



## **24<sup>th</sup> National Catholic China Conference**

### *A Chinese Catholic Life of Faith: Continuing China- U.S. Conversations*

*Joseph Hongcai Li*

We received this article from a Chinese visitor (Joseph Hongcai Li) of our USCCB website. Mr. Li read our 24<sup>th</sup> Conference and wanted to continue the conversations between U.S. and China Catholics about their life of faith. He voluntarily decided to share for some reflections about his own life of faith. We are happy to share the article with you. Please note that they are the author's own personal reflections, not those of the USCCB.

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## **Continuing China – U.S. Conversations:**

### **A Chinese Catholic Life of Faith**

*Joseph Hongcai Li*

God's Image and Place in Chinese Catholics' Life

From a sinful person who had become a Catholic in childhood, a seminarian as a teenager and served for over one year as a Catholic priest, then, has married but is keeping a daily prayer life.

Part I        Personal experience

Part II       Observation of others

Part III      Analysis

Part IV      Some ideas to be discussed

#### **Part I        Personal experience:**

I was baptized when I was 9 years old, right after the government allowed religions to re-start their activities, and that was in the year of 1980. At that time, all the liturgies were still in Latin, and all sorts of prayers were in classical style as well (There are two categories of Chinese literatures: classical and modern. The classical one is written with fewer characters but has more meaning than the modern one). As one of the requirements for being baptized, we had to be able to recite 8 prayers which included: Our Father, Hail Mary, Credo, Act of Contrition, etc. Also, we had to be able to answer the questions asked by the priest which were based on the Catechism (old edition).

Because the Cultural Revolution, there was very few Catholic books at that time. Our spiritual lives totally depended on the priest's sermons and as the

priests were so busy hearing confessions (believers were very sensitive with their consciences: felt great need to confess even if one had a light quarrel with one's children, and if they didn't have time to confess, they would not dare to receive the Eucharist), there was so limited time for them to give spiritual teachings. Under this situation, our spiritual life was really very poor and for those that, like me, had no church in the area, the situation was worse. Because my mom's family has a strong sense of religious life, we were all asked to recite the evening prayers. Because of the economic limitation at that time, we could go to Church only at special occasions: Easter, Christmas.

Because there was no church, not even a public prayer place in my hometown, also because there were a few Catholics there, we only had family activities for our daily spiritual life. For most of the time, my family only had evening prayers and offered these individually; therefore, we lacked spiritual nourishment and guidelines about God, Saints, God's functions and His position in our daily life. I only remembered God during my evening prayers and had no sense or awareness about God during the other times. And the teaching we had in school stressed that all religions were related with myths and fetishes, they were against science and truth; all believers were foolish and fools themselves. Therefore, I was ashamed to be known as a Catholic among my friends and classmates.

Growing up in this kind of situation, that God is the fairest judge in the world would be the best description for most of believers in my area. Also, we were influenced by the parents' control, for a large number of Catholics, God is like a very strict parent-either father or mother who is in control the family-who rewards believers when they have done good things and punishes those who have done bad, evil things. I remember clearly that I would pray very, very hard before every examination or whenever I was facing problems and would be punished by my parents, or whenever my parents had a fight. In those special situations, I would pray for the Lord to help me for a good grade, to avoid parents' punishment or for peace between my parents. For my

understanding, God would be a superman who was able to solve all kinds of problems rather than the Creator.

Before I entered the seminary, I had the chance to live at our church for a period of time, about 2 months. During this time, I had the opportunity to study more about God and the Catholic faith. But at that time, the pastor had very short sermon and only repeatedly recited the readings and gospel of the day's lectionary. And for the most of the time, quite a lot of those attending would say the rosary instead of listening to the preaching.

When I entered the seminary, we had a systematic learning of religion, especially from dogmatic and moral points of view, to know God and ourselves. But in the first two years in the seminary, the image of God would be still the fairest judge rather than a friend or a partner. And I had a little sense of the real meaning of the mystery of Incarnation and its meaning to every one of us. Although we would have a prayer before every group activity, that is, before or after the class, before or after meals, etc..., there was still not a habit to pray God spontaneously. With time in the seminary, I gained more knowledge about God and human beings, and was able to give a speech to parishioners and unbelievers. God then was present in my daily life more and more, then changed my relationship with Him and His image started to change in my mind.

The "redemption" of my faith would be the time during my overseas study. During the first one and a half years in the U.S.A., I had no contact with parents or teachers or classmates from the seminary in China. With the effects of cultural shock and difficulties faced in language, there was no one to turn to, to share with, and to complain but only God, only our Savior. During that period of time, I developed a close relationship with God, cried to Him, complained to Him, and even cursed Him. Starting from that time, I have felt God is within my daily life, His life, death and resurrection is totally, really related with my life. His death is part of my business and His

resurrection is all about me! Therefore, God's image has changed to be my Savior and my friend who cares for me and is with me always and all the time, even when no one else in the world can be depended on. My spiritual life then became a real part of my daily life, no longer a separated one from my study time, my entertainment time or resting time.

Because of the personal experience with God, it influenced me so much and so when I returned to homeland, I tried to share the experience with people around me and helped them to lead their faith to be alive, to be a part of their daily life.

Up to now, I have been keeping a habit that is when I left home to go somewhere, I would say Our Father, Hail Mary to devote myself to whatever will happen.

Although God's image in my heart has been changed from the fairest judge to my best, the closest friend, sometimes, I would still go back to the old cave - God is the fairest judge, the Almighty Protector, to urge Him to protect me, save me from terrible consequence which was caused by my guilt.

## **Part II                      Observation on other Catholics**

By talking with others and observing others during the Mass, I reach this conclusion for my area:

- God's image: a fairest judge holds a very high percentage among the believers.
- God is a "Good Fortune Grantor"—for a good, smooth job, a successful business, a higher income, a peaceful life, etc...
- God is a "Perfect Protector"—protect believers from all sorts of harms, dangers, temptations, tricks from competitors and enemies, etc....
- God is a "Magical Healer"—usually, all sorts of diseases would fly away from the believers but if, unfortunately, the believer is ill, God would

touch him/her with His almighty hand and the believer will be healed without any medical assistance. This is also a very common evangelizing approach used by the Catholics to the unbelievers around them who are suffering from illness.

- God is the “Strictest Judge—this image mostly kept in elder Catholics hearts (who were baptized and catechized before the Culture Revolution). In this category, God is very, very strict in the way He treats His believers, especially, regarding the sins they have committed. Therefore, observing all kinds of requirements is a must for them, even to the details such as washing clothes, mending clothes, washing the head on Sundays, fasting on every Wednesday and Friday, even after they reached age of 60 or 70, still observe the fasting laws, etc....

In a word, the spiritual life for the believers in my area would be still a separate part in their life, has not combined with their daily life yet. Most of them practice their religious lives only when they are in the Church for Sunday Mass or our Church’s traditional feasts and then they return to being to ordinary people as others around them. A few of them have a daily practice of religious life, e.g. say morning or evening prayers, saying the rosary, reading the Bible, etc....

### **Part III     Analysis**

In my opinion, the root of the entire “negative” phenomenon is caused the lacking of pastoral teaching.

So far as I know, in our area, only few parishes have had a systematic training for their parishioners about religious life, but the duration for most of them, because of the financial limitation and time for the participants, is very short. And the content of the training would be very general and less connected with the believers’ daily life.

For the rest of the parishes, the pastors are just busy with celebrating Mass, anointing the sick and hearing the confessions before Mass begins. In their sermons in the daily celebration of Mass, they would talk, based on the day's Gospel, about how our life of faith should be formed by God's will and should be improved day after day; let God be the director in the believer's life. But this is only a very short, improvised talk. After Mass, they rarely have any pastoral work to do; therefore, for the most of time, they would stay in their room, reading books or watching T.V.

While we have to say that most of pastors love their ministry and want to do more, but there are limited by time and other reasons; there are few believers who have time to stay in the church for further religious education by the pastor.

The second cause would be: even though the pastor has the intention to have a systematic training for the parishioners during the year, he is afraid of breaking the customs held by the faithful in the parish and lose his reputation among them. In some parishes, the pastors have never mentioned anything related, for example, to fasting, adultery, almsgiving, gambling, stealing and other sensitive topics, but just let the believers follow the "ancient practices". Although some parishioners' behavior is worse than other unbelievers in the area, the priests do not dare to speak out, even during the liturgy, which is the best occasion to educate them.

The third cause I think would be the limitation of finance and manpower in the parish. The shortage of finance and manpower is a common for most of parishes in China. For most of the parishes, the income only depends on the almsgivings and donations from the faithful; a few parishes would have their income by renting parish's building or land; therefore, they would be in better condition than other neighboring parishes, but the percentage is so small. At the same time, there is no parish activity run by parish volunteers, which based on two facts. First, the parish still carries the traditional practice, that is,

it is pastor's and nuns' duty to run all sorts of parish's activities as all these a sacred, noble ones which should only be done by people devoted to God alone. And this aspect is deeply rooted not only in parishioners' mind, but as well as priests' and nuns'. Secondly, most of the parishioners are busy with their livings and rarely have time to devote for parish activities.

The fourth cause would be the priests themselves lack of a rich relationship with God; their image and understanding about God is very limited. The current method of priesthood education very much lacks psychological and spiritual reforming: there is neither professional psychology education nor a psychologist to talk with. The seminarians are asked to do everything in group and there is little time and space for them to develop a personal relationship with God. Day after day, they are used to the pattern and do the prayer hour out of habit. After ordination, they hardly have chance to have a spiritual guide to lead them for a further spiritual development but just routinely say the hours of the Divine Office and celebrate Masses.

#### **Part IV      Some ideas to be discussed**

I believe that the root for improving the Catholic believers' spiritual life in China is to improve our priests' spiritual life; therefore,

First of all, we should improve the general education in our seminaries:

- The education should include a systematic teaching of psychology.
- The seminarians should have more private time for their spiritual growth with God.
- There should be a regular discussion (monthly) between the spiritual director and his spiritual sons.
- A psychologist is available for seminarians to talk about personal issues.

Secondly, the diocese should have a regular continuing education system/seminar or conference for our ordained priests to refresh and develop their spiritual life.

Thirdly, diocese should purchase (yearly or more frequently) some spiritual readings for the priests and ask them to give a book report or sharing on what they have read.

Surely, the above suggestions should also work with nuns in the diocese. At the same time, pastor should plan a systematic religious education for his parishioners, either a yearly plan carried out by Sunday sermons or a intensive training during winter time in rural areas where most of people have more free time.