

COMMENTARY

On Challenges Facing Catholic Spirituality in China

Rene Gilbert

In his all too brief article on Catholic Spirituality in China the author, Peter He-Xiu Shen, touches upon a matter both vital and significant for the Catholic Church in China. Narrating two personal experiences he states that many Catholics in China do not experience the joy and peace that the good news of Jesus Christ brings to humankind. On the contrary, he says that religion has become a heavy burden and even a curse for them. His article intends to analyze the reasons behind this malaise and propose some new ways of meeting this very serious problem.

He faults the spirituality that Chinese Catholics grew up with. Owing to the complexity of the problem he approaches it from the theological and ecclesial aspects only. According to the author, Chinese Catholics, for the most part, follow a pre-Vatican II theology. This theology is largely influenced by the Council of Trent especially in its teaching on justification. The author speaks at some length on this matter.

The article does not clearly indicate how large the number of Catholics in China is who do not experience the joy and peace that the resurrected Jesus brings to his followers. It might also be questioned how great an influence a pre-Vatican theology and ecclesiology actually exerts on these Catholics making them feel that their religion is a burden, and even a curse. The church situation in modern China paints for us a more complex picture. This is not to say that the author's experience is without foundation, but rather that his claim needs further elucidation.

However the author does a service in raising this important question while offering some valuable insights that may help

towards this elucidation. His emphasizing the necessary connection between theology and spirituality is one of these insights. My own theological studies, which took place before Vatican II, placed major emphasis on dogmatic and moral theology with Scripture and spirituality playing a very minor role. Pastoral experience in later life has proved to me the truth of what the author says concerning theology without a spirituality as being shallow and rootless while a spirituality without theology easily tends towards superstition.

I wonder whether the author's lengthy analysis of Luther, the Council of Trent, and the question of justification shed enough light on the present church situation in China. It would take a better-trained and experienced theologian and church historian than I to critique his analysis of Trent and Martin Luther. The author is on firmer ground when he says 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." He also very rightly points to the need of grounding this theology and spirituality on Chinese traditions and philosophy. He bemoans the fact that this has not yet been done. The lack of such a well-founded inculturation hinders the development of a spirituality that is adapted to Chinese culture that would, as a result, offer a significant contribution not only to the Chinese but to the universal church as well.

Another valuable insight is the author's emphasis on the essential relation existing between theology and ecclesiology. Quoting the statement that "outside the Church there is no salvation," but without developing its full meaning, he says that most Chinese Catholics take this statement in a very literal sense. If such were the case, then this would only exacerbate the already existing division that exists within the church on the China mainland. The author while not denying this serious division maintains that there is still only one Catholic Church in China. I believe that facts bear him out on this matter. This has been the standpoint of the Holy See. The Holy Father has often spoken to the Church in China, admiring the people's courage and steadfastness, and acknowledging their sufferings for their faith. On every occasion he has always addressed all the Catholics as members of one family and one Church, (cf., e.g., John Paul II's talk in Manila, 1981; in Seoul in 1989; to the bishops in Taiwan,

1995.) Recognizing their divisions he urges them to reconciliation, "I earnestly invite you to seek paths to communion and reconciliation, paths which draw their light and inspiration from the Truth Himself, Jesus Christ" (14 January, 1995 in Taiwan.)

I hesitate to describe the present division in the Church by the terms conservative and liberal. These can convey meanings that may not aptly apply to the Church situation in China. For example, is the underground Church opposed to all dialogue with culture, society and the government? Do its members not also see God as a loving Father? These and similar questions can be asked of both parties. There is need for a more nuanced approach to this serious question of Church division in China.

What the author says about the need for working together towards unity in their relating to the Universal Church is certainly very true. One of the main obstacles is the mutual lack of trust as the author well points out. However it is not altogether clear from his article what he means by saying that Chinese Christians have become more interested in Canon Law than in the foundations of the Christian faith. This statement needs further clarification.

The author concludes his article by saying that the common faith in and love of the Lord, inspired by the Spirit and shared by all Christians, will be the way towards reconciliation. He sees the role of the Church outside of China as helping their brothers and sisters in China to experience the force of this love in the midst of the darkness and confusion caused by this division. He warns about hasty judgments and condemnations. This point is well made. His concluding paragraph should be matter for prayerful reflection for all those who love and are concerned about the Church in China. Through painful struggles Chinese Catholics have kept the faith. The Universal Church owes them a debt of gratitude for their sufferings bring hope, peace, and joy not only to themselves but also to all members of Christ's body.