

# *Led by the Spirit along the Pathways of China*

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*By A China Pilgrim*

*Translated from the French by Betty Ann Maheu, A. M.*

**H**aving traveled across several continents, where we were witnesses to the end of many things, we finally came to China...the end of the world itself...to make a new beginning.

The world we had left behind no longer exists. But the China that we have come to has also had to bid farewell to its past, one more honored and ancient than our own. How else could it turn its face to the future whose day may not yet have dawned but asserts its advent in the very air we breathe. There is indeed a new world struggling to be born, not just here in China but everywhere.

We arrive then at the doorstep of China at a moment in history when all things seem to be coming to an end. We are welcomed as a friend, but asked to leave our foreign baggage at the gate, our Western ways of working, of thinking and of speaking, and yes, many of our talents, too. Even the age-old habits of the Church to which we belong must be set aside. Among the items to be left behind are those things that are already in the throes of dying in our former world. Discarding our old certitudes, we cross the threshold of our new world with empty hands and feet unshod...and yet...and yet not without hearts filled and overflowing. It is not forbidden to bring one's heart.

## *Is this the end?*

Jesus knew what it meant to come to the end of things. He confronted his own death and saw it as necessary; he viewed his departure from his disciples as something positive. "It is good for you that I go away," he said to them at the Last Supper (Jn 16:17). He thought of his leaving as a new beginning. And just at the point when his disciples felt that all was ended, he sent his Spirit to bring forth a new beginning. We entered China. The wall separating our two worlds, which seemed at first insurmountable, has been breached. We expected everything to be strange and different in this new place.

Instead, we find a familiarity in its trees and flowers, and in the birds that fly into that very same bright and warming sun which we thought we had left behind. Faces, too, some smiling, some serious, some lined with age, awaken fresh memories of our former life, and we begin to feel at home here in this supposedly foreign land. Time confirms this first impression. As the days and months pass, we become more and more conscious of the presence of something that does not respect frontiers and boundaries, something that pokes fun at high walls and barred windows, something that suggests to the heart that while we may have traveled a great distance, we have, in fact, never really left home at all.

A scent of something familiar rides on the air. It hovers hesitantly above the heads and penetrates to the depths of the hearts of those who ache for former loves and who feel the wellsprings of their souls gone dry. Then we sense the rush of a light breeze gently blowing, fresh and welcoming, in the places where we expected to find only suspicion and distrust. And suddenly the doors we feared would be locked tight swing open to receive us. We are touched by a breath from the past, a reminder of a small wind once felt in other more familiar places and along roads we used to travel. In that moment we recognize the presence of the Spirit.

This same Spirit, poised now above our emptiness and above the road we have yet to travel, once hovered over the void at the dawn of creation. It overshadowed the Maid of Nazareth, who, emptied of self, waited expectantly at the hour when all had supposed that God would never again break his silence. It came to rest on the young man who plunged into the depths of the river Jordan while the people around him, in the grip of death, longed for new life. This same Spirit hovered over him, when in the synagogue of Capernaum he heralded the Good News of God, proclaiming the liberation of the poor and oppressed. The Spirit lingered over the empty tomb of the Risen One as the sweet aroma of new hope, penetrating the hearts of his disciples and signaling a new beginning when all seemed lost. This was the same Spirit who filled the void left by the departure of the One who had conquered death and ignited a new fire that swept across the world and became the source of new life to the people of all nations.

We recognize that Spirit here with us...the Spirit who unifies all things and brings forth new flames from spent embers to light up the world. The Spirit is here, there, and everywhere; he comes and

goes like the wind. He is not confined to any particular place...no matter how sacred, or to any one institution...no matter how holy. He will not be contained by temples of worship, be they in Jerusalem or on Mount Garizim. Nothing holds or binds the Spirit who is freedom itself. It is the Spirit who creates the void, and fills it (Jn 3:6; 4:21-23). Our spirituality can only be defined as life in the Spirit.

The Spirit is not a burden to be borne; rather, we are borne by the Spirit who bears all our burdens. The Spirit moves at will, without need of passport or visa, above censure, above law, beyond ritual, and able to breach all defenses. His wisdom is not confined to books; he does not speak a word, but his silence is creative of all things.

The Spirit utters the Word and it takes root in the flesh, all in his own good time and in the place of his own choosing. We move ahead of him only to find he has already been there. We cannot say a word about the Spirit without his first forming it in our minds and placing it on our tongues. We can do nothing without him. It is the Spirit who plants, who waters, and who brings to fruition all that we seek to accomplish in our lives.

It is for us to be conscious of his presence, recognize him in the traces he leaves behind, sniff his scent, discern his signs, and welcome him into our lives.

The Spirit is freedom: "Where the Spirit is, there is liberty" (2Co 3:17).

The Spirit is poverty: in emptiness he sows his creative seeds, and he establishes his Kingdom at the gates of the poor.

The Spirit is truth: "The Spirit will unmask all lies."

The Spirit is joy.

The Spirit is harmony.

It is through these qualities that the Spirit builds up within us the Image of the One to whom we are called to bear witness.

Our spirituality is more than a spirituality of the Word, it is also a spirituality of the Image, the Image of the One that travels faster than light and is quicker than the sound of words spoken.

The modern world is a world of image. And China, above all, is a civilization of image. When law dies and the Word seems to lose all comprehension, there remains the Image. China forbids the Word, but it does not forbid the Image.

Our spirituality is that described in the *Magnificat* in which Mary, who is the sign, symbol and image of the Disciples of the Lord,

manifests herself as Spouse and Mother. While in the womb of her poverty, the power of the Spirit forms the Image of the New Humanity...the New Man who, unlike Adam, will live in complete accord with what the heart of God intended... as Mary's whole being rejoices and gives thanks (Lk 1:46-55).

We are remade in this image and give thanks to God to be at liberty to begin again. This time we are without the strength of numbers, of youth, or the galaxy of good works and academic credentials that served us well in former times. But we are, perhaps, more mobile now, freer to move about from place to place, unburdened of traditional roles and functions. With no particular projects to accomplish, no imposing responsibilities to fulfil, we need do nothing more than be attentive and responsive to the whispers of the Lord, which come to us in the simplicity of our daily lives lived in this special place and special time. Freeing ourselves from all distractions and accepting the task that has been set before us, we go forward step by step, without ambition, without pretence and without illusions. Our only intent is to follow the Lord along an unmarked path that is known to us only by faith, and travelling it blindly, learning as we go along, that it promises to lead us into the very heart of God.

We are thankful that of ourselves we are incapable of accomplishing great things. We are thankful, too, that we can meld unnoticed into the great mass of humanity, distinguished only by a desire to embrace, with others of good will, the needs, aspirations, sufferings, struggles and dreams of the human condition, be they lowly and humble or lofty and divine. Thus we can walk in the certainty of faith along new roads prepared for us by the Lord himself and brought to light by the spontaneous events of an ever-changing world. We thank God for delivering us from the unrealistic expectations of others, and for enabling us to opt for a life full of simple and marvelous surprises.

Ours is a pilgrim spirituality, a spirituality of grateful and happy itinerants, travelling lightly, totally free, but dependent on the presence of God and on the people who happen to cross our paths.

In our liberty we find our strength, because with liberty all things become possible. And yet this strength is also our weakness, for liberty means the freedom to choose, to choose from what we lack and what has yet to be discovered. Here liberty and poverty meet and mingle.

### ***Poverty***

We give thanks to God for the grace to live in a state of poverty, for making us aware of something still lacking in all that we have known and experienced up to the present time. Before coming to China, no matter how poor may have been our origins, when we followed Christ's call, we became people of importance in our society. While we had to endure a certain amount of criticism and controversy, we were, in general, needed, respected, appreciated and even loved. The people around us were liberal with their support and encouragement, even their admiration and sometimes their veneration.

But here in China, our reputation rests on what we are in ourselves and not on any traditional role that this society gives us. There is nothing here to single us out from the crowd, to invest us with special authority, or to confer on us special rights or privileges above and beyond the ordinary person. In fact, any outward sign that might empower us and place us in a position above or apart from others would be a sign of contradiction and, in the end, only serve to undermine our credibility.

In China, we are poor and we need the Chinese. Our poverty and vulnerability places us in a condition of need where we must be dependent on the goodness of others. And they are being asked to extend this goodness not to friends and family but to a stranger, a refugee, one who speaks their language poorly if at all, and who is awkward and fumbling in the most ordinary of social circumstances. Yet this spontaneous demonstration of goodness, which is experienced again and again by one who represents no power nor influence, is nothing short of the revelation of God himself who lives and loves in this people, and who waits for us along the pathways of China.

Our littleness awakens the largesse of their welcome, their compassion and tenderness, their graciousness and good fellowship. Coming to them in all our vulnerability as strangers in a foreign land, devoid of any pretensions of superiority, and naked in our need for the basic necessities of life, somehow touches what is the deepest and the best in them. Their charity and generosity of spirit are, indeed, a daily manifestation of the presence of God among us. We constantly marvel at such an outpouring of warmth which sustains our life and gives us great joy. This, in turn, renews our hope and our capacity to love.

The new force that energizes our lives is founded not on



power and strength but on weakness and vulnerability. This dynamic rests on the fact that we are strangers from a far and distant land, an insignificant few among so many, relatively useless and of little account, with not much to offer and certainly no threat to anyone. To recognize and accept this each moment of every day, and to render thanks to God for it, sharpens our sensibilities to his revealing presence in the most mundane of events and in the little people who proclaim his advent. In this, God has far outreached our wildest expectations.

### *Far from the forbidden City*

The fact that we are foreigners is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it makes us poor and vulnerable; on the other, it draws attention to our foreignness and makes us objects of local curiosity. We are, undoubtedly, a great and endless fascination to the Chinese. To them we are an enigma. In their eyes, we represent the other, the somewhere else, the unknown factor from which they have been cut off for thousands of years and for whom they have, and not without reason, an abiding distrust. However, they never tire of placing us under scrutiny, asking us all kinds of questions, seeking to discover something new and fascinating. They wonder how it is possible that these barbarians can be so advanced in science and technology, and how they are able to bring their wealth to bear on solving so many of their social problems. It would be easy for us to take advantage of such candor and, pretending to be God's gift to the human race, try to impose our way of life upon them. We are never far from giving into the temptation of feeling superior and of using Bibles and doctrines of salvation to back such feelings up.

Some day, perhaps in the not too distant future, when the present attitude of the government becomes more liberal, we will find ourselves in a position to be more useful in society, even perhaps becoming important, necessary and self-sufficient. But this would only serve to isolate us once again just like the emperors of old were isolated in their Forbidden City. We might then find ourselves right back where we started, full of ready answers to every imaginable question, rebuilding the outer walls and refurbishing the inner rooms of our own forbidden city. We will begin again to think well of ourselves. We might even do great work in our place of isolation, all the time growing in self-assurance and self-sufficiency. But there is no

room for pride in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom grows in much humbler soil, in dirt that allows itself to be worked over, stripped, ploughed and seeded from outside itself. The Kingdom does not grow and flourish in isolation but only in a caring community.

The citizens of the forbidden city only have eyes to look at themselves, energy to accomplish their own tasks and their own sacred mission. Under such conditions, we will become blind, no longer seeing the beauty, the goodness and grandeur of the world and its people around us. We will become blind to the working of God within them, seeing only their faults and their sins. We will be quick to note what they lack and how shallow and paltry their lives. Then we shall begin to plan projects for developing their potential. We shall pursue their formation with the utmost diligence, not by watering and nurturing the seed already planted in their hearts, but by teaching them to think as we think and do as we want them to do. We will busy ourselves with pruning and cutting and uprooting the weeds, even before we have sewn the seeds.

We give thanks to God for liberating us from the forbidden city and we pray that we might never set foot in it again. We are grateful to God for leading us to a country which, for all of its limitations and contradictions, has been engaged for these fifty years in a struggle against poverty, injustice and human misery. And this in the face of the daily challenge to provide enough food to feed its countless masses and a minimum standard of living necessary for their survival.

We firmly believe that the Kingdom of God is to be found in this gigantic struggle, making its way through pain and anguish to be born and reborn.

In spite of our insignificance, we want to participate in a positive way in the emergence of the Kingdom of God in this land, to share with other Christians openly but in all humility the spirit of the Gospel. In the Gospel account, Jesus is infused with and consecrated by the Spirit. The same Spirit is given to his disciples and to his Church that they may go forth and announce with great joy that God himself has established his love and his peace in this world through the death of his Son on the cross, and that he has made the poor and the outcast, all those whom the world refuses dignity, justice and freedom, the first citizens of his Kingdom.

Our spirituality, then, is a commitment to justice and

liberation. It is a commitment to the poor, who are the one door through which God has entered our history.

This spirituality professes that all truths, no matter how reasonable or sublime, fade before the brilliance of that sun which shines at the heart of the Gospel: God in Christ Jesus is one with the poor, crucified in the poor, and their liberation is his resurrection. No one can claim that the Kingdom of God has been realized in the world until the world's poor have been liberated.

### ***Truth***

In the forbidden city, pride often assumes the guise of generosity and falsehood the cloak of charity. We lie for good causes or we tell half-truths...for the best of motives. We disguise the truth out of love for truth...or maybe just manipulate it a little bit to suit our own needs.

We cover our shame with a veil of silence. "This is only human," we say. Who would blame us? But our problem is not that we fail to admit our sins or cry out our shame from the highest rooftops; rather our fault is that we who stand so much in need of forgiveness ourselves continue to insist that it is we who are the persecuted, the infallible, the righteous ones before God.

Jesus has told us that the truth shall make us free. Truth liberates. But truth and freedom are inseparable from love. Far from being in opposition, truth, liberty and charity are in harmony with each other and are fruits of the one Spirit. We can only love well when we are true to ourselves, and we are truly free only when we have learned to love well.

### ***The Grace of God***

Converts are not bought with rice, nor do clinics and orphanages produce Christians. "What you have freely received, now freely give" (Mt.10:8). "If you give anything to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing so that your gift may remain secret" (Mt.6:5). A gift should remain a gift, for if we give with the expectation of receiving something in return, our gift is no longer a gift. God is gift, God is grace, God is gratuitousness itself (1Jn.4:16). Jesus is the manifestation of God's free and gracious love; God gives himself to us, he gives up his life for us (Jn.1:16-17; 15:13;



Rom.5:5-8). He awakens in us his Holy Spirit..."The Gift of God"...who, in the depths of our being, bursts forth like a fountain of living water bubbling up into everlasting life (Jn.4:10;7:37-39).

Jesus wants us to be living witnesses of God's graciousness. The converts he wants are those whose conversion is an expression of gratitude for being graced by God.

A disciple is not in the business of buying souls or selling paradise. He has been given freely, and like his Master, he must freely give. He must not try to profit from weakness or naivete, from poverty or dependency, and certainly not from the vulnerability or the shallow enthusiasms of the people among whom he lives and works. Did Jesus demand that all those he healed should follow him? Does the Lord insist that the whole world become Catholic? Would he not be more satisfied with a mere handful of men and women from every nation who would bear authentic witness in their lives to the generosity and graciousness of God?

What can we give the world that the world does not already have? What can we give to a world where everything is bought and sold, where all is merchandise, commerce and trade? We even barter our own souls in exchange for money that gives us power. Power for what? Power to buy and sell. Where is God in such a world? Wherever graciousness and generosity are to be found, there is God. And it is just this quality of God that distinguishes the Spirit of God from the spirit of the world.

It is because there is little room for graciousness in this world that there is little room in it for God. And where is there a place for justice in the narrow confines of an ungenerous heart?

When we hear it said that the Gospel is "good news for the poor", it means that they alone allow God to be God. They are poor and without resources and totally dependent on God who is grace itself, and who graces them with his bountiful love. God is not an idol whose favors can be bought and sold. The poor, by their very poverty, are in a place where the revelation of God's gratuitous generosity is freely given and freely received.

To discover the 'graceness' of God is to discover the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price, the heart and soul of the kingdom of God. It is, in the language of the Chinese sage, to embrace the Tao.

All is gift (Rom.4:16). The one thing that we can bring to the world, which the world does not already possess, is the generosity and

graciousness of God.

This is what we want to be in China, living witnesses of God's graciousness and righteous servants of his generous love. This is what we mean when we pray with all our hearts for the gift of the grace of God.

### ***Joy and Gladness***

We, the people of God, find ourselves in China after a long, hard journey through a vast wilderness. Is this cause for weeping or regret? Do not the Scriptures teach us to rejoice instead? Why these tears then? Might they not betray a nostalgia for the land of Egypt which we have left behind? Egypt, the land of the pyramids...glorious monuments to the dead; Egypt, the land of the flesh-pots...stew simmering in sauces of leeks; Egypt, the land of slavery... Are not our tears expressions of a primeval yearning for the lost "forbidden city"?

The wilderness is full of beauty for those who seek truth and freedom. The road to discovery leads through its desert vastness. Its transforming light shines upon us, upon our lives and upon all the lovely things we do, leading us along the road to meet the living God who lights our path that we might discern the way to his kingdom. The wilderness then is not a place of death but of rebirth. Should we not rejoice in it and be glad? (Hosea 3:8-22)

Mary was caught unawares and totally unprepared when the moment of that greatest of all new beginnings was upon her. And what was the first word to resonate through the empty solitude of her silent wilderness? "Rejoice!" (Luke 1:28). And thus came the dawn of a new creation.

### ***Harmony***

Freedom, truth, justice, graciousness, poverty and joy are not a catalogue of ethical ideals to be tried and tested until we tire of the effort involved and return to our former state of reasonableness and repose. No, these are not ideas but the different faces of the Spirit of Life and of Love, who is given to us as gift, and who plays music, sings, dances, and sometimes even groans in the center point of our innermost being. It is wholeness, which grows within us like a living thing, that diffuses itself through every cell of our entire being. Like light shining, like the air we breathe and like water seeking its own

level, it permeates our body, our brain, and the rational little animal that is “me”, but only to the measure that I myself allow.

It is the Spirit that rises from the depths of our being, to the extent that we allow. Do not try to control or manipulate or confine him. The Spirit forges a unity within us that breaks the boundaries of our fears and puts us in a living, at times even tender and warm, relationship with all that exists. The Spirit puts us "in deep complicity" with everything that has breath, especially all that is fragile and small. He gives us an understanding and compassionate heart, which is wisdom and life. The Spirit renders us present to ourselves and gives us a sense of familiarity and a sense of belonging to many things that once seemed strange and distant. The Spirit dissipates our fears and demolishes the walls of our lonely isolation. He abolishes borders, brings order out of chaos, restoring peace and harmony. And he breaks through the narrow confines of our own complacency. The Spirit moves within us quietly and only gradually do we detect his presence, but he works until all doors have been opened and all walls have collapsed and we are free to risk those first faltering steps taking us out of the forbidden city and into the wilderness which marks the end of self-imposed limits and the beginning of a new pilgrimage.

In China we remain open to be infused by the soul of its culture. We feel, as the giants of the past, the breaking of chains. We, too, have drawn the secrets of God from the wilderness and have been nourished by the flame of the Spirit at the heart of the Church. The serene figures of the Enlightened One, dominates the Asian landscape and awakens us to drink from the deep wells of our own spirituality.

The Way of Tao presents to Western Christians, who may have lost their way in the clutter and confusion of activity, a light to guide us back to the interior country of space and peace. The Tao reminds us of the prologue of John's Gospel and the Word, who is the Divine Principle of all created things. The Tao is Power, Energy that gives life, meaning and direction to all things. The Tao transforms reality, lives in radical simplicity and welcomes all without imposing conditions or compromise. Is this Power God? We do not know. But what we do know is this: the Way of Tao, for one who has faith, does indeed lead to God.

This Way can help us to rediscover with a discerning simplicity something of our traditional teaching of what it means to be a child before God, wherein the Most High takes delight in the poorest

and the lowliest of his creatures. God deploys his power in favor of the weak and the little ones, those who are empty and claim nothing for themselves. The Taoist assertion of power vested in nothingness and emptiness is an astonishing affirmation of the Beatitudes of St. Matthew's Gospel (Matthew 6), and the poor of Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46).

The ground in China is thick with the seeds of the Good News. The Light of the World is already shining in this world. (John 1:10)

