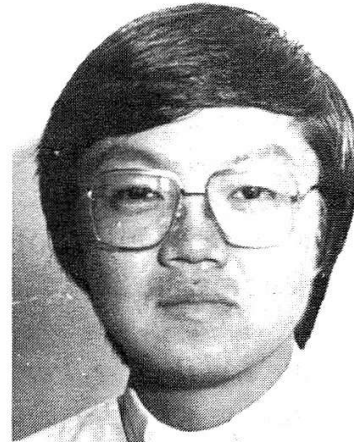


The Chinese Liturgy Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

*Interview with Thomas Law Gwok Fai
by Theresa Yeung
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Father, how would you describe the state of the liturgy in China today?

Some Hong Kong Catholics having attended Mass on mainland China find the experience somewhat unfamiliar. "Is this really the Mass," they ask, as they watch the priest with his back to the altar mumbling Latin prayers to himself while the congregation behind him chants its own prayers repeatedly.



Over twenty-five years have passed since the rest of the Catholic world adopted the vernacular liturgy. Those baptized within that span of time have never attended the old Latin Mass, and so it is not surprising to find them reacting to it like visitors to a foreign planet.

China has been isolated from the rest of the world for 30 years. When the Second Vatican Council took place in the '60s, the Church in China did not know about it. The Council sparked off the renewal of the Church. The liturgical renewal has had a direct influence on the spiritual formation of Catholics elsewhere.

The Church in China, with few exceptions, still uses the *Missale Romanum* which dates back to the Council of Trent and was, in 1570, mandated for use in all churches following the Roman Rite. Trent like Vatican II was a reforming Council. It sought to unify and rectify the confusion in the liturgy and eradicate abuses in the liturgical practice condemned by the Protestant reformers.

In the history of the Church was the vernacular ever in use?

The Church had, in fact, used the vernacular from the very

beginning in its liturgy. The *lingua franca* of Apostolic times was *koine*, the colloquial form of classical Greek in common use throughout the Roman Empire. It was only in the middle of the 4th Century, when Latin began to replace Greek, and the Church began to use Latin in the liturgy that Pope Damasus (366-384) authorized St. Jerome to translate the Bible into that language. Jerome's Bible is called the *Vulgate* because he employed the common and not the classical form of Latin in his translation from Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic sources. The *Vulgate* soon became the official version of the Bible used in all Roman Catholic liturgies. Not all the Catholic churches made the switch, however, and large numbers of what are now referred to as Eastern Rite churches maintained the use of Greek or other local vernaculars. This was true of the Mother Church of Jerusalem as well as of those churches where Greek continued to predominate.

Since some local churches have always used their own language for the liturgy, why did China not choose to do likewise?

When foreign missionaries came to China towards the end of the 15th century and early 16th century, they were confronted with an immense language problem. The difference between Chinese and Latin was so great that one might say the two languages were incompatible. Teaching Latin to Chinese candidates for the priesthood was beset with almost insurmountable obstacles. In 1615, Pope Paul V, aware of the situation, made a concession to the church in China permitting it to use the Chinese language in the liturgy. It was not until 1670, however, that the Jesuit missionary, Louis Buglio, completed a Chinese translation of the *Missale Romanum* which was published in Beijing. A breviary was published in 1674 and the sacramental liturgy in 1675.

How then did Latin come to be used so exclusively in China's churches?

One reason for this was the feeling among the majority of missionaries of that time that learning to get along in spoken Chinese was difficult enough, but mastering classical Chinese characters was a full time academic enterprise demanding the

time and attention that only career scholars could afford to give. At the same time, there was an increasing number of young Chinese seminarians who were eager and able to study Latin. They quickly grasped its principles and became well-versed in its use. When the missionaries saw that it was easier for the young Chinese seminarians to learn Latin than for them to learn classical Chinese, the urgency to implement a Chinese liturgy waned. Another factor was the long-standing Chinese Rites Controversy which continued to divide the missionaries and eventually stopped the indigenization of the Chinese church altogether.

Today, we wonder to what extent and how long Buglio's translation was actually used, how it was received by the Chinese Catholic community, and whether it was pastorally helpful? We do know that there were two editions, both printed in the type-setting of those days, although one has an entire section in Chinese brush-strokes. This would seem to argue for its popularity, or why bother to print a second edition? On the other hand, the lack of historical evidence indicates an early decline into disuse. However, Buglio's efforts were not all in vain, for many of the prayers found in traditional Chinese prayer books, which have nourished the faith of Chinese Christians down through the centuries, are taken from his translation. Some examples are the orations for major feast days and Sundays. The prayer recited at the end of the *Angelus* is also from the original Chinese Missal.

Did Hong Kong make any contribution to early liturgical renewal in China?

The liturgical revival that swept across Europe and America at the close of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries had little influence on the Church in China. The country was then beset by social upheaval and Chinese Catholics had little time or energy to pay much attention to what was happening in Europe or America. Nevertheless, the local church in Hong Kong, though small in number did manage, in a quiet way, to make important contributions to the development of the Chinese liturgy at that time.

They published several volumes of missals which were translations into modern Chinese. These books not only helped

the clergy and Catholics to understand the true meaning of the Mass, but they also helped them to participate in the Mass in a more meaningful way. Among these was a book of *Mass Prayers* published by Nazareth Press in 1931. Another was *My Sunday Missal*, translated by Dr. Wu Chin Hsiung and published by the Hong Kong Truth Society in 1946. These missals were widely disseminated to many local churches on the China mainland.

In 1954, Hong Kong's Nazareth Press published a bi-lingual missal in Chinese and Latin. The Chinese section was a mixture of both classical and colloquial Chinese, and most of the classical Chinese was taken from Buglio's 1670 version of *The Chinese Missal*. In 1956 the Catholic Truth Society published a completely colloquial Chinese version of *The Daily Missal*. The publication of this missal was a great aid to the Chinese clergy and Catholics of Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan and overseas in understanding the meaning of the Mass. It was a significant contribution to the spiritual nourishment of the Chinese clergy and Catholics in the days before the publication of the Chinese translation of the Bible by the Studium Biblicum. In 1965 when, following the directives of Vatican Council II, the churches of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau were beginning to use Chinese in the Mass, they made use of the 1956 version of *The Daily Missal*. After 1979 when the Catholic Church in China began to discuss using Chinese to celebrate Mass, they collected the above mentioned Chinese missals from Hong Kong to serve as reference works. These missals were also helpful to the Chinese seminarians in their study of the meaning of the Mass. The missals played an important role in the development of the liturgy in China. We can say that they were a prelude to liturgical renewal in the Chinese Church.

How did the Vatican Council bring about a change in liturgical language?

Vatican II's *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* promulgated in 1963 clearly stated that the primary meaning and significance of the liturgy is the presence of the Risen Lord. It is the expression of Christ's salvific work in the world, and his presence to his community in Word and Sacrament, to people gathered in his name in prayer and ministry. It is he who sanctifies the

faithful and gives glory to the Father in his office of High Priest. When the Church celebrates the liturgy in a way that is readily comprehensible to the modern person--clearly, simply, and reverently--the saving acts of Christ are made present and transmitted through the liturgical words and acts of the community. What is imperative, then, is that the Church use the vernacular as its medium of liturgical celebration if it is to achieve its desired effect of nourishing the Christian community. And a corollary of this is that Latin, which has been used in the Roman Rite for over 1,000 years, must now be consigned to history.

How did the Chinese outside mainland China react to the Council's liturgical reforms?

The Chinese Catholics of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau reacted quickly to Vatican II's call for liturgical reform. The Diocese of Hong Kong took immediate steps to set up a Diocesan Liturgical Commission to implement Council directives and oversee its future development. By 1965 experimentation on the use of Chinese in parts of the Eucharistic celebration had already begun. In 1965, The diocese published a reprint of the translation of the Roman Missal, originally translated in 1956. In 1969, the Church in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau, working together, produced a complete translation of Vatican II's new order of the Mass which is still used in Hong Kong for the liturgical celebration. During the 1970's, owing to various political and local reasons, the three areas began to edit and publish Chinese liturgical texts independent of each other.

The Bishops' Conference of Taiwan established its Liturgical Commission in 1967. Its chief task was to prepare liturgical materials in Chinese and study ways and means of adapting the Church's liturgy to the Chinese culture. In the past 20 years it has published various Chinese texts for liturgical use including a translation of the Post-Vatican II *Missale Romanum*. The translation of the revised *Roman Breviary*, (*Liturgia Horarum*), appeared in 1981.

The new Taiwan translations presented certain linguistic difficulties. While the Chinese Catholics of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau share the same classical Chinese tradition and Chinese characters are easily understood by all educated in that

tradition, there are many different dialects; in Hong Kong and Macau the native dialect of most Chinese is Cantonese, which demands a certain amount of linguistic adjustments of the Taiwan texts because Mandarin and Fujianese are spoken there. During the 1970's the Hong Kong Diocese began publishing *The Sunday Liturgy*, a series of Mass booklets for Sunday use according to local pastoral needs. In addition it prepared new texts for the sacraments and other rituals. At the close of the last decade, *The Sunday Liturgy* was revised and the revision published in 8 booklets. During this period many reference materials for liturgical usage were also published. The work of revising, re-editing and producing new liturgical texts continues as a major part of an on-going process of Chinese liturgical reform. But liturgical reform must go beyond textual reform and reach out to renew the lives of Christians in the spirit called for by Vatican II.

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The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* makes it very clear that all members of the worshipping community must be involved in the liturgy. Participation should be active, intelligent and whole, with participation according to role. To implement this basic pastoral principle, every effort was made to educate and train the Chinese Catholic laity to live lives imbued with the spirit of the reforms of Vatican II. Chinese Catholics in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau have begun to assume more and more some of the liturgical roles and ministries previously reserved to the ordained clergy. They now function as lectors, leaders of liturgical prayer and ministers of the Eucharist. Liturgical Commissions have worked closely with the parishes to train and develop lay leaders to fulfill their new roles. In the Diocese of Hong Kong alone, there are over 300 Eucharistic ministers, who

not only help in the distribution at Mass but also bring Communion to the sick and infirm on a regular basis. In 1980 the Hong Kong diocese implemented the new Ritual of Christian Initiation for Adults which revised the formation process of catechumens, etc. Every year, roughly 1800 adults baptisms are administered at Easter in Hong Kong.

In Taiwan, in 1982, the Bishops' Conference moved to set up Liturgical Commissions in each individual diocese. The purpose of these local commissions was to disseminate the spirit of Vatican II reforms, and to study way of adapting the liturgy to local conditions and promoting its inculturation.

The Macau Diocese is one of the oldest in the Far East and its Chinese Catholics share the same customs and dialect as those in Hong Kong. In recent years with many of its younger priests, having been trained in the seminary in Hong Kong, Macau has opted for the Hong Kong adaptations, finding them more familiar and the liturgical text easier to obtain.

Do you think it is possible to devise a Chinese liturgy?

To initiate a thorough and complete study of a Chinese liturgy at present is a time consuming and arduous task. China is a vast country, with Catholics found in every corner of it. Cultural differences are immense and customs and dialects vary among villages that are separated by the shortest of distances. While the technological development of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau has made easy communication possible, they still represent only a part of the whole. The question of inculturation should always be kept in mind. Local and regional reforms will continue to play an influential role in the development of "the Chinese liturgy," which is uniform in the sense that it is familiar, but in reality it is a plurality in unity.

Are you optimistic about the future of the liturgy in China?

With the advent of China's more open and liberal policy, church life there began to revive in the early '80s. Old churches were reopened and new ones built. The Mass was once again celebrated publicly in the traditional way--according to the rubrics and language set down by the Council of Trent. Among the flood of Chinese returning home for reunions with families

and relatives were, of course, many lay Catholics and not a few priests. They brought with them news of Vatican II and its reforms, especially its liturgical reforms. As a result, some mainland priests began to use vernacular language in their own Masses. This was spontaneous and not an organized movement. Some local priests would use the vernacular translation of the Vatican II Mass but celebrate it in the rubrics of the Tridentine *Missale*. It was not uncommon to find a priest at the altar with his back to the people now reciting the Mass in Chinese.

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When the Church in China began ordaining young men to the priesthood again, many of them found Latin difficult and taxing. They received permission from their bishops to use Chinese instead. Although they obtained from visiting relatives the official texts now in use in Taiwan and Hong Kong, they had little knowledge of the principles involved in Vatican II's liturgical reforms and had no training in implementing its directives.

The bishop of Shanghai, Jin Luxian, added a course to the curriculum of Sheshan Seminary in 1989 and began the systematic training of seminarians in the new liturgy. The seminarians requested that Mass be celebrated according to the new ritual and on the Feast of St. Jerome in September of 1989, the first Chinese Mass was celebrated in Sheshan seminary. Sheshan's course in the new liturgy was more than an introduction to liturgical rubrics; it included all aspects of the *Constitution* of Vatican II, such as Biblical studies, Church history, Theology, Pastoral Ministry and Spirituality, all directly related to the Council's renewal of Church life. The first year of Theology includes the fundamentals of the liturgy; the second, Christian initiation and the Eucharist; the third, the sacraments of reconciliation, anointing of the sick, holy orders and matrimony.

At the present time, the Mass in Sheshan is celebrated four mornings a week in Chinese, including Sundays. 1990 saw the

initiation of the Holy Week Liturgy in the vernacular. Seminar-ians, however, continue to study Latin and a Solemn High Mass according to the Tridentine Ritual is celebrated every Saturday. This is done to respond to the pastoral needs of the older Catholics, many of whom retained a deep and lasting respect for the traditional worship service. In the meantime, however, the vernacular liturgy continues to nourish the spiritual life of the younger clergy, and serves to prepare them for the liturgical reforms of the future. These seminarians will serve as the bridge linking the past to the future. Theirs will be a mission of vital importance to the Chinese liturgical movement.

The present state of liturgical reform in China can be summed up by saying: *Let 100 flowers bloom*. According to an expert pluralism is a common phenomenon during the transitional period. The greatest difficulty facing implementation of the Vatican II reforms in liturgy is the poverty of written materials in China, especially books on Scripture and liturgy. If mainland Catholics are to enter more deeply into the liturgy, they must have the Chinese texts in hand. In this way their understanding of the Scriptures can grow and their faith can be nourished.

In Sheshan there are more than 140 seminarians from over 10 provinces and tens of dioceses. After their ordination these men will certainly bring with them the spirit of liturgical revival to their native dioceses. This will have great impact.

Two young priests from the Beijing seminary attended a 3-month course on liturgical theology in the Philippines during the summer of 1991. They will help promote the training of seminarians and laity in the new liturgy.

There can be no doubt that the new liturgy will continue to develop throughout the China mainland, and before very long we can expect to see it take on a new style and character. We eagerly await the contributions it will make in the formation of an indigenous Chinese liturgy.
