

ENVISIONING PARISH LIFE IN CHINA: A PASTORAL REFLECTION

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Introduction

First of all, let me clarify that it is impossible for me to give a detailed description of Church life for the whole of China, because of varying parish situations in the different parts of China. I will talk about parish life from the point of sharing experiences of a parish priest of northern China. There are certainly some similarities between the parish life in northern China and southern China, so we can get a general idea of parish life in China.

Secondly, this paper will focus on parish life that should be or will be. However, we need to have some basic ideas of current parish life and of difficulties to be overcome before we can envision parish life of the near future. Therefore, I will try to give you a general picture of parish life in China in the first part of the paper. In the second part, I will give some evaluations and present some problems that we are facing in parishes. In the third part, I will share some of my insights of building a sound parish with analyzing some social changes and Church development in China.

I. The current situation of parish life in China:

Usually there are several churches in a big city. Several priests work in a parish. One is designated as the parish priest and the others are his assistants. They celebrate mass on weekdays and on Sundays for the parishioner. The Catholics go to the church, which is closest to their home, or they choose another churches. Within a parish you will find some permanent parishioners as well as transient parishioners, who may have travel there to attend mass. The parishes in cities of China are something like the parishes here in the States. They may sometimes offer some type informative lessons on Catholicism or catechism for interested non-Catholics. Some young university students are interested in Catholic belief and will attend catechism courses and are baptized into the church after the parish priest feels they are suitably qualified.

In the countryside or in the rural areas of China, each priest is usually responsible for the Catholics of several villages that are geographically in close proximity. One priest will cover ten or twenty square kilometers. In some populated catholic areas, a priest may take care of 2,500 Catholics in five different villages within an area of ten square kilometers. In some more sparsely populated catholic areas, a priest may take care of 1,000 Catholics located in ten fairly isolated villages. He must travel as far as thirty kilometers or more to take care the parishioners. Most of the priests, ordained in late 1980s and 1990s, are now in their thirties. They usually ride bicycles or motorcycles to go to different villages or towns to do their parish work.

Sunday mass is central to parish life for all the Catholics. One of the most important functions of a parish priest is to go to different villages to say masses on Sunday. The rural parish priests usually celebrate two to four masses in different villages on Sundays. The Catholics usually travel to their neighboring village or the closest village to attend mass if there is not one in their village. Another important function for a priest is to hear confessions before each big feast, for example, Christmas, Easter, Ascension, Assumption and Pentecost. All the adult Catholics will go to confession so therefore, the priest will sit in the confession room for up to ten hours listening to confessions. Anointing of the sick is very important, because it is a great comfort for the family members if the

person dies after he or she has had confession and communion. Therefore it is not unusual for a priest to be called to anoint the sick at midnight or early morning a great distance away.

In nearly all the villages, there are people designated to be leaders of the community. They generally are well respected by the community for their catholic lives. They are either elected by the community or appointed by the parish priest. They arrange daily common prayers and the mass on Sunday and carry out responsibilities that the priest assigns to them. If the priest has something to do, he will contact the leaders of the community.

In some dioceses, another important pastoral activity is the annual confession and communion. For our Church tells us that each adult catholic must go to confession and communion at least once a year. It is a long tradition for the Church in China. Therefore, the parish priest tries to organize homily-prayer activities that are similar in style to a retreat for the parishioners. He will invite other priests to give homilies and to hear confessions. Usually it lasts two to five days based on the numbers of parishioners. Different priests will present different topics in their homilies. They often focus on preparation for confession, the Ten Commandments and some fundamental catholic doctrines.

In some parishes, there are some small communities or groups. The most common one is the St. Anna Community. It is a community that is formed of married women. The purpose of the community is to try to help the married women be good mothers, kind wives and good examples in the catholic community. They help their children and husbands to grow in faith. Another parish community is the Women and Youth Community. The members are single and can join the community at the age of fourteen and remain members until they get married. The purpose of the community is to help the unmarried women to live good lives and help them to grow in faith. Most of them are choir members and they help in the teaching of some of the younger children. Each community has it's own leadership and organizes it's own activities. Sometimes nuns will join in to teach them or help them in their spiritual growth.

II. Some positive aspects to retain and some difficulties to overcome.

It is not easy to give a comprehensive evaluation of parish life in China. Here we just want to point out some good points that we should retain while clarify the problems and the difficulties we have in order to find possible ways to deal with them.

Generally speaking, most parish priests are doing well. They work very hard and they take care of the spiritual lives of their parishioners. The parishioners love their good shepherd and respect them. They have a close relationship with the parish priests and they trust them.

We have a very good tradition, which places great importance on Sunday mass. This is the center of catholic life for parishioners. Our Catholics also give much attention to their sacramental life, for example, confession and the communion. In addition, the annual retreat, the winter study group and small parish communities are very good traditions that we should keep.

However, we are not here to just count our merits. We all know that there inevitably will be some problems with parish life. The key issue is that we should try to recognize them, acknowledge them and solve them. I think there are some key points that we should pay attention to.

First, what is the model of parish life that we should follow? We could say that we do not have any model to follow because we did not have an active parish life for over thirty years. In the early 1980s, most priests were in their sixties or seventies. They were zealous workers and travel to different places to celebrate mass. For the young priests, they are their models. It means to be a priest is to go to different places to celebrate mass. It was very necessary for priests to do sacramental service twenty years ago, but it is not enough for a parish priest in 21st century. Our question is, What should parish priests be doing in addition to celebrating mass? Furthermore, what should the image and role be for parish priests?

Another special phenomenon in China is that the first generation of young priests is in their late thirties or early forties. They have been priests for more than ten years. They worked tirelessly at the very beginning and the parishioners respect them and love them. But sometimes some of them have had some difficulties and problems dealing with issues. They are like burnt-out candles. Furthermore, nothing is 'fresh' for them. However, they have some new challenges they have never faced before. Sometimes they find that they are not the absolute authority among the parishioners. They find that their answers cannot satisfy the young generation of Catholics or they have some problems with the leader of the community because of different way of solving problems. Perhaps this means we should re-define our identity as parish priests.

I have heard some parishioners say that without a priest on Sunday there is nothing they can do. This means that they depend totally on priests. My question is how we can change the notion of being a baptized Catholic? Some of them do not know the responsibility of being a Catholic. For some of them to be Catholics mean to attend Sunday Mass and pray everyday. They think spreading the Good News is solely the responsibility of priests. They have nothing to do with it. Maybe we should encourage participation of the laity to do some parish work or encourage them to fulfil their calling to be an active part of the body.

It is very important to acknowledge that religious sisters should play a key role in parishes. They have special natural gifts that we priests do not have. It is easy for them to have contact with children, youth and married couples especially children and married women. It is very good to ask them to take care of the Anna Community and the women-youth Community. The problem sometimes is that we ask them to perform numerous tasks for which they haven't received adequate education.

We do have annual retreats, annual confession and communion and winter study groups. The problem is how to effectively achieve our goal. During the annual retreat, we do not really achieve our goal to reflect on and improve our catholic life. We sometimes miss the spirit of the retreat. Some of the priests criticize the parishioners and the parishioners are just like 'pew-sitters'. But here I do not mean to overlook all the merits of the annual retreat. For the winter studies, the big problem is we do not have enough qualified teachers and facilitators.

III. What the parish life should be to meet the future challenges from the Chinese Church situations and Chinese society

In the past twenty years, many things have happened in our Church and in Chinese society. I think that it is a time of transition for our Church in China. We know that nearly all the old priests have passed away and the older generation of Catholics is in their seventies or eighties. Now the younger generation of priests is facing the younger generation of Catholics. It is impossible for us to maintain the old image of a parish priest. In the past, the priests were well educated and the lay people were

poorly educated. The parish priests were the only absolute authority in everything. It was natural that the old priests had authority, power and honor. Furthermore, the old priests suffered a lot for the Church in the past. The parishioners respected them for their witness to the faith and their faithfulness to God and to the Church

It really isn't possible for one person to know everything about modern society. Nowadays the lay people are well educated in social sciences and they can find books covering a spiritual topic or even read the Bible. They will challenge you and ask you questions that you may have never thought of before. Due to the increasing sense of democracy in society, the younger generation of Catholics will ask why they should accept a young priest's authority or accept what seems to be his unreasonable interpretation of the Bible or homily. Therefore, I think we must re-think the image of a priest. A priest is not a powerful and authoritative governor, but rather a wise and faithful servant here to serve his parishioners.

It is not easy for a priest to accept this servant image and identify with it because of the past glorious history and the Chinese concept of being a leader. As priests, we know that we also need to hear God's words, to be ministered to and to learn humbly from our parishioners. If a priest continues to retain the idea that being a pastor means to govern the parishioners that are entrusted to him, I am sure that he will be disappointed by reality. In our Catholic tradition we usually think that a priest should celebrate Mass and administer sacraments as a means of service to the parishioners. At the same time the priest should lead, guide and govern the parishioners and the parishioners must obey the parish priest. We had a strong sense of governing the parishioners. Therefore, if the parishioners offer new ideas which are different from the pastor's, the pastor will regard them as challenge of his authority or he may think that he has not done an adequate job of training the parishioners to be obedient enough. But facts tell us that sometimes the parishioners are really better than the pastors in dealing with some issues. Now there is a danger the priest will have to face his real identity. He may think that he is the leader of the community, but he may not be as capable as some parishioners may be in certain circumstances. What is his special identity? This is why some priests feel that they are not well respected and they feel depressed and confused about their identity. It is very important for our priests to really understand our identity as servants of the people entrusted to us. We should always reflect on whether we are good servants or not and be attentive to the needs of our parishioners. We must put great effort into offering the best service to the people. We also should know how to become good servants. We are not born good servant.

Ministry is not a science, but a skill that we must learn. It seems to be very simple, but sometimes we neglect it or we give very little attention to it. We seem to take for granted that a good-hearted priest must surely be a good pastor. But facts tell us this is not always correct. A very just and strong mind priest sometimes causes more tensions and problems with the parishioners rather than to resolve them. A good priest does not ensure a good pastor. Why? Because he may not know how to be a good leader and perhaps does not have the skills and abilities to deal with issues in the parish. It is not enough for a priest to merely be a robot who says mass or gives absolution for sins. Real life is more complicated than that. Therefore, we should know something about workplace relationships, personnel issues, leadership styles, budget and financial reporting, public relations and fund raising, just to mention a few. Especially when we are facing the younger generation of Catholics.

We should also have some working knowledge of skills to help solve tensions associated with children, youth and elderly. The reasons that this type of education is lacking is because they do not have any guidelines and requirements to follow. I think it is very important for the seminaries to incorporate

pastoral practice into the required studies and to offer more educational opportunities for priests in pastoral ministry and skills for pastoral care.

I have mentioned several times that the Church in China is in a period of transition. We also must confront the problem of how to transform our new Catholics with our new understandings of God and our faith. Our traditional faith tells us that our God is a merciful and just God. He is merciful to all who are repentant and He will punish all the people who are not obeying the Ten Commandment. Therefore, we join the only true religion and try our best to obey the Ten Commandments and all the Church laws so that we can obtain our goal of heaven. For many Catholics, God is a punishing God and a highly demanding God. If we do not obey his commandments we will be punished in this world and World to come. The most important thing for many people is to go to heaven no matter what happens to them in this world. The Catholic Church is the only Church in which we can get salvation. They pay much attention to adoring God and fulfil all the responsibilities of their daily prayers and Sunday masses. For them, the observation and fulfill the laws of the Church is most important no matter how tired they are they must pray their morning prayer, evening prayer, rosary and many additional prayers even though they are in semi-sleepy condition. They just try to fulfill what they understand to be their Catholic responsibilities. This is all.

This is not enough for the young generation of Catholics. They will argue that they do not like a punishing God who is just like a policeman. They think that it is very difficult to be a good catholic, because they must obey so many commandments and church laws. There are too many prayers. They think to be Catholics means you must carry a heavy burden. They also think that our Catholics are very selfish, for Catholics just want to go to heaven by making God happy. They will ask what the Good News is for them and those who live in this world?

What is the meaning of being a catholic? Many non-Catholics live very moral lives. Will they go to hell with the evil people? They do not think that they will go to hell, for they are wonderful people. If they go to heaven, what are the differences between our Catholics and non-Catholics? It is an essential that our parish priests really deepen our faith and our understandings of God so that we can try to enlighten, guide, and hopefully help to transform our new generation of Catholics. Otherwise, we will continue in the spirit of the Council of Trent from several hundred years ago. We must face the reality of the Church in China and apply the spirit of Second Vatican council to the new situations in China. I think we urgently need to have our new catechism books that are in accord with the new catechism book of the universal Church, the new theology and new spirit.

For reasons stemming from the Church's history in China, parishes in China lack models of structures and guidelines. We should try to compile parish structures and establish parish organizations. For example, we could outline and document the qualifications need to be a community leader, how to elect them, what their responsibilities will be, how often they will have a meeting, what are their goals and required reports, how long the term is, etc. We should also have parish councils, parish fund raising groups, parish study groups, St. Anna Community leaders, Woman youth community leaders, Liturgy groups, Bible reading groups, church choir groups, alter servers group, and for the children little angel group. It is very important that there is a sharing of power, responsibility and ministry in the parish. We should give them more opportunity to participate in parish life. Each one of them would have his or her community to serve. They all have a sense of belonging and a sense of responsibility.

In my opinion, the basic model of parish structure is one of collaboration and sharing. Nowadays, the parish priest himself is omnipotent. Usually, there is only one parish priest in a parish. He tries to take care of everything. It is not a good model. In the future, it is very important that at least two priests work together in a parish, one as the pastor and the other as his assistant. The parish council should include the pastor, pastor's assistant, religious sisters, community leaders and the representatives of different groups in the parish. We can have a sharing of power and responsibility in the parish community. It is also imperative that we properly and adequately train our future leadership in the Church so that they may clearly know their working responsibilities and their rights in the parish. We urgently need their participation.

We should try to educate our parishioners so they can understand more fully their identity as a Catholic. Some of the older generation of Catholics thinks that they have nothing to do with pastoral ministry work, it's priests' responsibility. Perhaps if a lay person does some pastoral work, they will think that he or she is not qualified, for only clerical people have the rights and power to do this type of work. Or if a lay person does some work in the parish, others will think that he or she is acting out of line. We should be committed to educating our new generation with the spirit of Second Vatican Council. We can try to educate that to be Catholic is more than just attending mass. Baptized faithful are recognized as having received a call from God to be ministers of the word, pastoral caregivers and associates in Church administration as a permanent vocation within the church. We can encourage them to help maintain their parish and be of service to others and the parish community for example, to clean the church, to serve as lectures during mass, and even to bring their friends to Church.

From my experience, I think that the most important thing is that the parish priests support them, trust them and give them some training. The parish priests are the organizers, supporters and animators of these communities and groups.

If we go to a church in the States, we usually see a school near the church. Now the diocese of Hong Kong has many elementary schools and middle schools and they are preparing to set up a catholic university. One of the key issues in parishes is proper education of their parishioners. I think we must seriously think about this. Without catholic and good social education for our future generations, we will loose our hope in the future. We have a long way to go to build an elementary or middle school, but we could build a catechism study center, Sunday school and pre-school center. Since Chinese Catholics see Sunday as a day they commit to the church, we could make full use of Sunday to teach our parishioners catechism, Bible and the Second Vatican Council. In winter, the students have a long vacation. We could organize them and teach them some of their lessons and church stories. A priest whom I know has done a very good job at this. During winter vacation, he invited several catholic teachers to teach students who are from sparsely populated catholic villages. They all gather at a big parish to study their lessons and catholic stories. There they can experience a Catholic atmosphere and learn to pray.

It is necessary to give the school-aged students and university students some Catholic teachings. Because what they learned in the school is sometimes contradictory to their faith. They learn from the priests that God created the world and our human being, but they were taught at school that human beings evolved from monkeys. The priests tell them God exists, but they were told by others that God does not exist and they cannot distinguish religion from superstition. They have many doubts and questions about faith. They ask their parents these questions, but their parents cannot offer them a satisfactory answer. They do not really believe in God. However they are forced to go to church by their parents or grandparents. Therefore, it is natural that they do not profess their faith publicly, nor do

they want to go to church. We must come to grips with these questions and try to give them an explanation or example to help them to foster a sense of pride and responsibility for having faith. We can share with them the meaning of life as well as some moral teachings of how to be a responsible person, how to respect others and cooperate with others and how to make friends. All good lessons are in order to live a good Christian life everyday.

It would be advantageous to have a pre-school center for children before they go to school. There they can learn some basic ideas of how to be a good kid by using stories, words, songs, and even prayers. I think it is wonderful that even some non-Catholic parents send their kids to pre-school centers. I am sure the experience will have an effect on the kids after they grow up or they will have a good impression of Catholics even though they may not be Catholics. I think your question will be where can we get teachers for these centers. My answer is that we can send some religious sisters to study child education or we can choose some parishioners to study in a formal school setting. In fact, I think we must build diocesan study centers. The best way now is to build it near seminaries or religious congregation. The teachers of the seminary and the sisters can teach the students and the students can be the teachers of different groups. Lay people's education is very important. We could also use the center to offer priests who have worked for ten years, the opportunity to get some new ideas and new information of our Church today.

In considering catechism, I think we should focus on Bible study and liturgy. Many parishioners can recite many prayers, but they do not know Bible very well. They attend mass each Sunday, but they do not pay much attention to the liturgy. It is very useful that we have some Bible study textbooks, Bible sharing and Bible praying. At the same time, we can have some liturgical books for different age groups. We can learn from Hong Kong and Taiwan and write our own books. Through this kind of study, the parishioners can organize prayer and Bible sharing so that they can nourish themselves from the word of God.

Previously I had mentioned educating school-aged and university students. Here I would like to discuss a phenomenon among the young intellectuals. The young university students or intellectuals have more opportunities to know the world outside of China. They know that western culture is closely connected with Christianity. The western literature is closely connected with Bible. Some of them are very interested in Christianity and Bible because of the admiration of western culture. Another thing is that they are trying to find something to believe in. Sometimes what they have learned cannot satisfy their real spiritual needs. Some people call this phenomenon a spiritual void. They realized that a material life cannot satisfy their inner desires. This is also the reason why recently some new religions or groups have appeared. I think we can try to start with literature, arts, Bible and to meet their spiritual needs in their daily lives. I know in some dioceses and parishes they have organized a study about Christian culture and the Bible along with other activities for university students or young intellectuals. They share their lives and their religious experiences. They organized a party and they went on a pilgrimage. This is a way in which they can share their faith and get to know each other so that they can improve their understanding of their faith and strengthen their honor of being of a catholic. It is important that a parish priest can read this situation and try to react to it.

Another social change we are aware of is that more and more people are moving from villages to cities for business reasons or to look for ways to improve their lives. We are especially seeing many young husbands as well as young boys and even some young girls who go to big cities to earn money. This migration to the cities has many problems, because they do not have any prior life experience other than life in a rural area. They see so many new things, which become temptations everywhere. Now

that they do not have their parents to watch over them, it is very easy for them to go to the cinema and watch any type of movie, which often does not teach anything of great moral value. They do not want to go to church. We should also notice this problem and try to reach out and support these fellow Catholics. I think this phenomenon will continue for a period of time because more people will be moving to the cities. The parish priests should ask some people to look out for these people and set up an organization or group to welcome and serve them. Otherwise, we will lose many young Catholics to the distractions of the cities. I know a priest in a city who organized the "Emmanuel Community" for new comers to the city. They built a center in a busy market street. The Catholics can go there and they get acquainted with other new comers through Catholics they know at the center. They help a lot for the new comers from villages.

Nowadays, Christian brothers and sisters are developing very fast in China. One widespread branch is called 'Evangelist'. They spread the Word to people, but for some reason there are times when they do not continue to take care of those they have contacted. Some of these new believers will come to Catholic Church to ask for Biblical explanations. Some of them may convert to Catholicism. I know 2,000 Evangelist believers in one diocese, who all converted to Catholicism. Some priests say that the Evangelist prepared some of the people to be accepting of the Catholic faith. In my opinion we do not need to force them to join us, but we can share the Bible with them and we can be nourished through this mutual learning.

In China, there are other religions and we used to try to make a clear separation between them and our Catholic faith because we think that we are the only one true religion and others are false religions that adore devils. We try to close in on ourselves and make sharp distinctions from them. I think that we should broaden our minds and try to open ourselves to all peoples whether they are Buddhist, Taoist, Confucianist or Atheist. We can try to find common ground and share our values and ideas with each other. We cannot enclose ourselves any more. Otherwise, they may think that Catholics will have nothing to do with them. Through openness to the outside, we can help others to understand us and we can understand others.

When we face the new challenges of society, we should know that we cannot separate the parish from society in which we are living. A good priest should know how to keep a good public relationship with local authority and non-Catholics while trying to be part of the big family and helping society. I know a priest who encouraged the parishioners to donate some money for the teachers of their school because the local education bureau could not afford the salary for the teachers so the teachers did not want to continue to teach. The priest asked the parishioners to donate money for two months for the teachers and the teachers were very grateful to the Church and to the priests. All the villagers and the local education bureau showed sincere thanks to the Catholics. Later when the parish had a big celebration, the students started from the school and cleaned the campus very well. On Christmas eve, the leader of the village asked the electrician to turn on all the street lights so that the Catholics could go back and forth safely. In another parish, the priest helped to set up a library filled with story books and books on agriculture. Of course, there were also some Church books. Each weekend, many students go there to borrow and read books in the reading room. Many farmers also go to read agricultural materials.

I also know of three orphanages, which are very good witnesses of our Church's love for the weak and disabled ones. I think this is very important that we can through our good works tell the world that we can have common ground to build a just, peaceful and loving world although we have different beliefs.

It is important to realize that a parish priest in the 21st century in China must be an open minded, far-sighted and as inclusive as possible. Through interaction with all walks of life and with society, we can set up a good image for the world and we can be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We can transform the world through our generous actions and good works.

IV. Conclusion

I have just shared my reflection of my parish experience in China. I think it is necessary for us to be aware of what is going on in the Church and society in China. My basic reflection is that we are in a time of transition not only for our Church, but also a changing from the old generation to a new generation. It is impossible for us to use the methods of thirty years ago to do current parish work in the 21st century. We must face the new challenges and grasp new opportunities. In this period of transition, if we can transform the Church well, we will have a bright future. Otherwise, we may face a terrible situation in the Church in China during the following years. We should have a sense of urgency for the need to transform our parish situations.

Nowadays, everything depends on our parish priests. If the parish priest do not know how to organize a parish or if he does not want to change situation, parishioners can do nothing to change the situation. In Chinese, we have a saying, '*the most important is our leaders*'. How our future leaders are trained is essential.

In this paper, you can sense that I put a lot of emphasis on faith education of the younger generation. I think our new generation should be enlightened with a new understanding of our faith and our God in fellowship with the universal Church. Of course, we know how we must respect and understand our older generation of parishioners. We should also have the ongoing faith education for the adult parishioners.

First of all, we should know where we should go. But it does not mean that this is all we should do. In fact, we have a long way to go to carry out our destination-to build a sound parish structure and to start a sound parish life in China. Because, the parishioners lack the sense of participation and we do not have enough people to rely on, especially religious teachers and parish personnel. But the important thing is that if we really should have similar ideas of what parish life should be and if we realized the urgency to build a sound parish life, we will move toward it and we can build a sound parish structure.

We know where we need to go, but we should also know the steps for achieving our destination. It is unacceptable to change everything without noting the reality. It is unacceptable to keep everything in the long tradition without making it any changes either. We should learn to be a wise and faithful servant to take care of our brothers and sisters that God entrusted to us.