

Sisters in China: Daughters of the Church

Tripod Staff

In recent years, thousands of young women in China have dedicated their lives to God by embracing the religious life. No issue of *Tripod* concerned with women can overlook the situation of Sisters in China, and the contribution they are making to the Church and to society. According to the Church statistics of 1948, there were at that time at least 7,000 religious Sisters working in China. Of these two-thirds were Chinese. The others were foreign missionaries mostly from Western countries. Following the takeover of the Communists in 1949, the foreign Sisters either left the country voluntarily or were expelled. Some Chinese Sisters also left China and made their way to Macau, Hong Kong, Taiwan, or even overseas with their foreign counterparts.

The 1950s witnessed the closure of one convent after another. Sisters were sent to prisons and labor camps along with the bishops and priests. Of those who managed to escape prison and labor camp, many lived out their religious vocation as best they could within their own family home. Some of the Sisters, however, unable to support themselves, succumbed to the pressure of the government to marry.

Since the 1980s, Sisters are once again able to live their religious life publicly. So far, they have welcomed several thousands of young women to join them in their way of life. There are at present at least 400 convents open throughout China. The

statistics for the year 2000 indicate that China has 60 houses of religious formation. Of these 40 are in the official church and 20 in the unofficial. In all, China has approximately 3,650 Sisters who have taken their vows. Of these 2,150 are in the government approved convents and the remainder, 1,500, are in the underground sector. In addition there are some 2,500 young Sisters in the process of formation. Of these 1,500 are in the convents approved by the government and the rest are in the underground church.

Religious formation

Religious formation in China is very much in an experimental stage. The quality varies from place to place. Trained formators are very few. Elderly Sisters trained before 1950 valiantly try to remember what they learned in their own novitiate, and endeavor to impart that knowledge to those who come to them aspiring to become religious. Where there is no elderly Sister to help with the formation process, the pastor or the bishop often becomes the formator. Since pastors and bishops are very busy, the overall formation is lacking in continuity and depth. Fortunately, a few young Sisters have now been trained overseas, or Chinese Sisters from Hong Kong and Taiwan have been able to provide some of the convents with in depth formation, albeit spasmodic due to government regulations. However, recently the government has given permission for a number of young Sisters, now taking over from their elderly counterparts, either as superiors or formators, to come to Hong Kong in groups for several weeks during the summer for further training.

Living conditions

Living conditions in China's convents vary greatly. Many are ill equipped, and extremely poor. Many Sisters have to earn their living. This need is often reflected in the physical aspects of the convent that takes on the appearance of a factory. Some Sisters make clothing and vestments, others work in clinics; still others make herbal medicine. In many places in order to make ends meet,

Sisters try to find whatever work they can outside the convent. Some have even been known to work in a pickle factory. Although this may be acceptable for Sisters already well formed and committed to religious life, the need for young Sisters to go out to work to earn "survival" money while still in formation leaves much to be desired.

Difficulties and expectations

Unfortunately, under the government's policy regulating convents, religious women in China cannot belong to any international religious congregation. A change in this regulation would go a long way toward upgrading the quality of religious formation in China. Technically, the requirements for acceptance into the convent include, of course, having to be Catholic. Sometimes, those in charge, even the bishop, forget to ask the question of the young women knocking at the door. One Sister from Hong Kong, who was visiting a convent in South China, asked the bishop for permission to interview the novices in order to find out how they had decided to become a Sister. The bishop thought that was a good idea. "How did you decide to become a Sister?" she asked the group. Several raised their hand wanting to tell their story. One recounted the following. It seems that one day in her village someone mentioned the word Sister. She had never heard the word and asked what it meant, she was told

Sisters today are studying and working very hard to upgrade their educational standards.



that a Sister was a person who liked to do good for people. "I want to do good for people," she said, "so how can I become a Sister?" She was told that she would have to see the bishop. "What is a bishop?" she asked. "The bishop," she was told, "was a man who could help her become a Sister." "Where can I find him?" she queried. She was told that since there was no bishop in her village, she would have to go to a neighboring village. The young woman made her way to the village, knocked at the bishop's door and said, "I want to be a Sister." "Fine," he answered, and took her to the convent nearby. The young lady was graciously welcomed by the superior who also failed to ask whether she was Catholic. It was only some time later that the superior and other Sisters noticed that the young lady knew nothing about the faith. She had never heard of the Catholic Church before, she had never been baptized, and was now in the novitiate. As she now told the story, some three or four years later, she could laugh over the whole incident. The Sister doing the interview mused, "Perhaps the Holy Spirit had a hand in this after all!"

Besides being Catholic, a young woman must be at least 18 years of age, of good character, have good health, the permission of her parents and the recommendation of the pastor. Whereas young men who aspire to the priesthood must be graduates of a secondary school and pass an entrance examination; these conditions are not required of women aspiring to become religious. The majority come from rural, even mountain areas, and in fact, have only attended primary school. Some have graduated from middle school. In any case,

Sisters raise chickens to support themselves and the children in their orphanage.



young women need not take nor pass any kind of entrance examination.

A number of young women, of course, come from "old Catholic" families. These are usually well grounded in the faith and enjoy the support of their families. These, of course, are often found in the underground church. Some young women come to the convent, usually located in the city, to escape the hardships of the village. Others come to religious life having been edified by the witness of Catholics in their parishes, and still others come because they are in search of a deeper meaning in life. They are disillusioned by the lack of spiritual values manifested in the spread of materialism and the desire for riches so prevalent in Chinese society today. They seek a spiritual anchor as an alternative to the emptiness of life they have experienced over the past years.

Charism and foundation

In the West Sisters are very concerned about being faithful to their founding charism. Most Sisters in China have no concept of their charism since most were founded by the Bishop to assist him to meet the needs of the people in the area. Often, of course, even though sanctioned by the government, the Catholic Patriotic Association has no clear concept of the religious life, and think of the Sisters solely in terms of cheap labor relieving the government of its social obligations to the elderly, abandoned and handicapped. They also see the Sisters as being responsible for looking after the maintenance of the church.

Under the government's principle of an autonomous independent church, international congregations, as noted above, are not permitted to have any jurisdiction over any convent in China. Most convents fall directly under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. As a matter of fact, however, some international congregations still exist in China. Many international congregations had Chinese Sisters among their members who remained in China when the expatriates left or were expelled. Once these were able to resume their religious life in the 1980s,

they started recruiting new candidates. Furthermore, many of these communities have always maintained ties with their centers overseas.

Types of religious congregations

Women's religious congregations in China can be categorized as follows:

- 1) Diocesan congregations. These are solely under the jurisdiction of the local bishop.
- 2) Congregations that now have their own Mother General and are, therefore, not solely under the direction and jurisdiction of the bishop. The Mother General has final authority over the Sisters.
- 3) Congregations formerly associated with international congregations. These have their own General Superior, but also keep ties, as well as they can, with the overseas congregation that originally founded them.

Types of ministries

Basically, there are two types of women's religious congregations working in China: 1) Sister catechists and 2) Sisters engaged in social or other works of charity. The catechists assist the bishops and pastors in the evangelization process of the Catholics, especially in the instruction of women for baptism. They often spend considerable time in the countryside and in the mountain areas living in very primitive and demanding conditions. The second group is usually engaged in medical works, care of the elderly, the sick, care of orphans, abandoned and/or handicapped children. Recently, following the example of foreign missionaries, and being aware of the need, some have undertaken work with lepers.

Sisters, trained in medical work, often make their way to remote areas to open up small clinics to give service to people in areas without the benefit of medical services. Unfortunately, certain convents where the Sisters do not have sufficient education

or grounding in their vocation, fail to recognize the needs around them. This is where experienced formators could be of great help to teach the Sisters what is expected of them, and how religious life responds to needs throughout the world.

Conclusion

Chinese women have a long history of lived commitment and faithfulness to whatever they undertake, no matter how difficult. This Chinese characteristic, so marked among Chinese Sisters, will go a long way towards shaping the Sister of the future in the Church in China. The large number of young women who come to the bishop's or the convent's door, responding to God's call, come willing to learn how to give their all in service to God, the Church and the people.

As women in China become more conscious of their own dignity, their rights, and their equality with men, women religious will also be liberated to make their distinctly feminine and unique contribution to the Church, a Church still waiting for its Easter morn, and to a society still in process of development and modernization.

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