

AFTER READING 'LONGQI-DRAGON PRAYS'
— REFLECTION ON THE CHURCH IN CHINA

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

Dragon Prays is a novelette by Yan Ni, a young Chinese writer who went to Europe to study. This novelette was originally published in Chinese in five segments in the publication God Loves China from May through September, 1993. It was later translated into English and published in the July-August 1994 issue of Tripod. Le Sheng is a young man who fervently loves the Catholic Church in mainland China. When he sent his article to Teresa Yeung, the editor of God Loves China, he said, "After reading Dragon Prays I felt inspired by the same feelings as the author. I had a lot in my heart that I wanted to say. It was as if I would not be happy until I got it out of my system, so I sat down and wrote the enclosed essay at one sitting. Can you use it?" His essay had over 20,000 Chinese characters. Limitations of space have required shortening the article somewhat

and cutting out two sections: “House Churches and Pastoral Evangelization,” and “See Through Contemporary Wording to the Historical Background.” We hope nonetheless, that we have been able to retain the flavor and integrity of Le Sheng’s essay.

A number of young authors have recently surfaced who have begun to write articles about the Church in China, a Church silent for the past thirty years. They are cultivating and developing a field rich in promise. Yang Ni, the author of *Longqi, Dragon Prays*, is one of these.

Longqi, the creation of the author, was born and raised in the “New China”. Despite his receiving a “revolutionary baptism” in atheism, he remained at heart a young Chinese Catholic cast in the classic mold. His faith was rooted in the rich soil of a Catholic family living in very special times. His parents and his grandmother handed down the faith to him and provided him with a firm basis for living it.

Longqi experienced China’s opening up. He was, in fact, among its beneficiaries—being one of the first to go abroad for higher studies. He also experienced the painful and difficult process of the Church’s restoration as it attempted to adapt to the many changes taking place from the late seventies until now. Though he had some misgivings

he succeeded in facing the challenges presented by Vatican II, the Church's traditional customs, the appearance of house Churches and the struggles between the "underground" and the "official" Church. He eventually found his own orientation as a young Chinese Catholic and made his own proper decisions.

Overseas believers who read Longqi may not be conversant with the historical background of the Church in China. Even Catholics in China, who personally experienced the events that took place and continue to take place, may find a quick analysis of the situation useful. It will also help the readers from outside mainland China to arrive at a fuller appreciation of what Yang Ni experienced through Longqi and give a deeper understanding and knowledge of the Catholic Church in the China of our day.

Ten Years of Development

Longqi's story takes place in Beijing, Suzhou, the countryside and finally, France. Longqi left Beijing to go study in France. There, he discovered the Post-Vatican II French Church. Only the "pure" Latin Mass was being said in Beijing at the time, although we learn that later on the priest in the "underground" Church in his home village said Mass in Chinese. This, however, was still the old Latin ritual, nothing more than Chinese words substituted for the Latin ones.

Upon arriving in France he was puzzled whether to sit or kneel during the Mass, receive Holy Communion in the mouth or in the hands, or drink out of the same chalice as everyone else. Initially, these questions seemed only to involve the liturgy without touching upon theological realities. Yet, the liturgy of the Mass is intimately tied to the life of faith. It is through the liturgy that we most readily discover how the Church in China accepted Vatican II and how it was changed by it. Longqi's experience summarizes for us the situation the Church in China faces as it rapidly undergoes the changes called for by Vatican II. This particular period of history shows how the Church, starting from point zero, fully embraced Vatican II's call for renewal.

In mid 1977, the Church in China faced an important turning point in its history. It was as though she awoke from a long sleep. A large number of priests were released from labor camps and returned to their communities. The Eucharist, which had not been celebrated for more than 20 years, now began to be celebrated openly. At first, this was done very quietly at early dawn or even in the middle of the night for people still had lingering fears. Yang Ni describes a village church, "At four or five in the early morning the Catholics silently entered the church and knelt on the ground ..."

Prior to 1977 there were courageous priests who during

the day squeezed the juice out of fresh raisins to make their *wine*, and then from memory of the Latin texts consecrated the bread and wine. In the evening they secretly went around giving the Last Sacrament to Catholics. One of my companions, an older priest, often did this. Touching stories of this nature happened very frequently in those days. The Church in China passed through a time of silent uninterrupted suffering lasting more than 20 years. This period is filled with varied testimonies of the courageous witness given by both the Catholics and clergy of the older generation.

At the end of the seventies Catholics gradually brought back to the church the chasubles, stoles, maniples, chalices and the water and wine cruets, which they had hidden with great ingenuity and courage. Priests vested themselves with new white albs and old chasubles, said the Latin Mass under candle light wearing presbyopic glasses slowly reading each laboriously copied Latin word. The altar was often nothing more than a square table covered with a white cloth set up in the home of one of the Catholics. Despite its simplicity everybody thought that it was very solemn and sacred. During those days almost all the Masses were celebrated in the early morning, even in the autumn with its cold winds and rains or during the biting cold of winter. Catholics who attended the Mass filled a small room or courtyard kneeling on the ground. Longqi recalled that, "Catholics knelt on small cushions that

smelled of the earth”. He said that the atmosphere reminded him of “detective stories” that he had read. This, of course, was an impression that he only acquired later on.

After 1980, things got better. There were morning Masses and sometimes even evening Masses. People were more free and gained confidence. They began to build churches and fight for the Church’s rights. They wanted the government to make restitution or to return property that had been confiscated. Churches in the cities were returned first. It did not matter that they were in poor shape. It was enough to have recovered the building. Catholics in rural areas often made use of large courtyards to set up temporary altars protected from the weather by a tent. These were only temporary arrangements but large numbers of worshipers thronged to them. People in those days kept their hands folded to receive Communion. This was quite natural for them. In some places Catholics went to Confession every time they were going to receive Holy Communion. Priests now no longer had old albs, chasubles, stoles and maniples, but new Roman style vestments made by elderly Sisters and unmarried women catechists. There was organ music, and choirs sang at high Masses. Churches even had bands that played for festivals making them more impressive and solemn. Fortunately many more priests appeared to serve the Catholic communities. Old seminarians—those who had remained

faithful to their seminary commitment and now had grown old—returned. Groups of young people, both boys and girls, appeared wanting to offer their lives as priests and Sisters. This had been impossible during the past 30 years but now vocations were forthcoming proving that the Holy Spirit was at work. Seminaries and convents gradually began to open.

In the middle of the eighties the Chinese Church published a “special” edition of the Latin missal with the name of the Pope deleted. Far from perfect it was still a step forward. Priests who used this Latin missal were quite adept at adding the Pope’s name at the proper place in the Mass. A special sign of vitality appeared in the Church in China at this time: everywhere, in country as well as city, Catholic communities embarked on large scale reconstruction projects, building new churches—each one modeled after the old style: cross shaped with pointed roofs, their tube shapes looking like factory buildings. These buildings with crosses on their towers appearing one after the other all over China were signs of the Church’s presence. The division which had begun in the early eighties between the “underground” and “official” Churches became more pronounced after the middle of the decade. The middle and latter eighties were a turning point as well as a period of rapid development for the Church in China, a period of energetic work for the

Church in the large vineyard which is mainland China. New churches were not the only sign of this progress: new bishops were appointed and old as well as young priests took up pastoral duties. Major seminaries with a five-year curriculum were set up in 1982, 1983 and 1984 respectively. White haired old priests and Bishops, despite their advanced years and failing strength, did their utmost to train young seminarians. We can imagine how many difficulties, worries, frustrations and trials the staff as well as the seminarians experienced during those five years of setting up and running these seminaries. More than five years of sweat and tears expended on training, but after 5 years the joy of a rich harvest. After 1987 many young, energetic priests were ordained just in time to fill the vacancies left by the older priests. After forty years of vicissitudes and a critical personnel shortage, the Chinese Church could now breathe more easily. The Church was beginning to leave her deep traumatic experience behind her.

The early eighties were years of laying the foundation for on-going and further development. Some priests obtained copies of the Chinese Mass from their relatives and friends who came to visit them from Taiwan and Hong Kong. They discovered that 20 years previously the universal Church had undergone a historical and world wide liturgical reform. They did not understand Vatican II but being loyal to Rome

they began to celebrate home Masses in Chinese. Some priests also adapted the entire prayer book published in Taiwan. This meant doing away with the prayers in the classical language and reciting them in the ordinary spoken language of the people. This caused an uproar at first but the reason offered was very simple, very devout and quite persuasive: “The Patriotic Association will never change, but we must answer the call of the Pope!” Fervent Catholics could no longer protest. By appealing to the Pope, who was Jesus’ representative upon earth, the matter was easily resolved. The stance one took towards the Pope, however, became the reason for ever increasing and bitter recriminations between the “underground” and “official” Church. The Church was just beginning again and recovering its own identity. It felt like a pilgrim long absent from home and just now returning to the embrace of Holy Mother Church. Many Catholics acceded to this “loyal” liturgical revolution, with many places adopting the change over from Latin to Chinese without any qualms. It was not flawless, but it was a step in the right direction. Not long afterward these priests and Catholics became the underground Church. At the same time the government could not figure out just what adopting the Chinese Mass entailed. It considered such changes to be an infiltration by “the Vatican and foreign imperialists.” It strictly proscribed the “underground” church

and dissuaded the “official” Church from taking any unauthorized steps to adopt these changes. For many priests this warning was not needed. They themselves were upset with the new Mass and would not accept it. Furthermore, during the early eighties they were occupied with establishing churches and had no leisure or strength to promote Vatican II’s liturgical renewal.

Longqi had gone to the “underground” Church. He also secretly went to an “official” church. In neither of these churches, at least in his home village, did the priest celebrate Mass in Chinese or accept the liturgical reforms of Vatican II. He never studied Latin “so he couldn’t tell whether the priest was saying the same Latin prayers used in the ‘underground’ church and if they came from the same book.” He also “wondered if all priests spoke Latin with the same Chinese accent”. What Yang Ni is describing here is the Chinese Church of the early eighties. The liturgy was still pre-Vatican II. Longqi had borrowed some Chinese books published in Taiwan and Hong Kong from the bishop’s private library. The Church in China at that time had not yet published any liturgical works. Neither the circumstances nor the atmosphere were ready for this, consequently, there was no question of any wide spread renewal.

By the early nineties, the Chinese Church had already experienced 10 years of difficult renewal. The most urgent

needs were for personnel and facilities. This entailed having a certain number of bishops, churches, and young people of both sexes to continue the Church's mission. Seminaries, convents, Catholic books and periodicals and other religious articles were also needed. A great deal of progress was made in this period in constructing and repairing churches. Dioceses were firmly established and many religious organizations were reestablished or reordered and began to operate effectively. Progress in updating also included the publishing of books and periodicals introducing the faith. With priests and Catholics from Taiwan, Hong Kong and other countries helping, the Chinese Church developed a solid understanding of Vatican II giving promise for even further progress. By the turn of the decade the Chinese Church, with the help of the Churches in Taiwan and Hong Kong, was implementing the liturgical reforms. Courses on liturgy were taught in the seminaries and parishes began to use the new liturgy. The three Church publishing houses responded to the demand and printed a collection of books and the documents of Vatican II on liturgical reform. Workshops on the national and local level were held for the clergy and laity.

The fact that during this period the Church was meeting its personnel and material needs and living in a more favorable environment was not the only reason for liturgical reform

and an increasing understanding of the Second Vatican Council. Rather there was a general feeling that the time had come to discuss the Council and implement its reforms. The political climate on the domestic and international fronts was favorable. With so many overseas priests visiting China, the propaganda for reform in the local Catholic press and the opportunities for both the clergy and the laity to get to know Vatican II better, the understanding of the Council was constantly increasing. Finally the Church authorities in China decided to initiate a nationwide study of the Council's reforms in view of their being accepted and implemented by all. The Mass, along with the sacraments, was the most important object of the reforms and so became the first item on the agenda. With so much emphasis being put on this matter, the local Church experienced a certain "annoyance", the same irritation that Longqi experienced. This was also the feeling of the local Church, but it saw the need to put up with this for a time in order to put the reforms of Vatican II into effect. The same was true for the Chinese government which had to acquire a knowledge of these reforms. With the Church's concerted efforts to win the government to its way of thinking, the government gradually came to realize that liturgical reform was not a matter of "infiltration from foreign imperialist powers". The government finally understood that this reform had taken place throughout the

Church. As a result, the authorities no longer voiced opposition or obstructed the movement. The Church's legal rights were protected due to the united efforts of the Church authorities. The important role that the promotion and acceptance of Vatican II reforms played in uniting and strengthening the Church in China is obvious.

Even though the conditions are ripe, a rather long period of time is still needed for the Church in China to accept Vatican II. The Council not only presents a formidable challenge to the Chinese Church, it presents a rigorous testing for the Church. We see the young Longqi meeting the "foreign Church" overseas and finding it strange. How much more strange will it seem to Catholics in China who do not yet fully understand it! In its process of renewal the Chinese Church is confronted by many challenges and not only by those presented by the liturgical reforms but in many other areas as well: theological, spiritual, ecclesial. There are also the pastoral problems and the question of seminary training.

The older generation of Catholics was accustomed to hearing that one is saved only through baptism and by being a member of the Catholic Church. Today, suddenly, they discover that there is "salvation outside the Church." Old Catholics still puzzle over this. And no matter how hard they try, they do not understand that the Church is only the sign

of the Kingdom of Heaven, that it is a structured community. They do not comprehend the emphasis placed on the spirit of communion among the members, and the elevation of ordinary Catholics to certain positions in the Church. Longqi speaks of this when he mentions Catholics giving out Holy Communion. Such practices bewilder Chinese Catholics. Previously, all they had to do was to obey. These obedient servants need time before they can participate more actively, a time to evaluate their spirituality and renew their values. This holds true especially in the case of fostering vocations to the priesthood and the Sisterhood. These matters are all presently putting pressure on the Church in China making it pass through a crucible of suffering. Like Longqi himself, our brothers and sisters must reflect on, recognize and accept this situation.

The “underground” and “official” Church that Longqi had contact with both accepted Vatican II. Although the “official” Church was slower than the “underground” Church in accepting the liturgical reform and other elements of Vatican II, yet owing to better conditions and a solid base, its grasp of the Council was deeper than that of the “underground” Church; the “official” Church was more widespread and had a more normal development. The “underground” Church, on the other hand, though accepting Vatican II earlier than the “official” Church, spent its efforts

in debating rights and wrongs and whether it was permissible to enter the “official” churches. This situation has lasted up to the present day. Some underground officials only translate the old text of the Mass into Chinese; and miss the deeper meaning behind Vatican II. Fervor, proclaiming one’s loyalty to the Holy See and being recognized by overseas Catholics as “loyal” are insufficient to develop the Church. One must also quietly and realistically take steps to effect its renewal. The difficulties for unity within the Chinese Church cannot be considered apart from the degree one knows and accepts Vatican II. If Catholics were really to grasp the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, unity would be much easier — at least we could tolerate one another. Unfortunately the attitudes and understanding of some of our “loyal” brothers and sisters remain fixed in Vatican I, drawing distinctions between what is right and wrong, setting up standards for orthodoxy, and adhering to the theology of the forties and fifties as well as to old political viewpoints. Vatican II has renewed the Church; the world has moved on, and the Chinese Communists have changed their aims and policies. However, some of our brothers and sisters do not change.

Nevertheless, most of the clergy and laity in China know, accept and promote the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. When Longqi left Beijing, the liturgical reform had not yet taken place; but now Catholics do not care whether

they stand, sit or kneel during Mass. If Longqi were to return today he would find that the liturgical reform is being implemented not only in Suzhou but in Beijing and in the entire country; that everyone is studying the documents of Vatican II, discussing its theory and taking hold of its spirit. This extraordinary development is clear testimony that the Church in China has really welcomed the Council.

Dilemma for the Chinese Church

Everyone in Longqi's own family, young and old, and for three generations, belonged to the "underground" church. However this typically fervent Chinese Catholic family soon showed a divergence of views and understanding. First, there was the old grandmother who, out of convenience and wanting to attend daily Mass, went to the "official" church. Longqi always obedient to his parents went to the "underground" church. He soon came to feel that the "family atmosphere" in the "underground" church was a little too much for him, An aura of sacredness and grandeur is the minimum young Catholics all over China desire for their church. This is their greatest dream whether they belong to the "underground" or the "official" church. This feeling is very deep in Chinese Catholics who have had to suffer the attacks of the Cultural Revolution and the contempt of others. There is a fierce desire to have a large church. Longqi was

unable to find his ideal church in the “underground” so he went to the “official” church, but surreptitiously. He was not quite sure of the “official” church since he had listened to so much “underground” propaganda. Making use of a political ploy he went very nervously to reconnoiter the situation, with the bizarre hope of raking up some devils from the “official” church and then reporting on them to his underground parents. Naturally, he did not find any devils. On the contrary he wanted to tell the parish priest in the “official” church that he no longer considered them to be devils. After he went to study in Beijing he had no hesitation to attend services in the “official” church.

Longqi’s change of attitude enables us to discover one aspect of the dispute between the “underground” and “official” Church as it affects young Chinese Catholics. Superficially describing the family atmosphere pervading the “underground” Church as being too “close” and subject to constant change while emphasizing the stability and “sacred” atmosphere of the “official” Church seems to be sufficient reason for Longqi’s change of outlook towards the official church. As a matter of fact, it is rather his own observations and reflections on his Church that brought about his change in attitude and finally persuaded him.

Catholic young people in China today did not go through the persecutions of the fifties and sixties and so they hold no

old grudges. They have not only idealized the “sacredness” of their churches, but they also want them, at all costs, to be that way in reality. It will happen one day that more and more young Catholics from the “underground” Churches will enter an “official” Church out of curiosity. Besides being awed by its “sacredness”, they will discover that those kneeling there are also brothers and sisters of the same Lord. Furthermore, they will see that those priests who had been reviled by their parents and leaders of the underground Church as “belonging to the Patriotic Association”, also preach what the Lord taught, celebrate the Lord’s supper, and tell people to keep the Ten Commandments of God. Amazed, they will be willing not only to forgive past faults, but like Longqi and his old grandmother, will go on attending Mass in the open churches. Chinese Catholics have been deprived of the sacraments for more than 30 years. Wouldn’t the opportunity to receive them today be more important than observing the dead letter of the law? It is now becoming more common for young students and workers to go to the “official” churches. This is true not only when they leave home, but even in their own native towns and villages. There are also cases of old Catholics sending their children to the “official” churches so they can receive a solid Catholic training in a community and become fervent believers. Yet they themselves continue to go to the “underground”

churches. Law and emotional ties still tightly bind them.

Longqi's change of mind helps us understand the different attitudes adopted by Catholics of both the older and younger generation towards the "official" and "underground" Church. The older generation is influenced by its pre-Vatican II training; they make clear distinctions between the "good" and "bad". Faults committed by some in the past prevent them from going to the "official" churches. Most likely Longqi's parents belonged to this group and found it difficult to forgive those who "spoke" and "did" things against their conscience while they had to suffer for it. They cannot forget how much they sacrificed and suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Furthermore, some of the culprits still "held power". These emotional scars make it difficult for older Catholics to forgive from the heart, even though they know that not all persons in the "official" churches are "devils". Since they make no efforts at union, unity eludes them. As for Longqi such scars as these were not very deep even though hidden pressures prevented him from revealing his Catholic identity. This does not necessarily indicate a lack of courage. It is quite common among Catholics living in large cities in China not to reveal their identity. Revealing one's identity seldom pays as it only provokes unnecessary misunderstanding and trouble. Therefore, Longqi never revealed his Catholic identity during

his student days. “He knew that God would forgive him knowing his situation.” For Longqi, then, it was easy to sympathize with those deeply troubled in conscience over their past mistakes. Did they really have any other option? “They were coerced,” he said.

Most young Catholics, like Longqi, confront the conflict between the “underground” and “official” Church with insight and understanding. They do not blindly accept everything the “underground” Church says just because of its loyalty to Rome. Neither do they mindlessly condemn all the priests and bishops in the “official” Church for the mistakes of certain individuals, much less do they consider them or their Church to be “devils”. No longer immature children, they do not rely solely on the words of their parents, nor bow to certain important individuals. They no longer believe in mere hearsay. They want to see and understand for themselves before deciding what is in accord with what God or the Church says. Their generation puts everything to the test. Large numbers of young Catholics in China— for that matter large numbers of older Catholics as well—having suffered through more than 20 years of conflict between the “underground” and “official” Church and having seen the Church inflict so much suffering on itself, are weary with so much internal bickering. It pains them to see brothers and sisters of the same Lord constrained by external law, critical

of the faults of some individuals and endlessly wasting their energy, knowing that the Church, which lacked freedom in the past, still exists and is presented with many opportunities. In any case Longqi will never again, as he did in the past, take as a norm for discerning the truth or judging the Church what his father's generation told him while he was in the seminary or what he learned or heard at church. Neither the "underground" nor "official" Church have an exclusive claim to holiness. Longqi, along with thousands of other young Chinese Catholics are doing some hard thinking, searching and hoping for a way that will enable them to grapple with the perplexities caused by the conflicts between the "underground" and "official" Church and eventually find a happy peaceful Church, one having dignity and holiness. This surely is a fitting ideal on which to expend one's efforts!

The Challenge of Modern Materialism

Longqi went with high spirits and an ardent sincerity to study theology to a Catholic country in the West. However, this did not prevent him from being appalled at what he found there: in a country whose population was 90 percent Catholic "he did not find 90 percent to be practicing Catholics." For he soon discovered that his friends—part of that 90 percent whom he imagined to be fervent—did not show much enthusiasm towards his religious studies, nor did

they really understand the emphasis the Church in the East places on mortification.

Because the number of Chinese Catholics is very small, they are proud of their identity as Catholics and are very much concerned about their local Church communities. However, when they go abroad they are often shocked and regret that foreigners are not like those priests and Catholics who visit the Church in China and express such concern for and interest in it. Undoubtedly, most Chinese priests, Sisters and lay people who study abroad experience these or similar feelings.

Secularism has made deep inroads in the Church in the West. People are occupied with their own lives. They study, work, and play, yet gain very little from all their efforts. Their devotion can in no way be compared with the fervor of Chinese Catholics. Secularism is largely responsible for the dearth of vocations and a sudden cooling of fervor. This situation is a serious challenge to China and the Church in China. Yang Ni explores this challenge:

“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 eager to demonstrate to the others how making money was more important than going to Mass.)”

Longqi also discovered that “rice Christians” was not a

phenomenon found solely among Catholics within China, even “overseas Chinese” had perfected the art. They went to Church and they believed in religion—for their own advantage. Even “Members of the Democracy Movement in their newsletter reminded their readers 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’.” There are always those ready to exploit every opportunity as long as they find advantage in it for themselves.

“One of Longqi’s overseas friends almost became a Mormon. It happened 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!... But a Mormon missionary from Brigham Young University told him that to follow Joseph Smith he’d have to give up drinking coffee and smoking tobacco, and also would have to pay a percentage of his annual income to the church. If it wasn’t for this his friend would have already become a Mormon.”

“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.”

In her writing Yang Ni describes how some people look for opportunities to become “Rice Christians”. The author does not directly say that this is happening within China itself, but certain actions of those Chinese (and Chinese Catholics) who have “escaped the bird cage” present strong proof that the Church in China today is also being beset with materialism. There is no need to show how common this is in China today. One has only to look at the Chinese totally occupied in doing business, opening factories, funding enterprises—completely dedicated to the making of money. Yang Ni’s description of those Chinese who go overseas is proof enough that quest for money and the good life have already made deep inroads into our Church.

A fervent Catholic doctor from Beijing kept on insisting that he wanted to serve a Catholic hospital in China. He requested permission to go to the States for studies. He stated that upon his return he would offer his services to the Church. The local church backed his request and Bishops and priests from Taiwan funded his studies. After completing his studies in 3 years he suddenly “disappeared”. More deplorable is the case of some “fervent” seminarians who have also played this game. Winning the trust of their superiors, they go abroad and “disappear”.

However, we must point out that most of our priests

and seminarians are outstanding. They have successfully withstood seductive temptations alluring them to the “dolce vita”. Some people are concerned that there will not be enough places overseas to send our priests and Sisters. The situation is actually quite different. Many countries have few vocations and their major seminaries lack students. Seminaries abroad can easily accommodate more than a thousand foreign seminarians and priests for studies. Furthermore, our overseas churches would always be happy to help our Chinese Church. Owing to the acute needs of present pastoral ministry, many of our young priests have put aside the possibility of going abroad for studies. Others have postponed their plans. Many priests from my own diocese have done this. Theirs is truly an extraordinary sacrifice!

Through Longqi’s prayer that foreign Christians “be not so quick to baptize overseas Chinese or to send them on to higher studies in their theological schools”, Yang Ni is reminding us to choose carefully those we send overseas since those Christians must face the challenge of the West’s present secular society.

Young Chinese Catholics Today

The story of “Longqi” is not long but it covers extensive ground through its time leaps, place changes and different historical backgrounds. Longqi is the one main actor. The

changes he undergoes are the thread drawing the whole story together. The author succeeds in using these changes to create for us a flesh and blood, lively, unforgettable, modern, young Chinese Catholic.

Longqi was once hesitant to receive the chalice and kiss the crucifix owing to his ingrained fears of infection.

Owing to his parents' cowardice he grieved over the loss of his favorite picture of a young girl praying with eyes uplifted to heaven.

Fearing trouble he hid his Catholic identity and wore dark glasses upon entering a church.

He was troubled over the "nagging" expressions of faith uttered by his old grandmother, and spoke against them, leaving the old lady lost for words.

This is Longqi, the story of Longqi and the Longqi who grows into maturity and whose life beats in pulse with the times. Why is Longqi so appealing, making the readers feel so close to him? Why is his story so successful? It is undoubtedly because the uncertainties, worries and aggravations that he experiences are not his alone. Today's young Chinese Catholics are having the same thoughts and feelings. We see ourselves in the character of Longqi, and in the minor characters of the story: his grandmother, parents and the priests from the underground and official church as well as the old guards at the church gates, in the very profile

of the Catholic Church, in the present generation as well as the former one.

The plot of “Longqi” follows the “stream of consciousness” style of writing, even in pace, free of much excitement. The author’s portrayal of Longqi’s growth to maturity and personhood, however, is clear and concise.

This is a splendid portrait of modern and enterprising young Chinese Catholics intent on observing and reflecting, and courageous in probing and questioning. They are a generation fully alive, mature and willing to make sacrifices.

The author, Yang Ni, delineates the changes Longqi underwent as he grew to maturity. Long before he went abroad he had arrived at a certain level of understanding and interest in the values of his faith, its liturgy, spirituality, Scripture and the divisions in the Church.

“Longqi’s emotions seemed to go beyond the level of his parents. He came to realize that man was not saved by observing the law, but only through faith in Jesus Christ...” “Saints are also human and they lived in this world.” When Longqi began to attend the official church in his village...he discovered that the priests were not devils.

He also got a new insight into the meaning of death while abroad. The faith of the Catholic fisher folk in his village was quite simple: eternal life meant “gaining the happiness of heaven and avoiding the pains of hell.” On one

level one could say that they “believed that after death the body was somehow changed but continues to live on in another form.” This, of course, he felt “was not necessarily the same as believing that ‘eternal life was to know the Father, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He had sent into the world.’” That Longqi’s knowledge reached this new level was indeed remarkable. When he was reading the Book of Job he was suddenly enlightened. The world had changed: in the past he had hoped to reassure his old 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 the old house—his heart—had burned down! Then Longqi felt the 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. Eventually, he rose to his feet and then went off to take a shower to celebrate his re-birth.

Longqi’s change of heart now gave his life of faith an entirely new depth of meaning. “There was no resisting an inner voice which, he felt, was calling him with quiet insistence to the fulfillment of his true destiny.” The call the Lord gave Longqi is the same one God gives to each of us. Longqi answered this call without the slightest hesitation.

“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 a diploma from a foreign university, or buying a new car or a big house, or marrying a beautiful girl and raising intelligent kids.”

“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 didn’t know when it all started but Longqi began to have a recurring dream from which he could not escape: his true Father whom he had never seen was calling to him: “Longqi, son of the dragon! Wake up, arise from sleep, quickly!”

At last, Longqi’s faith was now mature and took on a new meaning. His parents had passed on their Christian faith to him. This had become part of his own being as he grew to maturity. Though immersed in a secularized society, he had experienced a glimmer of truth. Concern for an entire people, in fact, for the whole human race, had made it possible for him to forget his own self and his family. Yang Ni, in the person of her fictional character, Longqi, traces not only his journey into faith but the journey of today’s young Chinese Catholics as they discover their own faith, reflect on their own life experiences, and life’s changing vicissitudes. Longqi represents the positive response young Catholics in

China are making towards this new age, the whole world, the Church and their heavenly Father.

The consummate skill with which Yang Ni concludes her story leaves us full of hope. Her message with its depth of meaning is for everyone:

“Longqi, Longqi, son of the dragon! Wake up, arise from sleep quickly!”

The Father’s call is not only given to Longqi, but to all the descendants of the dragon. The Chinese people, the giant of Asia that has been sleeping for many centuries. Millions of young Chinese, awake! Awake to the love that Christ and the Father have for you, witness to the Lord, announce joy to the people and create a new world for our people and for the Kingdom of Heaven!