

Growth of Christianity in China: Perspective of a Woman Religious of the Liaoning Diocese

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Introduction:

Following the political reform introduced in late 1978, the Catholic Church within the government-approved structure began to be restored. The spirit of the Second Vatican Council, however, did not blow into the Church in China until 1990. Since then the Church in China has looked to contacts with the Universal Church through Hong Kong, European countries and the United States. Through increased lay participation, communication with the Universal Church, and improvement of the practice of religious freedom, the Church in China has been developing slowly through three generally identifiable phases. Since China is so big and the situations are very complex in different locations, my presentation is limited to the Church in Shenyang, Liaoning Diocese.

From 1980 to 1992, believers and Church leaders tested the waters, trying to rebuild the Church community. Formal religious practices in Shenyang resumed when 300 people celebrated Easter on April 6, 1980. Regular attendance at Sunday Mass in the cathedral slowly increased from 30 to 500. Church teaching and liturgical practices followed pre-Vatican II. Most believers were old, younger members came mainly from traditional Catholic families who had preserved the faith during the Cultural Revolution, and many religious vocations came from sons and daughters of rural families whose Catholic faith was passed down from generation to generation. Moreover, the growing number of Christians was far greater in the rural rather than urban areas. Church ministry focused narrowly on the celebration of Mass and formal catechesis as very few priests and bishops had survived to take up the main responsibility of pastoral ministry.

From 1992 to 2002, the Church entered a historical period of development. Although seriously lacking theological, professional and financial resources, more churches and religious sites opened and formation of seminarians and religious women started on track. The Church also began to integrate local culture into the liturgy and lay people began to participate in Church leadership according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. An increasing number of converts emerged from urban areas and the Church attracted increasing attention from youth and educated people. *"As bamboo shoots after spring rains,"* groups of lay people emerged reflecting various practical and spiritual interests and commitments: Sunday Bible study; Church music; family visitation; pre-baptism; aging sharing; etc.

From 2002 to today the Church has emphasized training of laity and social services. At the same time conversions have slowed. Compared to the decade from 1992 to 2002 when baptisms averaged 560 per year, the average number has decreased to 265 per year since 2002. It should be noted that a number of converts leave the Church shortly after Baptism for various reasons. Many who claim to be Catholic attend church services only once or twice a year. Some identify themselves as both Christian and Buddhist.

Thus, it is difficult to ascertain the precise number of faithful Catholics in the Shenyang Diocese. In general, the official number given is about 100,000.

On the positive side, evidence does show that people are taking religion more seriously than before. One reason for the decrease in conversions is that people are taking longer to commit themselves to a religion. They often visit and attend different religious practices and studies, discuss concerns and questions with qualified people. Where a few years ago in Shenyang it usually took only five to ten months for a person to prepare for Baptism, people have become more mature and it takes over a year for them to make a commitment to be baptized.

For the purposes of our discussion today, I will focus here on developments in the formation and education of clergy and religious; formation and training of the laity; and development of Church sponsored social services.

Formation and Education of Clergy and Religious

The Shenyang Seminary and the Congregations of Religious Women have slowly developed over the past 20 years. The Shenyang Catholic Theological College was established in March 1983 and has educated seminarians from 16 dioceses and the provinces of Heilongjiang, Liaoning, Hebei and Inner Mongolia etc. 368 students have received training and 182 have graduated. 131 priests have been ordained and are serving in 40 parishes in 15 provinces. Currently there are 69 seminarians. The Diocesan Sacred Heart of Mary Congregation was reopened in 1989 and the Congregation of the Sacred Heart was reopened in 1986. They have since provided religious formation and education for over two hundred young women. Currently, there are 92 Sisters serving in 18 parishes within Liaoning Province. Over half of them are engaged in pastoral ministries such as organizing parish activities. Others work in clinics, social service center, nursing homes, and kindergartens, teaching in motherhouse and studying in schools. Major fields of study for sisters has expanded beyond strictly religious formation to medicine, nursing, education and music. Although their number is still quite small, it is the vision of women religious to live in society and to spread the Good News in different ways.

Given the shortage of people with adequate theological and pastoral skills to staff the seminaries and novitiates, some theologians and seminary faculty members from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the United States and Europe have been invited to provide short courses in the Shenyang Seminary and the IHM convent. The Diocese, however, has recognized that there are differences of culture and educational background between the foreign educators and Chinese students. To address this problem in the long run, the Diocese has sent some younger priests, seminarians and a few sisters, like myself, overseas for graduate studies. Several former Mission Societies which served in China before 1950, [such as Maryknoll, Jesuits, and others] have sponsored these students to study abroad and the project has been quite successful. For example, three priests and one sister – a member of my Congregation - have completed studies in the United States and obtained degrees in such fields as Scripture, Theology, Liturgy and Spirituality. They have already returned to Shenyang and are now teaching and working in the seminary, the novitiate and in other pastoral programs in the Diocese. They often deliver lectures and help to

organize different lay training programs in rural areas during winter and summer holidays.

Pressing Needs in Education and Formation

In the China Church today, the younger generation is taking on more responsibilities but also encountering more challenges than ever before. The number of priests is still very small for such a large population, and many places have no resident priest. Lay community leaders and sisters offer a great help; but many more are needed. In addition, the rapid economic development of the nation fosters very high educational expectations among young people.

Knowledge confronts younger people with question about the meaning of life, happiness, and suffering, as well as the reality and recognition of the existence of God at a deeper level. Meeting the spiritual needs of educated young people requires not only a well-trained mind, but also a mature and compassionate heart. Most young priests and sisters however, lack skills for ongoing formation and education, as well as the personal and community support to sustain them in these challenging times. Not surprisingly, many young priests and sisters often suffer from feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, helplessness, and depression when they confront their peers who are more educated. Related issues such as depression, drinking, leaving the priesthood or sisterhood, and problems of interpersonal relationships are increasing. Complaining, passive attitudes and low energy have increased the tension between leaders and individuals.

The formation and education of clergy and religious has been affected by the lack of appropriate experienced personal and financial resources. This is an issue not only for Shenyang, but also for many other dioceses. To address these issues in Shenyang, occasional short-term training, workshops, and annual retreats have been offered.

To overcome such problems the formation process needs to be addressed and reformed in some way. Traditional formation has emphasized rigid and passive constitutional rules and spirituality, and in many ways was far beyond reality and practice. Psychological education and the integration of psychology, spirituality and theology have been neglected in formation and the Church must find ways to address this neglect. Most of the clergy and women religious entered their community at very young age (18 to 25) without much social experience. There is a great need for ongoing formational and community support among those young priests and sisters as well as from the leadership of the Church in China. The pressing needs for the new generation of Church leaders are to be listened to, to be understood, to be helped to open up and face who they are. In another words, formation and training cannot be limited to simply delivering more new information. Insight, self-reflection, integration, articulating one's own message and taking action are even more important. Spiritual direction and counseling are urgent needs. Honest and open communication within communities; and exchanges of communication across communities are also needed.

Furthermore, there is a need to organize nation-wide and consistent communication of formation and education of women religious and clergy and there is still a long way to

go to resolve these issues. We can't deny that these anxieties and tensions slow down the Church's ability to move forward.

Training of Laity

In Shenyang, the laity plays a major role in the pastoral ministry. Bishop Pius JIN Pei Xin has paid increasing attention to lay participation and training in the past years and lay participation has expanded into many different areas: preparation of evangelization teams, family and hospital visiting groups, prayer groups, Bible study and catechesis groups, church music and liturgy groups and youth groups. The Shenyang Diocese pastoral ministry training center has trained over 300 lay people since 1996. This is a three year program, which meets for twenty days three times each year. The instruction and teaching are done by priests, sisters and laypersons. The program includes Scripture, Morality, Theology, Church History, Liturgy, Homiletics, Liturgical Music and Spirituality. Once a year, sisters organize young women into vocational study groups. Through sharing and discussion they helped the young women promote self well-being and encourage them to actively participate in church activities and take their responsibilities both within a family and in a society.

Lay people have become a major source of evangelization in both rural and urban areas as they organize and lead different programs. Trained people regularly visit suburbs and rural areas where there are no resident priests and sisters, and organize programs focused on Church teaching and life sharing. Those programs usually are offered during winter and summer when people are freer from their farming or businesses. Not only do these programs give people the knowledge of Church teaching, they also produce strong emotional bonds among the people. This work is especially important for the women, children and older people in these areas since they are often left at home as the men and young adults usually go to a city to find jobs or do business. The feelings of anxiety, loneliness and frustration with taking care of children, family, and farm work are prevalent among those left behind.

Building community has become the most popular topic and activity for the laity. Sharing, listening and learning, developing a sense of belonging, sharing common problems with others and the feeling of group support all help to promote the interpersonal relationships among the faithful and help the laity to gain better self-understanding and self-confidence. Outcomes of their efforts often surprise them beyond imagination. These group activities and good works at least indirectly help to relieve worrisome situations

Social Services

For complex historical reasons, the Church in China could not provide social services until recently. With the return of priests and sisters who have studied overseas, many dioceses or parishes are initiating social services, such as clinics, homes for the elderly, and AIDS/HIV programs, and are calling Church leaders to pay closer attention to the demands of the contemporary Chinese society. Engagement in social service programs can help broaden and deepen the theological understanding of Church's teachings. It can become the model for sustainable development not only of the Church itself, but also of the whole society. Although the vision of developing community through

engaging with the society and providing social services has clearly taken hold, actual implementation of this vision will take a long time.

Diocesan Social Services Center

I have distributed a sheet describing the new Social Services Center and outlining its activities.

The Center was established in April 2004 with the expressed purpose of helping people with special problems in the community. The Center will focus on serving the weakest members of society while serving as a platform for youth to learn and participate in the social mission of the Church. The Center will especially concentrate on providing educational aid for poor students; promoting the quality of life of people on the margins of society; and providing legal counseling and professional training for rural workers in the city.

In summary, the Church in China has enjoyed a period of renewal and growth since the reforms of 1979. For the Church to continue to grow, however, in the context I have briefly described, many pressing issues remain and should be considered in our discussions.