

Catholic Spirituality in China: Facing the Challenge

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One of the central messages that Jesus brings to the world is the message of peace. After the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the angel sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth." When Jesus appeared to his disciples after his resurrection, his first greeting to them was "Peace be with you." Daily, in the Catholic Eucharist, Jesus tells his followers again and again through a priest "I leave you peace; my peace I give to you." Indeed, a peaceful mind or a peaceful heart is and should be one of the goals, as well as the fruit, of a Christian's spiritual life.

My own experience tells me that, unfortunately, many Chinese Catholics, who strive to achieve a spirit of peace, not only fail to find peace, but they also feel that religion, instead of being a liberating force, becomes a burden and a curse. Their hearts are filled with heavy feelings of sin and guilt, and the fear of God.

Several years ago, a friend of mine told me that he felt very unlucky for having been born in a Catholic family. He said he was Catholic only because his family was Catholic. His friends, he said, were atheists because their families were atheists. They, however, seemed happy, while he felt miserable, and his misery, he maintained, was all due to the spirituality of his religion.

There was another parishioner in our diocese that once told me that her spiritual life was a constant source of anxiety and

worry. Her daughter was killed by her boyfriend. Not only was she very sad over the loss of her only daughter, but what worried her most was the thought that her daughter might be in hell since she had not been to confession for over two years before her death.

These examples make it clear that Chinese Catholics must indeed confront the challenges and resolve the difficulties they encounter in their spiritual life. In order to discover the reasons behind the misery and distress experienced by many Chinese Catholics, we must analyze their spirituality. That is not easy. All Christian spiritualities involve not only Christian theology, anthropology, and ecclesiology, but psychology and sociology as well. Obviously, it is impossible in this short reflection to examine all the aspects related to present day Chinese Catholic spirituality. In this article, therefore, I will focus on analyzing the challenges or struggles Chinese Catholics experience in living out their spirituality. I shall do this from a theological and an ecclesial point of view. This analysis will not be purely academic. It will rather be a reflection based on my own experience and understanding.

From a theological point of view

Theology cannot be divorced from spirituality. It is fair to say that, on the one hand, Christian spirituality is directed by and corresponds to Christian theology. On the other hand, theology is rooted in the Christian experience of a particular kind of spiritual life. That is to say, theology and spirituality are mutually conditioned and influence each other. Without theology, Christian spirituality becomes superstition; without spirituality, theology has no roots and becomes shallow and useless. In order to talk about Christian spirituality, we must, therefore, first talk about the kind of theology operative behind that spirituality. Chinese Catholic theology is essentially rooted in pre-Vatican II theology. More precisely, it is rooted in the teachings of the Council of Trent. These teachings constitute a major influence on Chinese Catholic spiritual life. In other words, and more precisely, the spirituality of many Chinese Catholics reflects the spirituality derived from Trent's teaching on justification. In order to understand the root and the background of Chinese Catholic spirituality, we must necessarily look briefly at Trent's theology on justification and its relation to the Christian spiritual life.

Trent and justification

Trent's teaching on the doctrine of justification was a response to the reformers, especially to Martin Luther and his justification theory. As a result of his devastating personal religious spiritual experience in an Augustinian monastery, Luther changed his fundamental theological belief in traditional Catholic teachings. He maintained that original sin has completely corrupted human nature, and this corrupted nature is beyond remedy. Human beings themselves cannot escape from their sinfulness. Since faith is the power that can grasp the righteousness of Jesus Christ to overcome our sinful human nature, the only way to be saved is to have faith in Jesus Christ and to trust in Jesus. Thus, for Luther, a justified person is simultaneously both righteous and sinful: righteous because one is protected by the righteousness of Jesus Christ; sinful because human nature always remains corrupted. Because Luther believed that human nature was unworthy and corrupt, he was convinced that good works have no intrinsic value for salvation. Nevertheless, good works for Luther are necessary in the Christian spiritual life precisely because good works are the evidence of one's faith, as well as the sign of one's justification. For Trent, our human nature is indeed wounded by original sin but not completely corrupted, and this wounded nature is restorable through the Sacrament of Baptism. Justification for Trent is an inner renewal of the human person by which human beings become the adopted children of God.

Based on the teachings about the goodness of our human nature, Trent affirmed that good works are one of the means for achieving salvation. Luther did reach some degree of spiritual peace and stability following his new insight on justification. Unfortunately, however, he separated himself from the Church.

The Council of Trent responded correctly to Luther's errors, but it did not remove the fear of God from the minds and hearts of many Christians. Why is that? Is there a problem with the teaching of the Council of Trent? Or is it that Luther's new theory was correct? More importantly, could Chinese Catholics learn from Luther's insight, and thereby experience a sense of freedom in their spiritual life?

From a psychological point of view, Luther's theory does indeed liberate the Christian from fear since it is based on trusting

in God's love, mercy, and forgiveness completely, and in accepting one's sinfulness. Also, without diminishing the importance of good works in the spiritual life of Christians, Luther's new spirituality liberates them from the danger of self-righteousness, or the self-centeredness some derive from doing good works. However, the weakness of this kind of spirituality is that it demeans a human being's nature and personhood. First, since grace alone saves, a person's free will plays no part whatsoever in the individual's salvation. Second, it does not integrate, as Trent did, a person's external behavior into his or her inner self. In other words, there is a disconnection between a human being's external behavior and his/her inner self. Contrary to Luther's theory, the Council of Trent indeed safely guarded both grace and human cooperation in the process of one's salvation.

Good works and merit

Trent, however, taken to the extreme, may cause persons to be anxious or apprehensive about their relationship with God. First, according to Trent, there is a difference between good works and merit. Good works done by an unjustified person are without any supernatural value. Merit, however, can be earned only if good works are performed by a justified person in the state of sanctifying grace. Without sanctifying grace, every work is totally worthless for gaining eternal life. Since sanctifying grace is crucial for acts to be meritorious, and since this sanctifying grace can be lost by committing a mortal sin, many Catholics become greatly concerned about the state of their spiritual life. The anxiety of wondering whether one is in the state of sanctifying grace or not, and the fear of losing this sanctifying grace is very real to many Catholics. Second, Trent declared that without a special privilege no one is exempt from sin. No matter how holy persons are, they still commit small sins daily. Thus, in Trent's view, everyone, including the upright, is sinful. However, in the midst of this sinfulness, a human being is called to sanctify himself or herself through the Sacraments. In living out the teachings of Trent, some Catholics may experience certain paradoxical feelings: a sense of sinfulness, as well as a sense of righteousness. Psychologically, in order to attain peace of heart, a Catholic has to balance the feelings of sinfulness and righteousness in his/her life. If the sense of

sinfulness always dominates, a person is likely to experience a sense of unworthiness, or of fear of eternal punishment. In this situation, the Sacrament of Reconciliation becomes the most important sacrament. This is precisely the situation of many Chinese Catholics today. It should come as no surprise then, that one of the main daily duties of a priest in China is to hear confessions.

Learning from Luther's insights

From our analysis, the current spiritual life of many Chinese Catholics would seem to indicate that the spirituality derived from Trent's teaching is not without weakness. I believe that the positive insights Luther obtained from his own spiritual life can help Chinese Catholics improve their own spiritual lives. First, in the midst of human sinfulness, they can learn from Luther that unconditional trust in God's mercy and forgiveness is necessary to build a good, strong relationship with God. Indeed, only through trust can anyone reach a deep peace of heart in the midst of misery and difficulties.

Second, Chinese Catholics can verify Luther's new image of a merciful God by studying the Bible. A person's spirituality is strongly affected by his/her image of God. No one can love an unlovable God, as Luther experienced in his early life. It was exactly Luther's dreadful image of God that caused him to loathe God. With his new image of God, peace filled Luther's heart; indeed God is a merciful God. Chinese Catholics should accept the image of God as merciful and forgiving as Luther did setting out on his new spiritual journey.

Third, Chinese Catholics can enrich their spiritual life by learning, as Luther did to liberate themselves from self-concern and self-seeking. Luther's concept of spirituality is "supremely altruistic," in the sense that justified persons are freed to serve others without seeking any reward for themselves, since the action itself reveals their justification.

A Chinese Catholic should consider that true love never seeks a reward, even though a reward may inevitably result. All works should express a person's love for God, and solidarity with others in order to bring about God's reign. By trusting God's love and accepting our own human weakness, as well as through self-

giving love toward others, I believe that Chinese Catholics can indeed improve their spiritual life.

I am not saying that Luther's positive insight is the only way for Chinese Catholics to develop or improve their spiritual lives. What I really mean is that Luther's insight could be an effective way to enrich the spiritual life of Chinese Catholics quickly given the fact that current Chinese Catholic spirituality is, in some sense, very similar to the one Luther experienced in his own life.

Developing Chinese Catholic spirituality

However, I think that the better way to develop and enrich Chinese Catholic spirituality is to introduce the teachings of Vatican II, along with the insights of contemporary Catholic theological thought into the Church in China. Moreover, these should be expressed and understood within the context of Chinese philosophy, and inculturated into Chinese tradition. Chinese philosophy grounded in Catholic theology can both enhance the spirituality of Chinese Christians, and make a significant contribution to the universal Church. Unfortunately, this project has never been given sufficient emphasis. It is very difficult to improve or "change" Chinese Catholic spirituality precisely because there is no Catholic theology grounded in Chinese culture and philosophy.

From an ecclesial point of view

We have just examined the impact that theology can have on Christian spirituality. From the analysis, we can see that the spiritual life of a Catholic is interconnected and interrelated with theology. Furthermore, theology cannot be separate from the Church. On the one hand, theology is in service to the Church, and on the other, the Church influences theology. The notion of the relationship between theology and the Church inevitably leads to understanding how the Church itself relates to the spiritual life of a Christian. Indeed, a Catholic or the life of a Catholic must be discernable within the parameters of the Church. That is to say, being a Catholic means participating in the life of the Church and interrelating with it.

Most Chinese Catholics who follow Trent's teaching consider the phrase "outside of the church, there is no salvation" to be true in a very literal sense. In other words, for most Chinese Catholics, human salvation accomplished by God in Jesus Christ is mediated only in and through the Catholic Church, and thus, being a member of the Church is the only way to attain salvation.

Union in division

In 1979, the Chinese government issued a new religious policy. Many priests and Sisters were gradually released from prison, and churches began to reopened. Unfortunately, the reopened China Church is divided into the underground church and the open or official church. With the traditional theological background, this division in the Church in China causes a great deal of confusion and worry among many Chinese Catholics. It also causes havoc in their spiritual lives. One of the obvious worries is "Am I in the real Catholic Church or not? Can I be saved in this Church?"

Even though the Church is divided, I strongly believe that from the theological, anthropological, and Christological point of view, there has been only one church in China from the beginning of its existence. From my perspective, the underground church takes a conservative approach. Its members want to be faithful to the Church's teaching, authority and tradition, as they more or less understand it from the Tridentine rather than Vatican II teachings. In order to defend their stand, they continue to risk every thing for the sake of their belief. On the other hand, the official church takes a more liberal approach towards the church's tradition, and it follows more closely the spirit and teaching of Vatican II. Furthermore, they want to open the door for a dialogue with the culture, society and the government. They believe that God is a loving God who never wishes us to suffer. In order to avoid some unnecessary suffering, there needs be mutual understanding, mutual trust, and mutual respect. Both sides of the Church in China are trying to defend the Catholic faith, but they are taking very different approaches. Both sides are making sacrifices for the sake of the Church.

The need for reconciliation

I think both sides are important for the growth of the Church, but they need to work together, and be united in relating to the Universal Church. For the sake of Catholic spiritual life in China, there is a great need for reconciliation within the Church. However, there are a lot of difficulties connected with this reconciliation. The different attitudes, caused by the Cultural Revolution, have left wounds on both sides. The leaders of these two segments do not trust each other. Without mutual trust, it is impossible to have a sincere dialogue on reconciliation. Furthermore, in order to be reconciled, both sides must recognize each other's goodness, and find a common ground and shared interests. Unfortunately, in the attempt at reconciliation, Chinese Catholics have become more interested in canon law than in the foundations of the Christian faith: Scripture, theology, love, etc.

I am not saying that canon law is not important. What I am saying is that we really should not attempt reconciliation by using canon law as the basis. Canon laws are made for the church; the Church is not made for the laws. Furthermore, canon law is not absolute; it has been revised several times within the history of the Church. On certain occasions, the pope can even give dispensations from the law. In my opinion, Scripture, theology, and the Second Vatican Council, not canon law alone, should be the starting point for reconciliation in the Church in China.

How can you help?

Many people are concerned about the Church in China. You may ask, "What can I do or how can I help the Church in China in its effort to grow and to be reconciled?" First, let me tell you a story that might help provide an answer. A young man was referred to a clinical psychologist because he hated his father. He said so clearly, and was able to explain why. The psychologist worked with this young man for six months on a regular basis. After critically reviewing and analyzing the man's behavior and most intense feelings, the psychologist realized that the young man did not hate his father, but actually loved his father passionately. In a two-hour session, the psychologist explained this to the young man. At the end of another week after his doctor's explanation, the young man declared that he wanted to stop the therapy. He had

changed. He had indeed hated his father all these years, but that hatred had suddenly dissipated. He was able to get along well with his father now, and all of the previous symptoms seemed to have disappeared

I think the father-son relationship in this story is comparable to the relationship between the underground and open church in China. There is an intrinsic bond in this relationship. Even though on the surface, there is misunderstanding, distrust and disharmony, nevertheless, deep down, they really love each other, and need each other, but they don't know how to go about this by themselves. What you can do for the Church in China is to take on the role of the psychologist in the story. In our baptismal ceremony, we all become children of God, and we all are called to be peacemakers and reconcilers. We are important to each other and for each other. Thus, your non-judgmental attitudes toward the Church in China, your listening, hearing, analyzing, understanding and encouraging the Chinese Catholics on both sides, can really make a big difference. Indeed, it can greatly help bring about reconciliation in the Church in China.

Moreover, since theology is so crucial for and fundamental to the spiritual life of Christians, your constant encouragement of Western Catholic theology, dialogue on Chinese culture, your direct or indirect support of native Chinese scholars doing theological research are very significant and important for the development and growth of the Church in China.

Conclusion

From a theological and ecclesial point of view, Chinese Catholics confront significant challenges in their spiritual life. However, no matter how difficult or how challenging the situation may be, Chinese Catholics with your support and help, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, will eventually achieve a new life of peace and joy. In the midst of their struggles, Chinese Catholics never gave up their faith. For the sake of their faith, and for the sake of the Church, they have made endless sacrifices. After experiencing the confusion, the suffering, the agony of Jesus in the Garden, I believe the Church in China will also experience the joy and peace of Jesus' resurrection.