

The Spirituality of Catholics in China Today

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The spirituality of Catholics in contemporary China has been maturing steadily. The configuration of the spirituality of China's Catholics is not only a way of thinking and feeling about the meaning of their lives, and the nature of their relationship with God, with Catholic communities and with the world, but it is also their life in Christ by the presence and power of the Spirit.¹ It is not one aspect of Christian life, but *the* Christian life.

In this context, a look at the background of Catholic spirituality in contemporary China after a period of Socialist Spiritual Civilization,² "highlighted in the documents of the Twelfth Party Congress held in September 1982, and which appeared as a theme for frequent articles in the press in subsequent years"³ is of utmost importance.

Background of the Spiritual Life in Contemporary China

In the 1980s,⁴ with the Socialist Spiritual Civilization and the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaign, questions arose. Many people asked: "What is the purpose of life?" "Should I live for myself or for other people?" These same two questions had been commonly asked, answered, even dismissed by people in other times and societies.⁵ However, they were raised at a turning point in contemporary Chinese history, and immediately produced heated discussions and exciting debates about *ren sheng guang* (philosophy of life), with hundreds of thousands of young people engaging in local forums, small group discussions, or personal conversations.⁶

In fact, Chinese youth are searching for spirituality and are involved in various phenomena. There are the “fever” of existentialism (influenced especially by the French philosopher Sartre), the “fever” of humanism (against animism),⁷ and the “fever” of Freudian psychoanalysis (sex is natural), etc. All of these “fevers” arose in the 1980s and influenced people’s thinking.⁸

In the 1990s when economic marketing became the official goal of reforms, many people “jumped into the sea of business,” some enthusiastically, some hesitantly. Whether they worked for government, for various companies, or privately, many people adapted to capitalism when “getting rich is glorious” was the dominant rule of the game.⁹ However, neither material wealth nor social recognition has stopped people from asking spiritual questions,¹⁰ such as: “How can I achieve peace of mind?” “How should I live the rest of my life?”

In China, the pursuit of the spiritual is persistent. Among the most noticeable are the so-called “culture Christians.”¹¹ The broadest definition of the term includes all those educated people who have accepted some Christian concepts and beliefs. They learn about Christianity not from the Christian community, but from theological, philosophical, and cultural writings.

In the late 1990s, some urban churches where I worked had an increasing number of Catholics. A classmate of mine, a Catholic priest working in the Northwestern Agriculture University area, told me he had been evangelizing there for just three years and had baptized more than one thousand college students and local people. He also told me that in 2001 the number of catechism teachers increased from two groups to six groups. In each group there are five people. However, he faces a big challenge because the catechists need to be trained since they have little religious knowledge, yet they must teach catechism to college students. Another problem is that the church is too small to accommodate all the believers. He also faces the situation where many people accepted baptism after a brief instruction and they now need guidance to grow in witnessing to their faith in daily life.

In the summer of 2001, we conducted a survey on the present-day spirituality of Catholics in China. We did not deal with the past nor with the future, but only with the present. Spirituality materials from the past are very scarce and difficult to come by. This

article gives a summary and a commentary on some of the results of our findings.

China is vast and changing fast. I know that what I say today may be outdated tomorrow, but I believe that various religions will revive and thrive in the coming years. As the government continues to relax control over spiritual affairs, the religious market will become livelier and flourish.¹²

Hypothesis

To discover the constituent elements of Catholic spirituality in China we postulated that: 1) In Catholic institutions the model of spiritual teaching would differ in content for various groups: laity, Sisters, seminarians, and priests. 2) The model of spiritual life would be expressed in a plurality of ways for the laity, nuns, and priests in parishes or religious communities.¹³ 3) The years spent living out one's spirituality would affect one's choices or preferences in the practice of spirituality. 4) Catholic spirituality is expressed within a social framework,¹⁴ with people interacting as brothers and sisters and with non-Catholics in general being friendly to each other and seeking peace in society.¹⁵

The Configuration of Current Catholic Spirituality

Before summarizing the results of our findings, we will examine the configuration of China's current Catholic spirituality as a guide for understanding the response of Catholics to living their personal life. The configuration of current Catholic spirituality may be demonstrated in various situations in Mainland China. We see: 1) Catholicism as a marginal religion in China today. 2) The progression of spirituality in Catholic institutions. 3) The demonstration of spirituality in Catholic teams (laity, nuns, seminarians, and clergy). 4) Catholic worship

Catholicism as a marginal religion in China today

Citizens of China may freely choose and express their religious beliefs and their religious affiliations. This has been clearly stated in the Chinese Constitution. According to government statistics, the number of religious believers has increased to 120 million since 1999.¹⁶ Though they account roughly for only 10 percent of

the total Chinese population (1.3 billion), its aggregate number is still large. For all approved religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism) there are more than 91,500 sites for normal religious activities. There are 288,650 religious professionals serving religious believers.

In the past 20 years, religion has become important and widespread among Catholics in China. Recent statistics for the Chinese Catholic Church are indicative of the courageous efforts of Chinese Catholics to restore and renew their church, both as an institution and as a community of faith.

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Statistics demonstrate that in roughly more than 20 years (1980-2000), the total number of Catholics in China increased from 3 million to 12 million. However, the percentage is still less than 1 percent of the whole Chinese population (1.3 billion), and 10 percent of all religious believers (120 million).

In 1980, the number of Chinese Catholic clergy was 1,300; in 2000, it was around 5,650 (priests and Sisters). That percentage is 2 percent of all religious professionals (288,650) in China.

Catholics have only 6 percent of all religious sites and meeting points (91,500). The number of Catholic churches and meeting-points, which was fewer than 10 in 1980, increased to more than 5,400 in 2000.¹⁷ Encouraging, as these statistics may seem, they still reveal the marginality of Catholicism in China today.

The age of the clergy also provides a significant statistic for the future of the Church in China. According to *A Guide to the Catholic Church in China*, "Since 1988, over 1650 young priests among 2,200 have been ordained, and about 2000 young Sisters have made their vows. All over the country, there is a large majority of young priests under the age of 40."¹⁸ In our 2001 summer survey we found 14 percent of priests are over 70 years old (including 10 percent over 80 years who tend to retire);¹⁹ 6 percent are from 50-69 years old; 65 percent are from 30-49 years old; 15 per-

cent are younger than 29. The average age of the Chinese clergy is somewhere between 30-49.²⁰

There are presently about 1,000 seminarians in formation in the 19 approved major seminaries and five preparatory seminaries, while some 700 others may be receiving their formation in unofficial seminaries. There are 1,500 professed Sisters, novices and postulants in 40 government-approved convents, and another 1000 in unofficial convents.²¹

A new image of the Chinese Church is taking shape in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Theologians, liturgists and other religious experts from overseas have been invited to teach in six seminaries to support this renewal. From 1993 onwards, over 100 priests, seminarians and Sisters have been sent overseas for further theological studies. Since 1997, a number of them have returned to China and are offering invaluable help to their dioceses and seminaries.²²

Progression of spirituality by Catholic institutions

In our 2001 summer survey, we asked: 1) How does your diocese provide training in lay spirituality? 2) How do you feel Chinese Catholics have implemented the new liturgy after Vatican II? 3) What are the most important spirituality courses or activities given in your seminary? 4) How do current female congregations train their nuns in spirituality? A summary of the answers to these questions follows.

Current Catholic institutions use multiple spiritual means to instruct Catholics in spirituality rather than a “single spiritual means.”²³ The findings reveal the following:

- 1) 39.4 percent of respondents say their diocese trains the laity in various categories of spirituality: scripture study, catechism study, faith sharing, and pilgrimages.
- 2) 28.3 percent of people believe their diocese gives the laity more spiritual life training in the catechism than in other categories.
- 3) 9.4 percent of persons think their diocese gives more opportunity for Scripture study to the laity than other categories.

- 4) 7 percent of respondents answer that in their dioceses organizing the laity for pilgrimages is more important than other categories.
- 5) 5.6 percent respond that their dioceses organize the laity to “share their spirituality” more than the other categories.
- 6) 10.3 percent did not answer the question.

39.4 percent of the respondents indicate that their dioceses train the laity in spirituality by using a plurality of means (scripture study, catechism study, spirituality sharing and pilgrimage). A plurality of means are used much more frequently than any one single means.

In terms of the second question on implementing the liturgy after Vatican II, results reveal that 81 percent of the respondents feel that they have implemented the new liturgy very well, pretty well or fairly well. Only 2.4 percent replied not well; 1.4 percent said unsure, and 11.5 said slightly implemented.

In reference to question 3 dealing with the relative importance of spiritual courses and activities, the results are as follows:

- 1) 35 percent answer that they have more “daily prayer” than any other kind of spiritual training.
- 2) 20 percent respond that their spiritual life training is pluralistic (daily prayer, meditation and contemplation, sharing spiritual life issues with spiritual directors and the study of the spirituality and lives of the saints, practicing love of God and serving people).
- 3) 21 percent consider their spiritual life training as being focused on meditation and contemplation.
- 4) 6.4 percent say that “practicing love of God and serving people” are more important for growth in spirituality.
- 5) 4 percent think that sharing one’s spiritual life with a spiritual director is very important for seminarians.
- 6) 2 percent answer that it was more important for seminarians to study the spirituality and the lives of the saints.
- 7) 2 percent think they seek categories other than those mentioned above.
- 8) 35 percent favor training in prayer to be the main spiritual training for seminarians.

9) 9.7 percent gave no answer.

Answers to question 4 on how current Catholic female congregations train their nuns in spirituality revealed the following: Female congregations consider “multiple spiritual instruction” as primary. The factor is 28 percent. It is secondary in the training of novices and postulants with a factor of 18.5 percent. Details are as follows:

- 1) 28 percent say that novitiates stress charitable service training, spiritual reading, and short-term theology study.
- 2) 18.5 percent answer that female congregations train novices in spirituality in their dioceses.
- 3) 9.2 percent feel that training in female congregations is more like a “retreat” when compared with other categories in their local church.
- 4) 9 percent answer that female congregations in their area favor short-term theology study.
- 5) 4.8 percent say that the spiritual training is rather like spiritual reading.
- 6) 5.5 percent report that female congregations training Sisters in spirituality might use categories other than the ones listed above.
- 7) 18.1 percent of the respondents did not answer our question.

There is a time factor involved in living out one’s spirituality and one’s preferred choice of means. The results show that:

- 1) Both seminarians and Sisters living in their religious communities many years, feel that more than anything else, “being attentive to prayer” is their main source of spirituality while those who have been living the life for only a few years feel less so.
- 2) Sisters feel “being attentive to prayer” is more important for them as a spiritual source than do seminarians.
- 3) Seminarians have a variety of spiritual life sources from their years in the seminary.
- 4) Those Sisters who have been in religious life for only 1-2 years have a different spirituality source than those who have spent over 3 years.

Vocations have ordinarily come from families with more than one son or one daughter; now they are beginning to come from families with only one son or one daughter.

Spirituality and the Catholic personality

Traditionally, we speak of spiritual sources as including prayer and pastoral care. In other words, the spiritual source is like a gift from God,²⁴ a special energy urging believers to love God above all else and to love all people on earth.²⁵ It affects Catholics' daily life, and encourages people to become "good Catholics," to bear with other people, and to be willing to suffer a loss rather than taking advantage of anyone else.²⁶

Within the context of spirituality and the Catholic personality we consider the following questions: What are the spiritual sources in your daily life? How does your diocese's clergy express their spiritual life? What percent of Catholics take part in Sunday Mass in your parish? How do you take part in the new liturgy after Vatican II? These questions concerning the Catholic spiritual life affect categories such as laity, seminarians, nuns, and clergy.

Laity

Chinese laity believe that doing good is not merely a matter of winning approval from the gossips or general respect from the Catholic community and secular societies; "It is a matter of eternal salvation; it is decidedly otherworldly, a matter of going to heaven or to hell. They talk a great deal more than most Catholics in the West about heaven and hell."²⁷

Catholics know that if they have prayed regularly, and have received the sacraments, they are sure to see the Lord in heaven after death, usually after a stint in the fires of purgatory.

Daily prayer is very important for the laity. They pray in the morning and evening. They go to daily Mass if a priest comes to their church. They visit the Blessed Sacrament often. They recite the rosary together and attend the way of the cross on Sunday afternoon.

Seminarians and female novices

Seminarians and female novices usually live in a seminary or a community. They have a regular program of spirituality train-

ing to develop their spiritual life. To gather this information we interviewed several spiritual directors in seminaries and visited some female congregations in several places. Our conclusion is that “they teach seminarians and young Sisters by good example as well as by word. Every day they go to church together with the seminarians to say morning prayers, sing hymns of praise to God, and assist at Mass. In the classroom they study the Bible and Church doctrine, thereby drawing strength for the spiritual life...sometimes they go to a hospital to visit the sick, the elderly and pray with them...In short, from our interviews and survey, we see that seminarians and novices or postulants and some spiritual directors have really involved themselves in the spiritual life of the Catholic Church in China.”

Nuns and clergy

For people who claim to have received a vocation to become priests or Sisters, the paradoxical connection between obedience and freedom becomes not simply a fact of ordinary experience, but a central organizing principle of their spirituality, their way of understanding and justifying the meaning of their lives. This vocation is spoken of as a mysterious gift of God.

Almost all the young priests, seminarians, and Sisters we interviewed in various seminaries and congregations in the summer of 2001 came from small Catholic villages and Catholic families with a strong faith. Several mentioned that their small Catholic villages, with fewer than three hundred Catholics, had produced three or four priests and Sisters, while big cities like Beijing, and Shanghai no longer produced many vocations. Seminaries and convents are filled with candidates who come from the rural hinterlands. Most, but not all, of the seminarians and novices (young women preparing to take vows as Sisters) said their parents had encouraged a son or daughter to aspire to the religious life as a source of pride and status for the family.²⁸ However, parents encouraged their children to enter religious life only under certain conditions: their son or daughter must have true Catholic faith and be intelligent. Some families, in certain areas, even encouraged all their children to become priests or Sisters.

Family and community circumstances may have an important influence on a young person's decision to become a priest or

Sister. However, that decision is experienced as a personal choice, a response to an individual calling from God. I asked one priest, how do you know your calling came from God? He answered:

At least we have one of many reasons, we understand that China is a vast land and has a huge population; it is a great market for Catholicism. Who will take up this responsibility and obligation? Who will open it up and bring it under cultivation? The Lord has placed this important duty on our shoulders. We receive it and say *yes* to the Lord.

Some priests and Sisters believe that their kind of faith, the faith that sustains a vocation, is not simply a product of one's family environment but something that must be actively cultivated. In my experience, the steady growth in the ranks of seminarians and novices, priests and Sisters in rural China testifies that Chinese Catholicism is more than an ethnicity, an identity ascribed from birth and passively accepted, and it is more than conformity to the customs of one's community or the dictates of one's parents. For some, at least, it is an internalized faith, which must be actively nurtured by the individual when it is discovered, and it is experienced mysteriously not as a human achievement but as a liberating gift of God.²⁹

Worship

Another question on the survey focused on attendance at Sunday Mass. Answers range from over 95% to below 30%. The actual overall percentage, according to our statistics, is over 65%

In the mid-80s, certain areas in Mainland China began to use the new Vatican II Catholic liturgy. Since the mid-90s it has been celebrated throughout most of Mainland China.

Our survey focused on how Chinese Catholics participate in the new Vatican II liturgy, specifically the Mass. The percentages show that almost 30 percent respond "very actively," while 45 percent say "moderately," and 16 percent find it "suitable." Only one percent feels nervous about it. Others say they are "not interested," "unsure" or did not answer the question.

Chinese Catholics and the Church's future

Chinese Catholics differ significantly in their outlook on the future of the China Church. On the one hand, 55 per cent answer that they are optimistic. My understanding of their response is that they may see opportunities for the Church to develop, and they may rely on the fact that Christ founded the Church, and its growth is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Christ has risen and the Holy Spirit is working in the Church. Therefore, Catholics do not have to worry about the Church's future. On the other hand, the 13 percent who say they are unsure may consider the Church as the "Kingdom of God, coming, but not yet here, a mystery of the Christian faith." The 32 percent who answer "not optimistic" or who fail to answer the question, may be those who regard the Church as still suffering, and following Christ in His passion, and crucifixion. They still look for the understanding of the "Incarnation." These three groups reveal the perspective of and challenge for Catholics today and in the future.

Perspective

1) The Holy Spirit guides the Christian community toward full activity in the Church, toward seminary recruitment, and toward nuns' formation. Current Catholic clergy teams are very young; the average age of priests and nuns varies from 30 to 49; many young priests and nuns carry the burden of responsibility for the Church and the community.³⁰ The laity can also express their opinion in Church liturgy under the guidance of the parish priest.³¹

2) The movement of the renewed Church aims at developing a more perfect Christian community system, making more visible the institutional organizational structure, making perfect the whole person, body and soul, as a member of the universal Church by the power of Christ and the dynamic of the Holy Spirit, tending directly to the glory of the Father.

3) Reconciliation inside Catholic institutional organizations (the church's inner unity) helps in looking for a way in which Catholics can demonstrate their identity, roles and spirituality in Socialist China.

4) Local Church dialogue with other religions and Chinese culture opens Christian spirituality to inculturating theology in China.

5) With the opening of the economic market and China joining WTO (the World Trade Organization), Western thought and culture will bring more opportunity to China for scholars at academic conferences to explain Christian ethic and spirituality as a model for cultural exchange.

While shouldering more responsibilities, the new generation has to face the challenges of a fast-changing society, which focuses more and more on moneymaking, material benefits and power.

Challenges

The survey indicated that the following are the main challenges facing the spirituality of China's Catholics today.

1) While shouldering more responsibilities, the new generation has to face the challenges of a fast-changing society, which focuses more and more on moneymaking, material benefits and power. Often isolated young priests and nuns need moral support and a sharing of their pastoral problems through programs of ongoing formation.³² This challenge not only influences the spiritual growth of the clergy and nuns, but also influences the laity's faith and spirituality.

2) For dialogue and reconciliation, one must understand China and the Catholic Church in ways that are certainly different but not in opposition to one another. China and the Catholic Church are two of the most ancient "institutions" in existence still operating on the world scene though in different domains: one in the political and social, the other in the religious and spiritual.³³

3) To promote inter-religious dialogue within Chinese culture, in the setting of religious pluralism and socialism in China, one has to seek more opportunity for developing Christian spirituality at all times, so as to have a strong Catholic spiritual market, and

high Catholic educational institutions to explore “Catholic-Chinese spirituality” and “Catholic-Chinese theology.”

Conclusion

The spirituality of present-day Catholics in China maintains a proper balance among, and a dynamic integration of, the essential “ingredients” of authentic Christian spirituality. It is visionary when it incorporates the new way of seeing reality and of seeing material things to their spiritual core, of thus “interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual” (1 Cor 2:13). It is relational because we are by definition relational beings—beings in relation to God, to one another, specifically in China to its culture and other religions, because we are living in the midst of a religious pluralism and in a socialist country. Our relational character of Christian spirituality requires sensitivity to the presence, the needs, and the gifts of others, as well as to the created goods of the Earth.

This spirituality is transformational, always open to the presence of the Spirit as a power that heals, reconciles, renews, gives life, bestows peace, sustains hope, brings joy, and creates unity. We are radically social beings gifted with Catholic spirituality, connected with one another and with the wider natural and cosmic orders. We are also individual subjects, distinct from others in consciousness and freedom, even though we share a common humanity with others, and solidarity with the whole created order in China. We remain unique individuals, with our own distinctive experiences of God.

In short, Catholic spirituality in China not only has been developing with a kind of individual self-focus that has a longer history, but also has been a discipline seeking to explain Catholic experience as it actually occurs, as it actually transforms its subject toward fullness of life in Christ, that is, toward self-transcending life-integration within the Catholic community of faith. Catholic spirituality in China is showing the economy of salvation in God, and it experiences this in the “Incarnation,” “Crucifixion” and “Resurrection” of Christ.

Endnotes

- 1 Cf. Xiao Ting Yang, "That's the Spirit! Catholic Church in China after Vatican II," in *World Mission*, June 2001, pp. 33-35.
- 2 Cf. Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today, Policy & Practice*, Maryknoll, NY, 1989, p. 420. In 1979 Ye Jian Ying, the chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, said that "While building a solid material foundation, we want to raise the educational, scientific, cultural, and health levels of the whole nation, foster lofty revolutionary ideals and morals, develop a rich and many-sided cultural life and thus build an advanced socialist culture and ideology" (*Beijing Review*, 10 November 1986, p. 17).
- 3 Cf. Donald E. MacInnis, op. cit., p. 420.
- 4 Cf. *ibid.*
- 5 Cf. *China Youth Club*, (Cambridge, Mass) 1980.
- 6 Cf. Feng Gang Yang, "Three Approaches to Spiritual Values" in Pacific Rim Report, University of San Francisco, March 2001, p. 4.
- 7 Cf. Feng Gang Yang, op. cit., p. 4.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 Cf. Chen Cunfu and Edwin Hui, "The Phenomenon of the Cultural Christian—An Overview and Evaluation," in *Regent Chinese Journal*, 4 1996.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Cf. John Tong, *Challenges and Hopes, Stories from the Catholic Church in China*, Taipei, Taiwan, 1999, pp. 91-101.
- 14 *Ibid.* p. 93.
- 15 Cf. Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics, Tragedy and Hope, in an Emerging Civil Society*, University of California Press. 1998, p. 87.
- 16 Cf. Li Pingye, "A Report on the Development of Religion in China in the 1990's," in *Journal for the Study of Christian Culture*, N 2, 1999, Beijing, p. 202.
- 17 Cf. The 18th National Catholic China Conference Report.
- 18 Cf. Jean Charbonnier, *Guide to the Catholic Church in China*, Communication, Singapore, 200, p. 2.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Sources from: General Social Survey about the Catholic Church in China, summer 2001.
- 21 Cf. Jean Charbonnier, op. cit., p. 14.
- 22 *Ibid.*

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- ²³ A plurality of means for spiritual training: A) For laity: All of the following categories: Scripture study, catechism study, spirituality and sharing, pilgrimages. "Single spiritual training": each of the above categories. B) For Sisters: All of the following categories: novitiate, charitable services training, spiritual reading, retreats, short-term theology study. "Single spiritual training": each of the above categories. C) For seminarians: All of the following categories: daily prayer, meditation and contemplation, study of the spirituality and lives of the saints, practicing love of God and serving people. "Single spiritual training": each of the above categories. D) For clergy: All of the following categories: daily prayer, retreats, love of God and people, seeking peace and joy for others. Single spiritual training: each of the above categories.
- ²⁴ Cf. Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline," in *Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring, 1998.
- ²⁵ Cf. Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics*, pp. 105ff.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Cf. Richard Madsen, *China's Catholics*, op. cit., p. 106.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Cf. Wen Shun Tian, "Chinese Church Expresses New Life," in *Zhong guo jiao hui lun wen j* (*Journal of Chinese Church*), pp. 118-119.
- ³¹ Cf. Xiao Ting Yang, "That's the Spirit! Catholic Church in China after Vatican II" in *World Mission*, June 2001, p. 33-35.
- ³² Cf. Jean Charbonnier, op. cit., pp. 3-4.
- ³³ Message of His Holiness Pope John Paul II for the fourth centenary of the arrival in Beijing of Matteo Ricci, S.J., in *L'Osservatore Romano*, N. 44-31 October 2001, pp. 3-4.