-opened in China (he was speaking of those whose establishment has received the implicit or explicit permission of the government). Of these 300 convents, 40 specialize in the formation of young Sisters. Each of these convents of formation has about 25 novices, postulants or aspirants. Therefore, now in China there are about 1,000 young Sisters in formation. In some places due to lack of space and financial problems many young women who wish to enter the convent cannot be accepted. Guiyang in Guizhou Province is such a place; over 100 young women there have applied for entrance, but there is not sufficient room for them. Besides these open convents there are some underground ones which do not meet with government approval. The Sisters in them risk arrest, but they still desire to live out their vocations in this way. This is related both to their background and also to the promptings of their consciences. Since not much is known outside of China about these convents, it is well not to criticize them. In this article I will give an overall view of the 40 open convents which have formation programs for young Sisters, and then give a short theological, spiritual and pastoral reflection on them.

These convents are now in the exploratory stage of their development. There is great variety in their living conditions and their methods of formation. In some convents an older Sister is in charge of formation, while in others, which lack capable Sisters, the pastor has taken over the duties of formator. Some convents have enough money to support the Sisters, while others take on the appearance of a factory to provide a means of livelihood. In some convents the Sisters must even go out to work to earn money to buy necessities. Some have good facilities and a good formation program, while the facilities in others are poor and their formation plans are incomplete.

The requirements for acceptance into the convent are as follows: the woman must be a Catholic, at least 18 years of age, unmarried, and have her parents' permission and the recommendation of her pastor. She must have a good character and be in good health, and she must be willing to give her life for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. She must also demonstrate that she at least does not violate the principle laid down by the government: "To love your country and your church, and to support the independent and autonomous running of the church." Unlike seminaries, candidates do not need to be graduates of senior high school in order to be accepted into the convent. Most of the young women have only graduated from junior middle school, and generally the convents do not have entrance examinations.²

At the present time, under the government's policy of the independent administration of the church, no convent belongs to any international religious congregation. All the Sisters are subject to the bishop or the leader of the diocese, and they receive their

assignments from him.

As far as the motive for entering the convent goes, most of the young Sisters have said that they chose this vocation because they saw the need for successors to the older Sisters, and they felt that they could best serve the church in this way. Some have expressed the hope of going to the countryside in the future to do missionary work and to teach catechism. Many have said that they can better love God and save their souls by being a Sister. Many of the young Sisters have come from old Catholic families (families which have been Catholic for 3 or 4 generations).³ In my opinion, in addition to God's call and the influence of the witness of members of the Catholic community, another reason for their response is the emptiness of life and the search for a spiritual anchor. After experiencing many political campaigns and the total repudiation of traditional moral values, most young people on the mainland find themselves in this situation today.

The Guangzhou convent opened in September 1987 with an inaugural class of 14 twenty year-old young women from the countryside. After undergoing two years of training, one of them wrote: "Two years ago when, full of faith, I entered the front door of the convent, my heart still felt empty. Everything here was strange to me. Although I had received religious training at home from childhood, when I entered the convent all I knew was that I had a vocation. I had no knowledge of Catholic doctrine, and even less of the spiritual life.....After two years living and studying here, I now have an elementary knowledge of the spiritual life and a clearer idea of the purpose of my vocation. I now have a closer relationship with Christ and a basic idea of the way I must follow in the future."⁴ Although the foundations of the young Sisters' vocations have only just been laid, the prospects for future development look very promising.

Before entering the novitiate, the young woman spends a half a year or longer as an aspirant. Then after a novitiate of at least a year and a half she can apply to make her first vows. Most of the convents have not yet decided when final vows should be made.

Schedules in the convents vary from place to place. In some convents where there is only a priest to guide the Sisters, no explicit class schedule exists. When the priest has time, then class is held. If the priest goes to visit the countryside, then there may be no class for a whole week. Larger scale convents of course have a definite schedule. Rising is usually at 5 A.M. Then comes morning prayers, meditation, and Mass. These are followed by breakfast and some housekeeping chores. Class begins at 8 A.M. Before lunch there is a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. Lunch is followed by a short rest, more classes, the recitation of the rosary in common and a work period. After supper there is time for homework, and retirement usually takes place after 9

P.M.⁵ From this we can see that there is not much individual free time. The young Sisters' course of study is divided into two main categories: religious knowledge and cultural knowledge. Their religious subjects include Catholic doctrine, Bible and Latin, while their cultural subjects are Chinese language, history, geography and current events, English, music, mathematics, sewing and general medicine. The students with better academic achievements are sent to outside schools to study such subjects as accounting, nursing and Chinese medicine. The religious subjects are taught by priests and Sisters, while college professors from outside are hired to teach the cultural subjects. In order to maintain their livelihood, Sisters from convents which have only the government's unofficial approval must work half a day and study half a day. Their fields of work are quite varied. Some make clothes, others work in clinics, while still others make herbal medicine. Along with their work schedule they are studying to be Sisters; so their formation cannot but be fraught with minor interruptions. Fortunately, the Zhanjiang Convent in Guangdong Province, previously possessing only unofficial recognition, has just received the government's verbal permission to exist. In a short time it may become an officially approved convent. It is a good example of how the government's approval can be won even though it means a long struggle (in this case 5 years).

Seventy year old Sister Chen Zhidao, after three years experience, as superior of the Guangzhou Convent, has written about her ideals and experiences. "The young Sisters come from the distant countryside of the Guangzhou Diocese. They have left their fathers and mothers and homes to enter the convent and live a strict, spiritual life. Not everyone is able to adapt or to become accustomed to the life. Moreover, there is a great age gap between the older Sisters (myself included) and them. Only through understanding and our common faith can affection be built up and the wall of separation broken down. Therefore I regard the novices as members of my own family. I show great concern for them and look after their daily needs. If they are sick I treat them with food and medicine. If they have to go to the hospital, I myself watch all night by their beds. Regarding the spiritual life I lead by example as well as by word. Each dawn, after ringing the bell to awaken the novices, I meditate together with them in front of the Blessed Mother's statue. Then we climb the steps of the church together to say morning prayers, sing hymns of praise to God and assist at Mass. In the classroom we study the Bible and church doctrine, together drawing strength for the spiritual life from these sources.....I think we must emphasize love in the training of the young Sisters. And love's sacrifice is not to remain in thought or word only, but it must show itself in concrete action. Every Sunday when the Friendship Clinic opens to take care of the health problems of the Catholics, I arrange for some of the young Sisters to help out by showing their love for the patients. Since the bishop and priests are old and not in good health, and so that the Sisters can understand something about illnesses, I send the Sisters in turn to take care of the priests by taking their temperature and blood

pressure and giving them medicine at the proper times. When the bishop or priests are in the hospital, the Sisters gladly go to visit them after class, taking food, medicine, or anything else they need."⁶ I think that Sister Chen is doing her best to become the loving mother, guide and friend of the young novices. However, people familiar with the situation think that this kind of training is somewhat too internalized. If there were more contact with the outside world the results might be better.

One priest who is in charge of Sisters' formation told me: "Our convent has been in existence since 1985. It has 21 Sisters and they support themselves by making clothes. Sometimes they accompany me to visit the countryside, where they teach doctrine to the women and children. Just as in the early church, they are my pastoral helpers. If they were not present, pastoral work in the countryside would not progress. However, our convent faces many difficulties; only God knows how much longer we can survive. We only worry about today. We do our best to carry out the work God asks us to do, and place our lives in God's hands." This convent's building and facilities are not only simple and crude; it does not even have a bathroom. One Sister has cancer and another has hepatitis. Sometimes the Sisters have to ask for financial aid from the families they are staying with in the countryside.

Reflecting from a theological, spiritual and pastoral point of view on the present situation of Sister formation in China, I think that their training programs can be summed up in two models, i.e., the "catechist Sister model" and the "worker Sister model."

The catechist Sister model was created in the 1930's by Bishop Francis X. Ford of Meixian in Guangdong Province. Although the Sisters belonged to parishes, they lived with the common people, especially working with the women. This model was promoted in the Chinese countryside where women were often looked down upon and the population was dispersed over a wide area. Bishop Ford desired that before they begin their religious formation young women should have graduated from senior high school. The formation program itself had two objects: to train Sisters to lead a religious life and to train them to be positively evangelical. The first stage was to give them spiritual formation, which would support them in their later religious life. The second stage was to imbue the Sisters with knowledge of the doctrine and train them in techniques for teaching it. Then the Sisters were assigned in pairs to the undeveloped areas of the diocese to take an active part in the work of evangelization. Because they went to comparatively rural places, it was necessary to set definite times for their returning to the center for community meetings; otherwise the Sister in charge of formation went to visit them at definite intervals to discuss with them the difficulties they faced in their work. Community spirit was maintained in this manner.

The life of the catechist Sisters was closely related to the lives of the common people amongst whom they lived. There was no convent or chapel, nor was there a definite schedule for common prayer. The parish was their source of spiritual life. Their daily life revolved around the parish; they went to Mass and other ceremonies at the parish. Because there were many places in China without churches and because there were not enough priests, sometimes these Sisters could not attend Mass. They could only enjoy "spiritual communion." They prayed and meditated each day, and many times each day recalled the presence of Christ. As they walked along country roads they would recite the rosary. This model was originally established for the Maryknoll Sisters in Meixian, but later Bishop Ford also included in this model the native Sisters he established. After experimenting with this model of sisterhood for many years, in 1939 Bishop Ford received the formal approval of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide for it.⁷

Of the convents I have observed in south China many use this model as a blueprint. The Sisters receive this style of spiritual and theological training, and at the same time they preach the Gospel in the countryside. This model is quite suitable to the present situation in China. This is so because the Sisters can more easily, and in a more attractive manner, teach the doctrine to the women and children than the priest can. The Sisters receive the love and support of the common people, and serve the church effectively.

The second model is the "worker Sister." This model emphasizes the presence of Christ in our midst. What this presence means is that the Sister's whole life should be imbued with her Christian faith. The spirituality of this model is built on the awareness of the conversion power of the Gospel. It requires that the Sisters enter into the real situation of the society where they are located and become a sign of the Gospel.

This second model is somewhat like the priest-worker movement which was active in France in the 1940's and 1950's. This movement had two characteristics: commitment and spirituality. The original reason many worker-priests entered the factories was to lead the workers back to church. They regarded factory work as a pastoral strategy. However, they soon discovered a new kind of spirituality, namely a means for them to march together with the workers in the direction of fulfillment.⁸

We can find this example of Christian witness in China today. With government approval a diocese in the north of the country operates a clinic. In it some young Sisters receive formation and live out their religious life. It is a place where they can bear witness to Christ's message by serving sick people. As a result this witness of life has more power of persuasion than spoken doctrine.

The second model is also like the witness of Fr. Charles de Foucauld. Foucauld

was a officer dismissed from the French army. After his conversion to Christianity, he became a Trappist brother in Nazareth in Palestine. Later he received an inspiration to go to the Sahara Desert in North Africa where he lived with the semi-nomadic tribes-people, the Tauregs. There Foucauld attempted to lead "the hidden life of Nazareth," in which he imitated the completely simple life Jesus led before he began to preach his message. He felt that Jesus' "hidden life" was just as much a part of God's plan of salvation as was his preaching, death and resurrection. Although he was called the "Apostle of the Tauregs," he did not succeed in making one convert. Charles de Foucauld's experience of Christian presence is what Vatican II calls a sign of transcendence or a sacrament to the world. The "body" of this sacramental type of presence is the commitment of a Christian to a concrete work in the world. Through this the Christian affirms the value of everything that God has created and guides them in the direction of God's salvation. The "soul" of this sacramental presence is spirituality. It supports the "body" of this presence, giving it form and direction.⁹

Following on the four modernizations movement and China's open door policy, more and more Chinese are seeking material satisfaction. The presence of the second model, worker-Sisters, becomes a sign of transcendence in China, pointing out that God lives "in" the world He created as well as "outside" of it, and that He is continuously drawing the world in the direction of a higher, more spiritual level. The most important reason for the worker-Sister's commitment to her work is not to make her self-supporting but to help her arrive at a deeper transformation, to enable her to become more truly Christian and more truly Chinese, in order to lead the whole of society in the direction of greater fulfilment. Thus factors in these Sisters' spirituality are a deepening of prayer life, purification of motives for work and a fervent love of the Blessed Sacrament.

Of course, the above mentioned two models can appear in the same convent among different Sisters; they can also appear in the person of a single Sister. At the same time, since convents in China are just at the beginning stages of development, more new models will most likely surface in the future. No matter what, there should be more contact between Sisters from abroad and Sisters in China, so that they can encourage one another to make a more profound return to the sacrificial spirit of the early church and to make a more effective response to the needs of modern times.

(Notes see p.17)



Novices in Zhanjiang Covert, Guangdong Province, help support convent by making clothes on their half day work schedule.



Novices at Wuhan Convent with their superior and formation mistress, Sister Zuo Muli.



Students at Jinlin Seminary in North China about to begin morning classes.