

Promoting the well-being of Women

The Contribution of Women Religious in China to Societal Development

Sr. Matthias Guo Xiao Ping

A few years ago, there was a movie called "Sister Act" which was extremely funny yet, it also raised a profound question of what is the proper role for women religious in the secular world? Today, as we reflect upon the response of Chinese Catholic Church to social change, it is meaningful to ask what is the role of women religious in the development of Chinese society? In this paper, I attempt to give a brief answer to the question.

1) Women religious as Foremothers of Women's Liberation in China

Long before religious life first emerged in China, Chinese women, oppressed and controlled by the patriarchal society, knew very little about the meaning of womanhood besides being a dutiful wife and giving birth to a son. They were deprived of the right to education and any participation in public, because women were regarded as inferior to men. The patriarchal society also imposed on women strict moral requirements, which best represented by the famous "Three Submissions and the Four Virtues." Women were to submit to the father before marriage; the husband after marriage, and the son in widowhood; they were to cultivate the virtues of fidelity, physical charm, propriety in speech and action, and diligence in housework. The ideal image of a woman, imposed by the patriarchal society, is obedient, chaste, quiet, self-effacing, ignorant, and devoting herself only to the service of the family.

It was in such a social context that the first Chinese women religious communities were born. Enlightened by Christian understanding of women as precious children of God and equal to men, Chinese women were awakened from their state of being dominated and oppressed by patriarchal society. They also found liberating force and strength in the good news of the Gospel. At the beginning of the 20th century, the first group of women religious dared to challenge the old tradition by deciding their own future and choosing to enter religious life. Although facing tremendous obstacles from both family and society, their determination and faith in God helped them win the battle. In the religious community, they received formation in catechism, spirituality, professional skills, as well as a basic education in liberal arts. Thus, they discovered not only the meaning of religious life, but also the significance of womanhood, that is, women not only deserve equal rights, autonomy, and full participation in human society, but also have many talents to contribute to society.

In order to improve the life of their fellow sisters, Chinese women religious, with the help of foreign missionaries, devoted themselves to various forms of work besides teaching catechism to women and children at local parishes. They opened schools for girls; organized literary programs for rural women; provided health care and

promoted hygiene for women. Their tireless work not only promoted the wellbeing of women in the church, but also society in large. Moreover, through taking on public roles, women religious presented to the Chinese society a new image of womanhood with dignity and self-confidence. They also opened new possibilities for their fellow sisters to find their value outside the household sphere. By their courageous fighting for the right to their own destiny, and by their living examples and devoted services, Chinese women religious became the inspiration and harbinger to their fellow sisters in their liberation movement.

2) Women Religious' Role is Vital to the Recovering Church and Society

From 1950 to late 1970s, while the Church was undergoing persecutions, women religious were forced to leave their communities and sent back to the secular world. The Church regained its freedom to a certain degree in the beginning of 1980s. Christians were able to resume their public worship. Many women religious who had amazingly kept their faith and vocation throughout the turmoil of Cultural Revolution, also came back to the Church. The newly reopened Church with her teaching of hope, truth and love fascinated many Chinese as they were seeking for spiritual food. In responding to the great pastoral need, these women religious, although in their old age, took up the role of "mother" of the parish Church. Due to the lack of priests, it is these women who were always ready to receive whoever comes to the Church with questions and difficulties. By their kindness and tenderness, people found in them the embodiment of Christian love. Gradually, they attracted more and more young girls who felt the call to religious life. With the help of the local bishops, these women religious re-started their religious communities with nothing but their faith and hard work.

From the end of 1980s to 1990s, vocations to the religious life and priesthood were blooming. According to the statistics compiled by the Holy Spirit Study Center in Hong Kong, by year of 2002, among 12 million Chinese Catholics, there are 6700 women religious including 1800 novices, whereas the number of priests is 2650, not include 1670 seminarians. Obviously, most of the pastoral work fell on the shoulders of women religious. After only a short period of formation, newly professed Sisters were sent to all kinds of work, most to the local parishes. From the maintaining of the church building to teaching catechism; from cooking for the priests to visiting the sick and the elders; from organizing Church activities to planing formation programs for faithful of all age groups, women religious, with the help of lay people, are playing a vital role in the life of the Church. Because of the majority of believers are women, the life and work of women religious have a great impact on women Christians. They come to women religious not only to learn about Christian faith, but also to seek counseling and guidance when facing challenges and difficulties in their lives. Women religious have become the support of their spiritual life. Through forming good Christians in women believers, women religious are spreading the truth of equality, justice and love to society in large.

Moreover, women religious do not regard their vocation as confined to parish work only, they are also eagerly reaching out to society through other form of services. Such as opening clinics, nursing homes, orphanages, and kindergartens. In addition, whenever it is possible, women religious also actively engage themselves in the social services. For example, during the SARS outbreak in this past Spring, many women religious from HeBei province, who serve as medical workers volunteered to serve SARS patients; others either helped to sew protection cloths for local health workers or provided counseling through phone calls to those who were isolated.

With their simple life and devoted services, women religious became the living witnesses to the truth of love. They are reminding people of the meaning of life beyond material bondage. Although non-believers may not know the profundity of religious life, they admire the self-sacrifice of women religious. Most of all, they see the value and dignity of a woman in them, and they are convinced that women, with their talents and strong spirit are capable of changing the society.

3) Women Religious are to be Challengers of Social Injustice

Within past 10 years, Chinese society has gone through dramatic social and economic changes, which made China an important figure in the world stage. Yet, the material affluence is accompanied by the moral decline. Chinese people are experiencing ever greater spiritual hunger. The economic development, although brought fortune to some people, has left many people unemployed and created a great gap between the rich and the poor. Women, without good education, professional skill, and physical strength became the weakest group in the Chinese society. In order to survive, many women, especially young girls are forced to become prostitutes, or are abducted and sold to be wife in remote countryside. Some women, unable to cope with the cruelty of life, commit suicide. A report shows that Chinese women suicide's rate is higher than men by 25%. Most of the suicides took place in rural areas.¹ Women, as a marginalized group hardly receive any attention from society, which is still dominated by males.

In the Church, women religious and lay women are playing an important role by actively engaging themselves in the work of the Church, but they are not given enough opportunities and recognition. Even though they have rich experiences in evangelization, they play no part in the leadership of the Church. This situation is well said by an Asian woman theologian. " In Roman Catholic circles, women are rarely to serve on consultative bodies for the bishops' conference, participate in the decision-making process about vital issues of the Church, help to lead the Church in visible ways, and share in ministry and liturgy as equal partners."² Even the few laywomen leaders are still struggling to gain recognition and acceptance by priests and bishops.

¹ By David J.Lynch, USA TODAY, 3, Dec,02,

² Kwok Pui-lan, Introducing Asian Feminism Theology,

How are women religious going to respond to such great challenges that come from both the Church and society? Although they have been working diligently to promote and improve the life of women, it seems to be not enough. However, they can only give what they have. In order to contribute more they need to be empowered. Thus, women religious in the 21st century need to claim first for themselves the right of receiving more education, theological formation, spiritual formation and the development of professional skills. At present, women religious formation period is too brief because of the shortage of formation resources in China. Moreover, they deserve to be given more important roles and full participation in the ministry of the church. This requires a new model of Church, in which the authority is not based on position and status alone, but on charisma, the ability to build community and genuine qualities of leadership.

The improvement of the situation of women religious in the Church will certainly promote the full participation and recognition of laity, and lay women in particular. Empowered by the new model of Church, women religious, together with lay women will be able to help women in society. The equality, respect and recognition that women religious and lay women enjoy in the Church will be a powerful example and inspiration for the marginalized and oppressed women in Chinese society.

Conclusion

There is a Chinese saying; "women are holding half of the sky". Women have the power to change societies if they introduce the concept of justice and love wherever they are present. From household to working place, from social gathering to formal meeting, women's influence is substantial and penetrating. If they are convinced that things can be changed for the better and if they are moved to action, they have the power to build a better society. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead has said so well: "Never doubt that a small group of people can change the world-it is the only thing that ever has." Chinese women religious, though still small in number and weak in power, will keep fighting for the well-being of their fellow sisters. We believe that our efforts will bear fruits. It is like a lamp has been hidden in a corner of the room, but it keeps beaming and warming up the surroundings. Until one day, joined by many small lamps they will make the room full of light.