

# *Midlife Identity, a New Challenge for Consecrated Religious in China*

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## **Introduction**

In 1919 Pope Benedict XV promulgated the Apostolic Letter *Maximum Illud* and in 1926 Pope Pius XI issued the Encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae*. Both documents affirmed the necessity of establishing local Churches. The Catholic Church in China actively responded. In 1922 the first apostolic delegate, Archbishop Celso Benigno Costantini, arrived in China. In 1924 the first Chinese Synod was held in Shanghai. In 1926 six Chinese bishops were consecrated in Rome. During the process of inculturation, many Chinese bishops, with the assistance of international congregations, established diocesan Sisters congregations. This gave local bishops a greater authority to assign sisters. At the same time the Chinese Sisters, being indigenous, were better able to communicate with grassroots communities, especially in evangelising rural areas.

After a century of turbulent history and fundamental social change in China, Chinese Sisters congregations can be said to have weathered many storms. Now, some congregations are celebrating their 80th or 90th anniversary, or even the centenary of their establishment. The God of history has always been with us and has kept on renewing us. Chinese Sisters congregations had gone through different kinds of challenges, from their founding to their re-grouping and searching for their congregational identity (charism). The latest search may be for the Sisters' identity and sense of self. The young Sisters who had joined the congregations when these were reopening after the Cultural Revolution, are entering into middle age now. They face formidable social changes such as the dissolution of rural communities, a Church on the margins in China, popular online obsession, especially among the young, and a decrease in vocations. Many Sisters find themselves

asking: “Who am I/ who are we?” “What is the meaning of Sisters’ congregations in China, or in the Church in China?” To find a new answer, one has to go back to the source, to find the original charism of their congregation, and their response today. After they have reflected on all this, they find that the Holy Spirit has always been leading them.

### **A review of the road we have taken**

*Even were I to walk in a ravine as dark as death I should fear no danger, for you are at my side. (Psalm 23:4)*

As early as the 17th century, even before the presence of international Sisters congregations in China, missionaries at the turn of the Ming-Qing dynasties already started to encourage some young women to devote their lives to the service of the Lord. They all lived at home, engaging in prayers for redemption. Toward the end of the Ming dynasty, following the increase in the number of these virgins, there appeared some organisations in the form of sodalities.

Beginning in the mid-19th century, some international Sisters congregations, such as the Daughters of Charity, were invited to come to China. With their assistance, missionaries in many dioceses set up communities of consecrated virgins. These inherited the spirit of the international congregations, and were similar to today’s third orders. Consecrated virgins, who had the advantage of knowing the local tongues and cultures, did meet the pastoral needs at the time. They became important helpers to missionaries evangelising women. They lived in communities but they did not profess the three vows. They only promised to live a virginal life for the sake of the Church. Even today in Fujian, there are strong communities of consecrated virgins who work devotedly in the local Churches.

In the 1920s when the universal Church encouraged the institution of local Churches, many bishops in China focused on setting up diocesan Chinese Sisters congregations, the better to assist the bishops in local evangelisation. Often the formation of these Chinese Sisters was entrusted to international congregations.

As these diocesan Chinese congregations were established before the Second Vatican Council by local bishops who were

looking to meet the needs of the local Churches, the charism of these diocesan congregations might differ from the mentoring international congregations. Such diocesan congregations were often service-oriented. Their constitutions often stressed rules of living. Their spirituality focused on pieties. They were created to assist in parish affairs, visit women and take care of orphans. Some constitutions even stipulated that Sisters had to maintain the liturgical vessels in good order. Such practices certainly contributed greatly to the development of the Church in those days.

In the 1950s when the People's Republic of China was newly established, basically most international congregations in China were dissolved. Foreign missionaries were expelled while Chinese Sisters were either detained or forced to return home. Some were even forced to get married. It was even worse during the Cultural Revolution. Both international and local congregations seemed to have disappeared.

In the 1980s when China launched the Reform and Opening Up Policy, the Church in China, together with the Sisters congregations, recovered gradually. But after an interruption of some thirty years, all the Sisters who survived were old or were exhausted by long years of imprisonment or hard labour. They felt lucky to reunite with Sisters of old. But to rebuild the congregation was something beyond their capacity.

Several significant factors affected the prospects of rebuilding the Sisters congregations: (1) Was the spiritual formation of the Sisters before 1949 strong enough for them to transmit, by word or by example, the spirit of the relevant congregation? (2) To what extent would the surviving Sisters affirm their vocation and the congregational charism? and (3) the number of surviving Sisters. All these variables affected the re-organisation of the congregation and the recruitment of new members. Some congregations had only a few or only one Sister left. Some might only find an old copy of their constitution, or even a few scattered pages, or nothing at all. With such difficulties, the re-building work could only depend on diocesan leaders.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, new recruits were called forward by old bishops or elderly priests. These women were the post-Cultural Revolution generation. They grew up in a society

devoid of religious formation. Their formation was based on familial transmission. The new congregations did not have their own formators. Instead different dioceses joined together. They invited Sisters from overseas to train the new members. Others sent their aspirants and novices to more mature congregations for formation.

At the beginning of the 21st century, some congregations sent some Sisters to study abroad. Some dioceses, out of financial consideration, would send their Sisters to study professional subjects such as medicine, embroidery, accounting or even literary studies so that they could receive professional qualifications. Yet upon their graduation, Sisters of a congregation often found themselves lacking a common language, as they did not have a common experience. In the absence of a solid constitution, and with only some regulations, a congregation could easily slip into a collective instead of a community. In addition, due to pastoral needs or sometimes financial reasons, some Sisters are assigned to live alone, or as a pair in the parish. Quite often, the Sisters of the same congregation may meet only once a year. This lack of a sense of community is one of the most severe crises facing Sisters congregations.

### **New challenges in the 21st century**

*"The Lord brings us to life and keeps our feet from stumbling."  
(Ps. 66:9)*

After 40 years of the Reform and Opening, China has undergone breathtaking changes in infrastructure, technology and educational opportunities. For different reasons, the Church seems to have been on the sidelines. Now Sisters congregations have reopened for 20 years.

In light of decreasing vocations, the majority of Sisters congregations have fewer than 40 members. At the same time, however, the Sisters have more opportunities to receive different kinds of formation from priests, Sisters as well as lay Catholics from abroad. Formation courses include: consecrated life, spiritual accompaniment, holistic development, theology, biblical studies, catechesis, etc. Some theological colleges have started to offer

theological pastoral programs especially for Sisters. There are more opportunities to study abroad, including to the Philippines, the United States, France, Germany, Belgium, Italy and so on. Recently, Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan has also started to offer theological programs. No doubt such formation increases the Sisters' capacity to serve, and broaden their horizons. But it also causes problems of incompatibility with fellow Sisters upon their return to their hometown. Some Sisters, finding no outlet for their expertise in their own diocese, move to other places or other provinces for further development. Not a few turn their profession into a vocation, and leave their congregation.

On the other hand, those Sisters who were born in the 1970s and 1980s are coming into middle age after joining the congregation for about twenty years. Facing the tremendous social change, they could not help but ask themselves: For what am I living? Has my choice in life been worth it? Does the congregation I belong to really have a *raison d'être*? What is the future of the congregation? An identity crisis slowly emerges in the community. Some Sisters feel incapable or even develop clinical depression. These are not exceptional.

### **Renew and rebuild**

*"In your saving justice, Yahweh, lead me" (Ps 5:8)*

God often issues a new calling when we are in a crisis. When a number of congregations realise they are facing an identity crisis, they start to review the primary meaning of their existence; they trace the original calling of the Lord, and hope to join with other Sisters of their congregation to renew the vision for the sustainable development of their community. The Holy Spirit also inspires the Church to issue this calling. In 2016, the Holy See encouraged diocesan bishops to pay attention to the development of Sisters congregations and renew the congregational constitutions according to Canon Law. The congregational constitution is not only a schedule or some regulations of life, but is the blueprint of the religious life according to their own specific congregational spirit. The revisioning is a communal project and a process of prayerful discernment. It signals communal conversion and renewal. Some

congregations have taken on this challenge. It can be difficult but it is absolutely a time of grace given by God to the congregation.

### **1. Retrace the grace of the Lord in history**

Those who consecrate their lives are indeed a grace given by the Lord to the Church. We trust the birth of a congregation, no matter its size and however long it has existed, is here by the grace of the Holy Spirit. To reaffirm, remember and reiterate such grace is the first step toward rebuilding the congregation.

Whether it was by the invitation of diocesan bishops or attraction by the virtuous model of the older generation of Sisters, young vocations are “a precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to certain souls, whereby they may devote themselves to God alone the more easily, due to an undivided heart. This perfect continence, out of desire for the kingdom of heaven, has always been held in particular honor in the Church. The reason for this was and is that perfect continence for the love of God is an incentive to charity, and is certainly a particular source of spiritual fecundity in the world.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 42)

In 1996 when Saint John Paul II promulgated the *Vita Consecrata*, he stated that religious congregations must, during their historical development, maintain “creativity and fidelity.” (#36) It means to be faithful to the founding charism and to bravely accept the call of our Lord communicated through the signs of the times. But for many Chinese diocesan congregations, they do not trace back to the defining charism of a founder. We believe, however, the Holy Spirit was working with those who founded the congregations, driven by the needs of the Church, and who had certain expectations of the Sisters. Their charism may even be expressed through the name chosen for the congregation. When the Sisters together remember the history of the diocese, and of the founding of their congregation, the words or actions their founders emphasised, and their encounters with elderly Sisters, they can rediscover the inspiration implanted by the Holy Spirit in their hearts, and discern their original charism.

## **2. Listen to the word of God**

When the old bishops set up the Sisters Congregations, no matter whether their intent was articulated, they were no doubt inspired by a personal or diocesan contemplation of the Mystery of Christ, or they were inheriting the legacy of their diocese's spiritual family, for instance, Franciscan, Vincentian, Jesuit or Dominican. Therefore, in order to understand the Lord's vision of the congregation, besides researching into history, it is necessary to embark on a journey of *Lectio Divina*. It means that the Sisters together should meditate on the face of Jesus Christ as revealed by God through the spiritual tradition, the history, or through the name of the community. They begin by personally meditating on certain relevant biblical passages, or a particular mystery of Christ; then they share the fruits with the group. Gathering these prayerful insights, they then reflect on them individually and together. Through this process of listening together, the revelation of our Lord becomes clearer and clearer. This is what the Lord is saying to this community. It is God's call to this community to live out a particular mystery. That is the reason why our Lord wants this community to exist.

## **3. Lifestyle derived from a common calling**

The community discernment of the Word of God and their response evolves into a special spiritual quality of the Congregation. It can be called the charism of this religious community. It also becomes their direction and vision. The community hears God's call. The call and response should be realised in community life, developing into a common lifestyle, a blueprint of their life which is also their constitution. The constitution should be an expression of God's plan for the community, known as regulations or a charter of life. It defines every aspect of life of the members: their spiritual and prayer life, community life, the life of vows, carrying out the evangelising mission, the management of the community, the growth and development of the community, etc. All this reflects the special calling of Christ to this community. It is the hallmark by which

people recognise a consecrated person as belonging to this community.

### **The importance of re-constituting their identity**

*Come and listen, all who fear God, while I tell  
what he has done for me. (Ps 66:16)*

The above-mentioned work of re-forming the congregation is arduous. But the opportunity to re-iterate their common vision through the communal discerning of God's call is truly valuable. It can help individual members of the consecrated community to rediscover, through life's different phases, her own and the community's place in the salvific plan of God.

**1. Discover and realise the true "self":** charism is not only a common spirit. It is even more a path by which one fulfills oneself. The constitution is not just a set of rules for living, or ritual practices, but covers as well the being of the congregation and its members. Based on this charism, the contemplated mystery of Christ gives a particular colour to each aspect of community life, a colour motivated and revealed by the Holy Spirit. Each consecrated member can find her own "identity" ("Who am I?") in this charism. She can find her true self as created by God, the self that continues to be shaped, and will reveal its salvation and sanctification in the mystical body of Christ.

**2. Establish a sense of belonging towards the community:** identity and belonging make up the "self." Who one is depends on to whom one belongs, for no man is an island. One needs to be aware of how God shapes one through the community and completes the plan of salvation that belongs to her. The congregation's constitution and traditions are part of her; conversely, her history is part of the congregation's history. To affirm the congregation's charism is to say I belong. The plan of God is given to the individual as to everyone in the community.

**3. Give meaning to members' prayer life and community life:** As charism comes from the "self-revelation of God," it is the revealing of God's holy face to us. When I am aware of God's self-



revelation, it is actually God speaking to me. An “I” then appears before the Lord. As Søren Kierkegaard said: when you read God's Word, you must ... remember to say to yourself incessantly: It is I to whom it is speaking. Therefore the prophet said, “O Lord, we are called by your name.” (Jer 14:9) When we contemplate God, when we pray, this mystery or an aspect of the human life of our Lord is unveiled to us. We will find a special identity, a lifestyle that is quite similar to how our Lord lived, in such a way that the whole community and each of its members receive the power of life. This connection with the mystery of Christ reveals to each member her identity, and gives the community an aptitude and an orientation. That is why the charism of a religious congregation is the corner stone of community living. Recipients of the same grace, those who hear the same calling, they live together because of this charism given by the Holy Spirit. Thus the Sisters share a bond deeper than blood relations. It is through sharing and living together that such grace becomes more apparent.

**4. A way to persevere and sanctify:** When a member experiences this mystery, and discovers her future and her true face, she will find that to adapt to this mystery, it is necessary to let God mold her language, her thinking, and her desire. Her response to the Lord is a thanksgiving, a worship, a surprise. Each congregation has its own plan of sanctification (for example, Franciscans persist in poverty). It includes attitude of life, feelings, inspiration, ethics, particular virtues, every aspect of the consecrated life, even interpersonal relations and specific apostolates.

**5. Guidance in terms of the congregation's apostolates:** Finally, every religious congregation is called to live for others for the good of the Church. Each charism reveals the love of God for people. So the apostolic ministry (as distinguished from work) of each congregation is the fruit of the Holy Spirit, through which the Holy Spirit unveils the salvation of the Lord. The Holy Spirit understands people. He knows the needs of the time. In each epoch there is a different calling. The Holy Spirit lights the fire in the heart of the founding members and their followers so that salvation will be realised in that epoch. Some congregations will tend to spiritual needs while others address physical needs. Such services are

generated through specific revelations. In prayer, the direction of services will emerge along with vitality for the service. The divine mystery brings the inspiration and calling. Our apostolic life is directly related to our daily life. It reflects our loyalty to our charism.

### **Conclusion**

Catholic diocesan Sisters congregations in China face severe challenges in the 21st century. Besides social changes and the role of the Church, the most critical challenge comes from individual members and the communities themselves. To be or not to be? How to live out the role of the consecrated life in modern times? What is the future of the congregations? Can they survive? Just like the chosen people in the wilderness, people can easily get lost amidst the temptations to wealth and power. At this moment, the Holy Spirit works in the Church and through the Church to keep on calling professed people to return to the Lord. It reminds them of the grace of God, and the experience of God incarnate. In this way, even amidst swirling changes, they can move forward and bear witness among people.