Longqi: Dragon Prays

A Story by Yang Ni

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

> *When I was a child I spoke as a child and acted as a child. Now that I have grown up I have put aside the things of a child* (1 Cor. 13:11)

Longqi looked on in dismay as they received Holy Communion. So many of them drinking from the same cup. It broke all the rules of hygiene his teachers had drummed into him from kindergarten days in his native China. No wonder some of the other Chinese students, especially those from more traditional Catholic families than his own, could be heard muttering 'bieniu, bieniu' under their breath after Mass. 'Bieniu' was an old Beijing term used to express revulsion and disgust.

Personally, he didn't feel it was all that 'bieniu'. But then he was a product of the Red Guard era when 'swimming against the tide' was lesson one in the education of a revolutionary. It was, perhaps, for this reason that he had resolved to stick to the Chinese custom and never drink from the chalice for as along as he remained abroad. However, when anyone questioned him about it, he'd justify his decision by saying that he belonged to that group of up-to-date modern youths who might be overly sensitive to the dangers of catching AIDS. This despite the fact that as a student in Beijing, he never hesitated, in fact rather enjoyed, drinking from the tea bowls commonly found at the building entrances there. It was simply a matter of having the right cultural perspective.

Longqi knew he wasn't the only 'Loyal Son of the Revolution' wary of catching some disease from the Communion cup. (How fond he'd become of using Red Guard jargon when far from home!) Nor was it the first time he had had this neurotic reaction. He remembered entering a church in Beijing at the height of a hepatitis epidemic. It was a few days before Easter. He had entered the church to make the Stations of the Cross when he saw a group of Catholics crowding around a priest who was holding up a cross for each of them to kiss. At that time,

too, he felt a strong feeling of repugnance creep over him. He was afraid to go up and join them...afraid he might come down with hepatitis...but even more afraid of having to report it to his class 'political officer'.

How could he explain that he'd caught hepatitis not while out on a date with a girl friend, but in a Roman Catholic Church 'the club for Promoting International Peace'! He would certainly be sent to a centre for the prevention of disease where they would brainwash him. As a result, he did not go up to kiss the cross that day, but remained in the back looking on. Later, he heard one of the priests speak of his own concern for the health of the people in the parish. Some priests themselves had been hospitalized because of the disease. This made him feel a lot less guilty.

Longqi had always considered it a minor miracle that he'd gotten an exit visa which allowed him to fly from the bird cage that was mainland China. Yet, he never imagined how different from his own the Western church would be. To his surprise Western Catholics sat down most of the time during Mass! He thought, "Really, how comfortable!"

His first experience of Mass outside China confused him. He was not able to follow the new post-Vatican II liturgy, even though he had, while still at home, borrowed some books on the subject from his local bishop's library. The books were in Chinese and came from Taiwan and Hong Kong. This Mass was in French, and he hadn't a clue as to what was being said. "Hey, you're not talking my kind of language!" he joked to himself. But he did give it his best effort. Unfortunately, he soon felt himself dozing off in those very comfortable seats. In retrospect, it seemed to him that God was leading him like the boy Samuel in the temple, telling him, as Eli had told Samuel, to "go back to sleep".

Nevertheless, he did feel guilty for a long time afterwards, even though he knew sleeping in church was only a 'venial' sin. He'd always been a dutiful son, and obeyed his parents' wishes and often gone to the 'underground' church. The 'underground' church met in private homes, and the surreptitious nature of these gatherings always managed to conjure up in Longqi's imagination scenes from detective stories he had seen at the local movie theatre. Yet he did continue to wonder, but never dared to ask his parents, why he'd never experienced that sense

of the sacred in the homes, which he imagined would permeate a 'real' church...or did he get that notion, too, from watching movies and reading so much pulp-fiction? The 'underground' church community was indeed like a closely knit family. He felt, however, that the underground church inserted right in the midst of the large family of China's one billion people made for an overdose of family spirit.

One day he slipped into one of the 'official' churches during Mass--something anathema to his parents. He couldn't tell if the priest was saying the same Latin prayers used in the 'underground' church. He wondered, too, if all priests spoke Latin with the same Chinese accent. Well, he'd have to join one of the newly opened 'official' seminaries or go to medical school to find the answer to that question. The Latin language was not, of course, a part of the curriculum of any Communist university. He had learned that some students in the West were given a smattering of Latin in high school. He was suddenly reminded that his parents had painstakingly repeated to him, "Don't ask too many questions and keep on saying your prayers." In any event, here in the confines of the 'official' church, there was little danger of his dozing off. True, the prayers were chanted in a dialect different from his own and according to the classical readings common in his grandparents' time. Also there was little point in listening to the sermon since the walls in the 'official' churches were know to have ears, and this fact was not lost on the priests themselves who never said anything of importance. But what kept him awake and alert was the hope of finding some evidence of the 'devils' that were said to inhabit these 'official' and 'patriotic' churches. Surely that would be something special to tell his parents about. (Not long afterward, the 'underground' as well as the 'official' churches introduced vernacular liturgies, using Chinese texts printed in Hong Kong and Taiwan. Unfortunately, amid all these changes the only thing that remained the same in the 'underground' church was the ardent family spirit, which meant that Longqi preferred going to the 'official' church where there was no need for him to think or listen.)

> When Sabina was working in the student brigade, her soul poisoned by the cheerful marches issuing incessantly from the loudspeakers, she borrowed a motorcycle one Sunday and

> headed for the hills. She stopped at a tiny remote village she had never seen before, leaned the motorcycle against the church, and went in. A Mass happened to be in progress. Religion was persecuted by the regime, and most people gave the church a wide berth. The only people in the pews were old men and old women, because they did not fear the regime. They feared only death. She sat in one of the last pews, closing her eyes to hear the music of the words, opening them to stare up at the blue vault dotted with large gold stars. She was entranced.
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> What she had unexpectedly met there in the village church was not God; it was beauty. She knew perfectly well that neither the church nor the litany was beautiful in itself, but they were beautiful compared to the construction site, where she spent her days amid the racket of the songs. The Mass was beautiful because it appeared to her in a sudden mysterious revelation as a world betrayed (from Milan Kundera: *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Part III, Chapter 7).

Longqi longed to find a church where he could kneel down all through the Mass. His Western friends, however, told him he was hopelessly out of date. One possibility was for him to go to one of those churches where the chairs could be turned into kneelers. He had seen this in a foreign movie--old ladies, faces thick with makeup and gold rimmed spectacles perched on long, thin noses kneeling high up on straight-backed chairs facing the altar. Now that was something really 'bieniu!' Also, the Catholics here had already elevated themselves into a rather lofty position as it was, and, if the truth be told, all he really wanted was once again to kneel on a simple dirt floor as he was accustomed to in China. There Catholics in the rural areas silently entered the church as early as four in the morning and knelt on small cushions that smelled of the earth.

Longqi was surprised to see the 'foreign' Catholics chew the host as though it were a piece of chewing gum. The overly casual way they received Communion with hands in their pockets or arms folded on top of their chests upset him. (He'd read in a psychology book somewhere that arms across the chest signified a resistance to communicate with others.) Longqi thought this was a desecration of the holy. Were they not aware that they were partaking of the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ? Also, whereas Chinese Catholics would carefully examine their consciences to see if they had committed any sins before going up to receive the Sacrament, in the West nearly

everyone went up when Communion time came. Longqi could not understand this. He would never dare go to Communion unless he knew that his soul was pure. Was it that Westerners were more lax than Chinese Christians and had little sense of their own guilt? Or did Chinese Catholics simply consider themselves too unworthy?

One summer he returned home on vacation. On Sunday he went to Mass in the only church in his home town. Because it was his first homecoming after he had escaped from the 'bird cage', he was as excited as Grandma Liu when she first set foot in the Da Guan garden in *The Dream of the Red Chamber*, which was very excited indeed. While happily chatting with some young Catholics from the town, he said, "I hear that the Church abroad has changed!" Although Longqi was well acquainted with the Church in the West, he also knew that a student from abroad returning to China had better carry with him some Chinese medicine called "hearsay" for his own health, to save his own skin. "You've 'heard it said', have you!" snarled a young man whom Longqi had never met before, but who punctuated his words by stabbing him on the chest with his finger. "How can the church change!" the youth insisted. He turned on Longqi accusingly: "You're another one of those university students and a pagan to boot!" It was then Longqi realized that some diseases could not be cured even with the best Chinese medicine.

The Czech writer, Milan Kundera, says that taking people 'seriously' amounts to "allowing them to believe in whatever they choose to believe in." Longqi felt he had rarely experienced what it meant to be taken seriously, and he was not about to test out whether he'd be taken 'seriously' now by waving his PRC passport around and hawking his newly acquired Western panaceas for the cure of all China's ills. Not now, and not so long as his parents continued to take their membership in the 'underground' church 'seriously'. What would happen to them if the local committee chairman should get wind of his 'reactionary talk' and decide to pay him a 'serious' visit. He'd then be treated to another kind of medicine entirely...an inoculation against 'peaceful evolution and creeping capitalism'. But the point he had been trying to make was valid all the same: the church had indeed changed! And all the way home he mulled over this fact most 'seriously'.

Was it because his parents had always insisted he take the family faith 'seriously', that he grew up to be a very 'serious' young man, or, perhaps closer to the truth, that he'd always been an introvert and often felt trapped in the web of his own suppressed emotions? It was still his parents' custom, after asking first about his health, to ask about the well-being of his soul. They would remind him to continue to recite his daily prayers, just as he'd been taught as a child, from the old fashioned classical Chinese prayer book. He felt his parents, like the prayer book, were a bit dated. Such modern religious terms like 'the Church as a Pilgrim Church' were foreign to their way of thinking. In the end, all they really cared about was that he 'save his immortal soul' and 'go to heaven' with them forever.

It seemed to Longqi that his religious sensibilities had already gone beyond those of his parents' generation. His mind continued to be carried along by 'the mighty torrent of the revolution', but to speak 'seriously' of social matters with them was something not expected of him. On the other hand, to talk to them 'seriously' about religion was no longer possible. One day he came across a passage from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians that helped him grow a little in the kind of acceptance that allowed him to take the faith of his parents seriously.

> We know that no one is justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, as even we have been justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified (Galatians 2:16).

When Longqi heard he was going abroad to study, he looked for information about the country where he was going. He discovered from a Chinese Encyclopedia that over 90% of the people in that country were Roman Catholic. He tried to stay calm and not get too excited about it all, for he had always imagined that the cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris was everything that a church should be. When he finally did arrive at the front entrance, he was somewhat disappointed to discover no hunchback in the bell tower and few of the '90% Catholic population' particularly devout.

On this his first trip, he began making new friends among the local people. But when he spoke to them enthusiastically about his majoring in religious studies--for he really believed his friends were all 90% Catholic--they did not seem to share his

enthusiasm. Rather than religion, they preferred to talk about the weather or about Chinese food. They knew little or nothing about the Church in China, and the subject itself seemed of little interest to them. After a year spent in their company, Longqi began to wonder if he himself was not overly pious and perhaps too much in love with God for his own good.

Among the Chinese overseas student 'elite', those who had been raised under the influence of the political campaign against the 'liberalization of the bourgeoisie' would laugh at their foreign hosts for their unwillingness to tell a lie. They felt this was simple-minded. But, then, only a Milan Kundera, who grew up under similar circumstances, could understand what it meant to have your writings officially condemned and placed on a list of forbidden books. "An enemy of freedom has no freedom."

None of his friends on the mainland knew that Longqi came from a third generation Catholic family. Nor would he be the one to tell them. He had been taught from childhood by his parents to be careful of what he said outside the home, lest he be branded a 'rightist' and suffer the fate of the man across the street who was once a college professor but now cleaned the "honey buckets," as the Chinese were wont to call the public toilets.

When Longqi was in high school, he saw a painting that he liked very much in the *World of Art* magazine. It pictured a young girl at prayer, her eyes gazing up to heaven and her hands folded piously across her breast. He cut it out, framed it and hung it in a prominent place on the living room wall. One day when he returned from school, he found the picture missing. He asked his parents where the 'little girl' had gone. His father denied any knowledge of it, while his mother muttered something under her breath. The mystery of the vanishing portrait puzzled Longqi. He did not believe it had sprouted legs and walked off on its own, yet all his attempts at finding it proved to be in vain. Then about a week later his mother told him what had happened. It seems that the Party secretary of his father's work unit was to pay them a visit. "Your father was afraid the picture might cause some trouble," she said, "so he took it down." His mother insisted that his father liked the picture but Longqi, after hearing this, put an end to his efforts to find his 'little girl' again.

Sometimes it made Longqi heart-sick to see his parents so

fearful about such small things. He wished they were more courageous...after all, weren't they proud to be old Catholics? His mother tried to talk to him, telling him with tears in her eyes how his father's generation went to prison because of their faith, and after prison to labour camps to care for cows and pigs. During the Cultural Revolution, his father's name had been scrawled on the school wall, upside down and slashed with a large red X. "You never had to suffer," she said to him, "so how can you understand?" She was right. All he could do at the time was stand and watch in silence. He did not know what it meant 'to suffer persecution'. All he remembered was that you had to keep quiet and not repeat what you read or saw. There were too many 'real life incidents' that happened over the months and years of the Cultural Revolution, too many private 'crimes against the state' that must be confessed to and atoned for publicly. He was too young then to know this. Only later, after the 'rectification campaign' had begun, did he come to realize what was taking place during those years. He could recall hearing the sound of a single gunshot in the quiet of an afternoon; and the air raid drills, when he and his grandmother hid together under the family altar-table 'to protect against the war planes of the imperialists'. Then, too, there was the old lady next door who never tired of telling him how hard it had been for her to part with the mahjong set which she had thrown down the well in the courtyard. One day after he had grown up, Longqi went in search of the old family Bible. Only then did he find out that his father had burned it during the Cultural Revolution because it was on the 'black' list of forbidden books. Anticipating a sudden visit by the Red Guards, he had put in its place a copy of Chairman Mao's *Little Red Book*. But when the Guards finally did raid the house, they still found enough 'evidence' to convict him of 'contradictions among the people'.

Finally, the announcement came that Chairman Mao was dead. Longqi walked out of the church where he'd spent a day and a night singing over and over again the old revolutionary hymn to 'self-reliance'. He felt as though he was emerging from an air-raid shelter after the all-clear had sounded. Not long after this he found himself in France. As he walked through an old market place on a Sunday morning, he saw in a shop-window a reproduction of the picture of the 'little girl' that had disappeared from his home so may years before. He went

in and bought it on the spot. She had grown since he had last seen her, for this picture was at least three times larger than the one he'd lost in China.

> Old Li came 'from the country'. In Old Zhang's eyes everyone who was not from Beijing, as he was, came 'from the country.' This included everyone who came from Tianjin, Hankou, Shanghai, even Paris and London..all of which places were reckoned by Old Zhang to be 'the country'. The only mountain that Old Zhang knew was West Mountain, so he looked with suspicion on the fruit vendors in the market who happened to come from North Mountain. The longest journey Old Zhang ever made was the one that went from his front door across the city to the Yongdung Gate. (*Divorce*: Lao She)

By the second week of his arrival in this 'small municipality' of the West, he had made the rounds of just about all the 'real' churches, by which he meant those with high spires that pierced the sky. Then one Sunday, by chance, he found himself at a very strange Mass. It was in English; people were strumming on guitars and singing hymns in American country style folk music.

He couldn't respond to the Sign of Peace, not just because it was said to him in English, but because people were shaking hands and some were even embracing each other. Then, just as he was about to receive Communion, he was startled to see that the host was made of coarse, brown bread. He left feeling that the atmosphere was just a little too warm for comfort. He never went back to that strange church again.

When Longqi discovered that in Western churches lay people were allowed to distribute Holy Communion, he felt that showed a daring bordering on the extreme. How could lay people be allowed to handle the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ? No matter what explanations were given, he remained adamant in this opinion. If lay people took over this task, what was left for priests to do? Count out the Communion hosts to make sure there were enough? Westerners even took care of this item by leaving hosts at the rear of the church to be put into the ciborium by the lay people themselves. And, he wondered, whatever happened to 'reverence for holy things'? This, he was sure, would be his mother's comment when she heard about such goings on.

> "Many poets are not poets just as many religious are not saints. The reason is the same. They have never fully developed their personalities. They never thought of becoming what God planned for them as individuals--to be poets or religious. They never became the individual persons or artists that their own individual environments had arranged for them to be."

After reading these words of Thomas Merton, Longqi asked his spiritual adviser, who was a priest and foreigner, what it meant. He said it meant that religious were human like everyone else. This shocked him. Were he to say such a thing at home in China, he'd be ostracized from the Catholic community who were given to kowtowing before its priests and religious. A lay person would never have the nerve to criticise a priest openly or even suggest that he might be mistaken in some matters. His own parents were typical. They looked upon the priests and sisters as above the pains and angers, the pleasures and joys of life, having left the world behind them. Chinese Catholics tended to put them on pedestals, like sacred statues of Our Lord and Our Lady. "Father, please pray for me." "Sister, please recite some prayers for me." This was the way Chinese Catholics addressed their priests and religious.

When Longqi's parents, who were both products of Catholic schools, thought of a priest or a nun, the image that inevitably sprang to mind was someone dressed in long black or white robes. Once at an 'underground' Mass, he saw a priest wearing a blue Chinese tunic suit. While this did not shock him, it did make him feel that the family atmosphere was getting to be a little bit too much. Despite having priests who dressed in blue Chinese tunic suits, instead of the traditional black soutane, his parents continued to attend 'underground' Masses.

The congregation in the 'open church' in his home town, which Longqi began frequenting, was composed mostly of uneducated fisher folk. He felt that the open church also was a bit too rustic. One Sunday he finally got up enough courage to go up and talk to the pastor after Mass. He wanted to tell him, "I no longer consider you to be devils." Instead he found himself saying: "My father was a classmate of yours some 30 years ago." He also wanted, but failed, to tell him that that morning he had stolen out of the house without taking breakfast to come to Mass. No matter, the parish priest welcomed him warmly and invited him into the rectory. "Come," he said, we'll talk

some more over a bowl of hot noodles."

When Longqi left home the first time to attend university in Beijing, he purposely arrived a few days early. He made a friend of a new student who, in the course of conversation, expressed an interest in religious matters and wanted to visit a nearby Catholic church. Longqi was happy to accompany him. When they arrived at the church, they found themselves standing beneath a large cross that was above the main gate. The gate was locked with a heavy chain and the whole place looked quite forbidding. They knocked loudly and finally the porter appeared. "What do you want?" he said to them coldly. Longqi, as was his habit, retreated into silence, but his friend spoke up and said they wished to see the church. "Do you have a letter of introduction from the Religious Affairs Bureau?" the porter snarled. "Are you a Catholic? What is your baptismal name?" Longqi knew without having to be told that they had run into another 'ID checker'. The two young men became impatient and started to argue with the man. His friend lost his temper and shouted at him: "So don't let us in! Who wants to see it anyway!" Longqi felt miserable. He was from a small town and couldn't imagine how a representative of a sacred institution like the church could treat visitors with such coldness. This incident only caused him to become even more reticent and circumspect whenever he went to church.

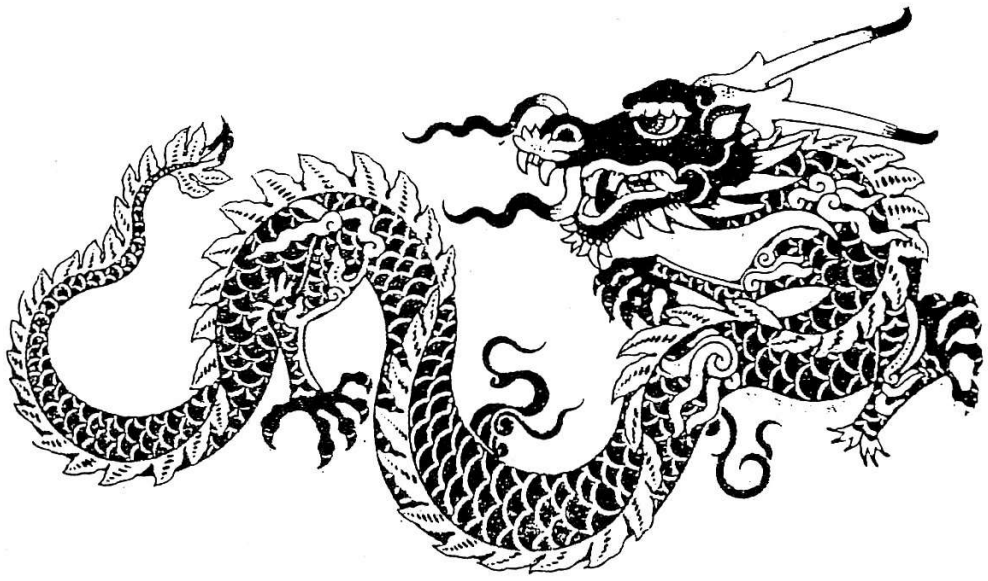
In Milan Kundera's short story *Edward and God* he read:

> Edward, the village teacher, didn't think that he believed in God. One Sunday he accompanied one of his students, a Catholic, to church. After Mass the principal of the school was passing by and saw him. On Monday morning this conversation took place: "Didn't we see each other yesterday?" Edward answered, "Yes, we did." The principal continued, "I don't understand why a young person goes to church". Edward somewhat puzzled shrugged his shoulders. The principal shook her head, "A young person, too!" "I went to see the baroque architecture inside the church." "Oh, so that was it!" the principal answered coldly. "I didn't know that you were interested in such things."

Longqi wasn't afraid of being seen coming out of church now that he was living in this large city where you could preserve your anonymity. The cities of China had huge populations. It was easy to hide oneself. However, he couldn't dis-

guise his nervousness whenever he walked out the school-gate to go to Sunday Mass. He was fearful that a fellow student or a teacher might stop him and ask where he was going. It would be awkward for him if one of his fellow students were to discover that among their number there was some one who feigned indifference but really did have an interest in religion. Often he had to fend off their inquiries, which arose from natural curiosity or just plain friendliness, with the excuse that he wanted to be by himself for a while. He had other excuses at hand as well: 'Just going for a stroll', 'Off to visit the relatives', 'Thought I'd take in a film'. He never did use the one about 'wanting to see the baroque architecture inside the church'.

Many Chinese people, in order to explain the phenomenon of why some took an interest in religious matters, would quote the Party line from the *People's Daily*: "Some people find life empty and so look to religion for consolation". Longqi wondered if he was, in fact, leading an empty life. By Western standards, his was full of noise, bustle and throngs of people. He didn't know what was meant by 'an empty life'. Yet despite the constant din of bicycle bells and the jostling of the crowds that allowed little time for loneliness, when he entered a church to pray, he could, nevertheless, hear the still small voice of God. Of course, he always wore dark glasses whenever entering or leaving the church, but he trusted that God in His mercy would forgive him this small weakness. And yet when he



thought about this it made him feel akin to Yang Bailao who, in the dance ballad of *The White-Haired Girl*, cries out with indignation and grief to the woman he'd been tricked into buying for a wife: "It is THEY who have forced this upon us!"

Now that he was abroad, Longqi no longer had to wear dark glasses when he went to church, and he no longer felt afraid that he'd run into an acquaintance along the way who might ask where he was going. "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." For many overseas Chinese, the church had lost some of its former mystery. Why here evangelists could barge right into your house without fear. Here the church also offered English lessons free and organized free concerts for foreign students. And the Members of the Democracy Movement would remind the readers of their international newsletter that "in the United States only two groups are happy to help people coming out of China: members of the Democratic Movement and religious believers."

Away from home, Longqi knew that many Chinese friends would openly praise the 'foreign believers' for their goodhearted generosity. However, over the coffee cups after Mass, they were not above discussing the various opportunities religion could offer them. This brought to Longqi's mind a term he'd often heard used at home in the past: 'rice Christians'. Nor could he understand how the majority of the Chinese, who, on the one hand, knew and experienced the church as a 'charitable organization' should, on the other hand, fear it as a foreign entity. And he also wondered why it was that the Chinese, who were known to be meticulous about paying back for favours rendered, were at times incapable of acting according to the Five Principles of Co-Existence.

Longqi discovered abroad that some of his Chinese 'friends' were not always courteous to the women volunteers in the church. After attending just one free English class, he could not go back for a second one. While he wanted to learn a foreign language, he didn't want to become "a passive smoker" by absorbing the bad examples of his companions nor did he want to be unduly influenced by the zealous missionary women. In either case, this could blunt his own now clear distinction between black and white.

One of Longqi's friends almost became a Mormon. (It was not until Longqi was studying overseas that he learned the

Chinese *Dictionary of Religion* was in error about the Mormon religion. The Mormons were not, as it was stated in the *Dictionary*, a Protestant sect.) It happened in this way. A friend of his friend had joined a Protestant church and received what he called "preferential treatment". Members of the congregation had actually bought a washing machine and had it sent to the boy's parents in China; and when a baby was born, they also sent money to help care for it. Longqi's friend was determined to join a church; any church would do! It did not matter to him that he had sworn an oath of atheism under the Red Flag, nor did he care if the church he joined was 'mainline' or 'heretical'. He decided on the Mormons. But a Mormon missionary at Brigham Young University told him that to follow Joseph Smith he'd have to give up drinking coffee and smoking tobacco, and would also have to pay a percentage of his annual income to the church. When he heard this, he had second thoughts and withdrew his application.

Whenever Longqi heard stories like these, he prayed that God would enlighten these good hearted people not to be so quick to baptize overseas students, nor be so ready to send them on for higher studies in their theological schools.

Nearly every church in China celebrated Midnight Mass on Christmas eve with great ceremony. Many non-Catholics also liked to go. They often went just to see what was going on, even if it meant being late for classes the next day or missing them entirely. People pushed their way onto crowded buses only to find upon their arrival that the churches had been packed to the rafters since 8 o'clock.

For the Chinese Catholics, attendance at Christmas Mass was an obligation; but for public security officials it only meant one more demand on their limited resources, since they had to send extra security police to control the crowds. In some cities it was the churches' policy to open up the 'temple' doors early and allow the curious and the 'once-a-year tourists' to come in to 'burn their incense'. Other churches were more strict. They only allowed those who could prove they were Catholics to come through the gates. For older Catholics, this lining up to have their credentials checked revived memories of revolutionary days, when they had to show their ID papers at every crossing in order to prove that they were citizens in good standing.

"What's your baptismal name?" the man at the gate would

ask. One would look in vain for such a word as 'baptismal' in China's prodigiously large dictionary, the *Sea of Words*. Less than a third of one percent of the total Chinese population has ever even heard the term. But if pressed, students would shout out any foreign name they could think of. Names like 'Horace' or 'Jackson' would be offered with great fervour and sincerity, only to be told by the gatekeeper to "get lost"!

One Christmas Eve Longqi found himself among the students at the barricades in front of the church gate. He heard a familiar voice, a baritone trying to pass as a tenor, answer the gatekeeper in a high pitched voice: "My baptismal name is *Maria*". "Get out of here!" said the gatekeeper angrily. The student began spelling it out using the Chinese phonemes for Luciano Pavorotti's name . "Hey! I'm a famous opera singer!" "Get out of here!" the old man growled. But the student insisted in his new found tenor voice: "I am Lu-ci-an-o Pa-wa-luo-di!" The old man raised his hand and suddenly three men appeared out of nowhere to hustle the tenor away from the gate and out of the arms of Holy Mother Church.

Christmas drew large crowds not only in the city but in rural areas as well. On another Christmas Eve, Longqi once again happened to be at the gate of a church, but this time in the country. The familiar scene of battalions of students besieging the gatekeeper was repeated here. This time, however, it was Longqi who was the object of the gatekeeper's suspicions. Perhaps the years abroad had effected his Mandarin and his accent sounded foreign. In any event, when he gave his baptismal name, (by now the small cities were trying to keep in step with the large ones) a look of disbelief spread across the gatekeeper's face. "If you're a Catholic," he demanded, "then make the sign of the cross for me!" Because Longqi did so with some show of annoyance and not much piety, the gatekeeper then ordered him to recite the Ten commandments as proof that he was indeed a Catholic. Longqi refused to be drawn further into what he felt was a child's game. Instead, he called into play the tactic of 'convincing the people through reasoning'. But all he got for his efforts was greater frustration, and a sympathetic smile from a young policeman who was standing nearby.

"Friend," said the policeman. "What's inside that's worth all the trouble?"

When Longqi heard these sympathetic words, he wanted to

shout to the world at large: "No one knows and no one cares how I feel!" But he restrained himself, remembering the well-known fact that while the singer Li Zongsheng may have worn a sad face, he never let a teardrop fall as he sang this melancholy song.

A foreign priest, who was in China as a teacher of English, once told Longqi that he could not understand why so many stores were permitted to sell religious cards at Christmas. From as early as the beginning of October, shop-windows everywhere proclaimed the message, wishing one and all a Merry Christmas. The blue-eyed foreigner was of the opinion that the Party secretary in the New China Book Store must be suffering from near-sightedness or perhaps had gone totally blind to allow this celebration of Christ's birth to take place in front of his nose. Longqi did not share this opinion.

He felt the reason could be found in the natural affinity Chinese had for understanding relationships. This was a popular topic in Western scientific books and journals, and the Chinese had a knack for knowing how to practice the art in just the right measure; for example, how a gentleman must cultivate a certain reserve when dealing with others, even with his friends. The one-a-year Christmas Card festival was too big an occasion to miss. Besides, all it demanded of someone was limited to one simple phrase: "Merry Christmas". Nor did anyone feel their principles were being compromised, least of all the atheists, by sending the cards to friends and acquaintances. Nor did it matter in the least to those buying 'seasonal fruits' whether or not Jesus was born in a stable or in a king's palace. Also, it was not uncommon to open a card with a Christmas scene on the cover only to find the greeting inside to be "Happy Birthday!" These matters were not to be taken too seriously. After all, the census bureau knows exactly how many Catholics there are among China's population of one billion two hundred million people and just how many people can read English.

Longqi explained this to his "foreign friend" and suggested that if he ate more stir-fried Chinese dishes, he'd soon understand why the Chinese do not consider cheese and bread to be authentic food.

Chinese altars were generally cluttered with bric-a-brac, plastic flowers spilling out of so many vases that one would be hard pressed to find room for one more. Whenever he entered a

foreign church and looked up at the altar, he could not help but feel that something was missing. But even before going abroad, his reaction on first seeing Beijing's South Church altar in all its cluttered splendor could be summed up in one word: "Ugh!"

It happened that during his first year of study abroad, one of his professors died of stomach cancer. He was a young man, only in his early forties. During the Mass for the Dead, the choir sang a hymn by Mozart. Longqi felt he'd never again experience a church so peaceful and serene. The mourners were dressed in conservative colours, many in black. As the casket was being carried from the church on the shoulders of the pall-bearers, the wife and children of the deceased broke into tears, as did his relatives and friends. Yet to Longqi their sorrow was not an expression of despair; it was more like the sadness of leavetaking, when a family bids farewell to one of their own who is about to embark on a long journey. Longqi felt then that he had for a brief moment come into contact with the Kingdom of God.

Longqi had while in China taken part in many mourning rites for the dead. There, the mourners still wore traditional hooded robes made from sackcloth, and they expressed their sorrow with loud wailing and crying. Whenever he saw the 'doufu-coloured' robes of the mourners, his heart beat a little faster, not from excitement but from fear. Ever since childhood, his reaction to the news of the death of a relative or neighbour was fear, which only increased as he peeped through the open doorway into the room where the dead person was being waked. Ceremonial cloths hung from the walls. They were extravagantly decorated and had been sent by relatives and friends as expressions of condolence. The high-pitched keening of the women made his head reel, and the clashing of cymbals seemed to him to announce the end of the world. As the acrid smoke from rows of burning joss sticks moved like a cloud to cover him, he began to concentrate feverishly on ways of forestalling his growing panic.

Those called upon to give eulogies at Chinese funerals were usually careful to avoid using the word 'feast day' for in spoken and written form it was closely allied to another word that denotes the anniversary of the death of a parent, ancestor or someone held in high esteem in the past. In some aspects, the traditional Chinese belief in an afterlife was really not that far

removed from those held by the Catholic fisher-folk of Longqi's village, who believed that 'eternal life' meant gaining the happiness of heaven and avoiding the pains of hell. The ordinary village Christians believed that after death the body is somehow changed but continues to live on in another form. This, of course, is not necessarily the same as believing that "eternal life is to know You, the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3-4).

There is an African American Spiritual that says "all God's children go to heaven, just waitin' on the judgement day". The Chinese, even if they are religious believers who have to a large degree left folk superstitions behind them, still find it hard to shrug off such a traditional catalytic agent for getting into heaven: the burning of 'paper money' throughout the five week mourning period. And when Longqi received a letter from his parents telling him his grandmother had "peacefully gone home to God", and how his parents insisted on keeping the funeral ceremonies simple, as was in keeping with their Catholic beliefs, his father still had to bow to clan pressure and bury her on Dragon Phoenix Mountain in Suzhou, a plot which had been selected by the traditional Chinese geomancer as particularly 'auspicious'.

Longqi had returned home on a visit that year. While there, he often stole away to his grandmother's empty room to sit silently and alone. He had no desire to go to Suzhou to 'sweep her grave', feeling no compulsion to perform such traditional rites of respect. He believed his grandmother, looking down from heaven, would forgive him this lapse of filial piety. He remembered a time in primary school, how one day he and his classmate went to the cemetery to 'sweep the graves' of the heroes of the revolution. He and his classmate snuck off to 'sweep' his father's grave which was nearby. When he came back the two, made a great show of their revolutionary ardour. Their zeal soon faltered, and they began to eat the fruit and cakes they had brought for an offering. "Waste not, want not!" they said to each other. There was little enough food for the living to eat during revolutionary times, and the two boys could certainly find a precedent among their 1 billion countrymen to justify breaking the taboo against eating the food offered for the dead.

Longqi's aunt once told him how she had brought his

grandmother to live for a while in her home. Because the house was very small, grandmother would go outside to say her morning and night prayers. All the neighbours were pagans and it was not long before the news got around that there was a old woman out in the lane making strange signs and mumbling to herself. Soon grandmother had gathered a crowd around her. But taking no notice of them, she kept right on praying until she was done.

Longqi had reached the age when he understood what it meant to be baptized and was quite content with the explanation that it was a special gift of God. Why on earth couldn't his grandmother let it go at that? Why this continual nagging at him to be "spending less time running around outside and more at home saying your prayers".

One day at school Longqi felt he had been given a weapon with which to put an end to her endless muttering about the efficacy of prayer. The lesson had been about Galileo and the challenge science posed for religion. "Granny," he said, "if Thunder God unleashed a bolt of lightning that struck the roof of our house while you were inside praying, wouldn't the roof catch on fire despite all your prayers?"

The old woman had nothing to say in reply. She could neither read nor write and had never gone to school. Nor was she aware that teachers in school who had no belief in a supernatural world were instilling in the minds of children the profound historical significance of such stories as Galileo, and Savanarola, whom "the Church had burned at the stake". But despite it all, she continued to insist that Longqi say his prayers.

Sometime later Longqi heard one of the younger Catholics among the overseas students say: "All the praying in the world won't put a crumb of bread on the table." The boy was anxious to demonstrate to the others how making money was more important than going to Mass. Longqi thought of his grandmother. He never had a ready reply for such statements, just as he could never understand how his grandmother always found time to say her Rosary. He himself prayed rarely. He did go to church regularly on Sundays but could seldom fathom why. Probably more from habit than anything else. As long as things were going smoothly in his life, he seldom bothered with religious devotions. Nor could he ever bring himself to imitate his grandmother, who every morning, no matter what the weather

was like, would make her way to the 'official' church nearby to attend the 5 o'clock Mass. When it came to patronizing the 'official' church, his grandmother was of a different mind from his parents. After the government permitted their village church to reopen its doors for worship, she never went back to the 'underground' community, even after the political climate changed for the worst and she had to go into hiding with the rest of the Catholics.

Longqi's grandmother often appeared in his dreams. He began dreaming of her from the moment he left China and even more so after she had died. He'd awake from these dreams feeling miserable and alone. They made him question why good people had to die, while the evil lived on in relative peace. On one occasion, when such thoughts were more persistent than usual, he opened a Bible to the Book of Job and began to read. Suddenly, he felt his whole world changing. In the past, he had hoped to reassure his grandmother that she need not worry about the Thunder God setting her house afire with lightning and burning it down; now he fully realized that his grandmother's 'house' had indeed caught fire and burned to the ground. She was now gone and Longqi felt an urgent need to pray, to talk with God again. For the first time in a very long time, he knelt on the floor in the middle of the day and prayed. He did not know for how long he stayed kneeling there, but eventually he rose to his feet and then went off to take a shower..to celebrate his re-birth.

In order to avoid problems with the Public Security Bureau, when he applied for a visa to study abroad, he wrote down education as his choice of subject. But he now intended to make theology his major. His bishop was not very encouraging, warning him that the government did not recognize theology degrees, which, he said, "were at the top of the list of unwanted diplomas." Nevertheless, Longqi was determined and he began to fancy how he might look with a Roman collar around his neck.

There was no resisting the inner voice which, he felt, was calling him with quiet insistence to the fulfillment of his true destiny. And recently he'd taken to singing the American song *My Way*. But it was only after witnessing the ordination ceremony of four seminarians to the priesthood that the ordinary pace of his desire began to accelerate, something like a car that

had suddenly been shifted into high gear. He could not recall ever having felt this way before. Afterwards he went home and wrote the entire episode of Samuel's call from the Old Testament on the wall of his room.

Longqi came to believe with an ever-growing certitude that what the world needed most was the light of Christ and His love. It needed this more than fame or money, more than social standing and good fortune, even more than a diploma from a foreign university, or buying a new car or a big house, or marrying a beautiful girl and having children.

Sometimes he felt the urge to track down one or another from among the Chinese Catholic students that he knew, and, in the middle of a harmless chat right out of the blue ask him suddenly: "Where can we find God in today's world?" He tried it out on a Taiwanese friend, who was also studying theology, who only laughed at him: "Are you out of your mind?" He was not surprised by his friend's reaction. For most Chinese, faith was a highly personal matter and hardly a fitting topic for general conversation. Even more personal were possible doubts an individual might harbour about his or her faith. These were to be kept hidden deep in the heart and never allowed out to see the light of day.

Longqi never had the feeling that his choice of the priesthood involved his having to renounce the world. There was nothing dramatic about it. He was just a very ordinary child of God, whom God had always loved all along. And who could deny this? How else could one explain the circumstances of his birth? After his mother had given birth to six girls, his parents lost all hope of fulfilling their dream of having a son. This despite his efforts, when his mother became pregnant with him, to remind her from the womb to keep on eating those plum tarts. His parents suddenly seemed to lose all faith and confidence. Despite being Catholics, they decided it was best that his mother have an abortion. Like many other Catholics on mainland China, they felt God would understand and forgive them for submitting to the government's population control program. Unfortunately, the pedicab driver, who was to take his mother to the hospital, was not operating up to usual speed, and they arrived too late. The doctor told her to come back the following day. That night the more his mother thought about the operation the more fearful she became. She never went back. And that is

how the family of Longqi obtained their one and only legitimate candidate for the priesthood.

"May God sanctify you and make you holy." Longqi knew that ordination of itself did not make the priest a saint, and he also knew that his parents and relatives would not see him in this light. In Chinese, the priest was given the title of 'spiritual father'. What with the first character meaning 'spirit' and the second 'father' how could it be said that there was nothing holy or sacred about the man? Furthermore, since the unbelievers had already 'swept away all the monsters and demons', those 'class enemies' of all descriptions, and any other remnants of the supernatural, ordinary Chinese people would certainly sit up and take notice if a 'spirit-father' suddenly appeared on the scene. Even more so should the "spirit-father" be of the blue, green or grey-eyed variety. They'd be amazed at the sight and render to him a respect even greater than that accorded to the monks or the lamas, or, perish the thought, to the old men who sat in the high offices of government.

As an only son, Lonqqi had received from childhood more than his share of parental affection. And he would never forget all that his parents had taught him, and the good habits they had instilled in him since his youth. "When you grow up you must live your life with a good conscience, always treating others as well as others have treated you."

He felt a keen sense of responsibility for his parents, but he also was becoming more aware with each passing day that his sole purpose in life was not to provide a better living for his parents and his family.

He had read in some Western books written for children certain ideas which Chinese parents would certainly feel ran contrary to traditional Chinese teachings on filial piety. These books taught children not to be surprised or overly disturbed if they found themselves different from their parents and siblings. On the contrary, they must not lose heart. The family with whom they were living might well not be their true family after all. But out there in the world somewhere, their true family did exist...one they had not yet met, but with whom they would be united one day.

"He's been Westernized!" his friends would say if Longqi spoke aloud the 'unfilial' thoughts. They would accuse him of deserting his roots and taunt him with shouts of "Hey, you'll

always be a black eyed, yellow skinned, son of the dragon!"

In his dreams Longqi often heard the voice of his true Father, the One he had not yet seen but who cared for him and watched over him as Eli the high priest for the young Samuel. "Go back to sleep, my child. And if you hear the voice call to you again, say to Him: 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" (1 Samuel 3)

It was unclear to Longqi when he began to dream the dream that would not go away, the one in which his true but unseen Father would be calling out to him: "Longqi, Longqi, son of the dragon! Wake up, arise from sleep, quickly!"

And in those days Jesus came to the house of the leader of the synagogue and saw the flute players and the crowd wailing and crying. "Go away!" he said. "The child is not dead but sleeping." And they ridiculed him. When the crowd was put out, Jesus came and took her by the hand, and the little girl arose (Matthew 9:23-26).