

“A City Set on a Hill”: A Priest and His Church Whose Design Had Been Revised Seven Times

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Translated by Eveline Warode

“It feels like God lives in it!” Netizen Albion may or may not have faith, but these seven simple words are undoubtedly an extremely high valuation for a church.



The Liulin Catholic Church of Liulin Town, Liulin County, Lüliang City, built on the highest point of the town.
Photo: *Xinde*.

The Liulin Catholic Church is located in Liulin Town, Liulin County, Lüliang City, Shanxi Province. The consecration ceremony of the Liulin Catholic Church was held on October 20, 2021. More than 1,000 priests and parishioners attended the solemn High Mass.

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On October 20, 2021 the solemn High Mass for the consecration of the Liulin Catholic Church was celebrated. Photos: *Xinde*.

Everyone marvelled at the ingenuity and beauty of the church design. But who would have thought that the design drawings of the Liulin Church had to go through seven drafts because the parishioners found that they “did not resemble a church enough.” In this process of changing the design seven times until settling on one design, priest Ren Min 任敏, the priest of this church, proved his “tenacity” and “comprehension.”

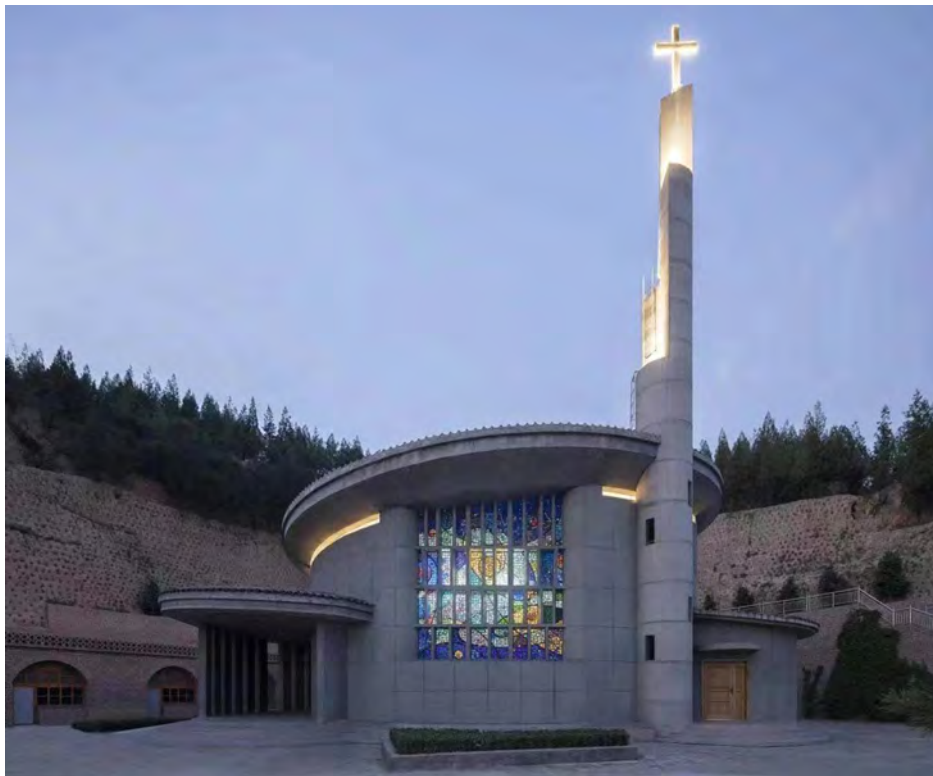
Liulin Town is located on a high loess slope, which is criss-crossed by gullies. Looking down, the town’s landscape of jumbled, brightly coloured steel panels and grey concrete roofs of varying heights stretches out. On road embankments and in courtyards there are

some trees with mostly gnarled branches. And the priest Ren Min built the church in such a high place in the town that he speaks of it as a “city set on a hill.”¹

Anyone who has seen the Liulin Catholic Church will definitely have the Japanese master architect Andō Tadao 安藤忠雄 in mind. The name of Andō Tadao may be unfamiliar to those outside the circle of architectural designers, but if one were to bring out pictures of his best-known trilogy of church designs – the church on the water, the church of the wind and the church of light, it would surely suddenly dawn on people, “originally it was him.”

The Liulin Catholic Church is obviously not a magnificent, large-scale church in the traditional sense, towering high through the clouds into the sky. It is made up all around of solid, hard, exposed concrete and forms a strong contrast to the loess and the cave dwellings in the background. The exterior of the church does not have much colour, apart from a group of stained glass windows. The visual effect of the cement grey of the building conveys an introspective and calm atmosphere. Stepping into it, instantly feels like entering a different world. Sunlight enters through several stained glass windows set into the wall and causes a feeling of sacredness and awe to involuntarily flow through the hearts of the people.

In terms of space, the Liulin Catholic Church is not complicated. Around the circular main hall, a series of round structures form functional spaces such as the chapel, the sacristy, the small reception room and the office. The soaring bell tower is also circular and it has become a landmark clearly visible from the bottom of the hill.



The Liulin Catholic Church with bell tower as a landmark. Photo: *Xinde*.

1 This quote is taken from the Gospel of Matthew 5:14: “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.” Translator’s note.



The round structures of Liulin Catholic Church seen from a different angle. Photo: *Xinde*.

Talking about his church of light, Andō Tadao once said that he did not need pictures on his walls because the sun, this painter, would paint for him. And the simplicity, plainness and restraint of the Liulin Church also means that it does not need more decoration and interpretation; it has its own recluse character.

When the lights go on, the elevated railway line that runs through the town forms a band of lights; like a silk fabric winding its way between the mountains and dancing elegantly through the night. On one side there is the church that reflects it. The church is wrapped in a halo of light like a pearl in the night sky, inlaid into the silk fabric. And every



The Liulin Catholic Church offers a different visual impression at night and during the day (see next page). Photos: *Xinde*.



morning when the mist rises over the mountains Liulin Church is very “friendly” again. In the rays of sunlight, it shows a touch of golden colour. From time to time roosters crow and dogs bark from near and far. Obviously, it is a dwelling located in the countryside, full of the smell of smoke and fire from the neighbourhood.

“Actually, I’m not just building a church for people of faith.” Priest Ren Min has more far-reaching considerations. He is full of enthusiasm for dialogue and integration of church and nature. He wants to create a world where people are equal and get along well with each other and walk around freely in nature. And he wants to let all the people who come to visit the church find peace and tranquillity, just as the netizen said: “It feels like God lives in it!”

Questions and Answers

(Questions: *Xinde*; Answers: priest Ren Min)

Question: What was the reaction to the construction of a modernist church in a town with such traditional and conservative ways of thinking and not much economic wealth?

Answer: There were basically few parishioners who did not object. The architect of the church worked out a total of seven drafts until the church was finally built. There are still many parishioners who think: “Does that look like a church at all?” A church in their mind’s eye should be a traditional Gothic or Romanesque church with a large cross in the most prominent place in the centre. That’s what a church is like. Some parishioners even felt that the use of stained glass windows inside the church led to dim lighting; but they are rather used to bright, clear windows, wide windows for large buildings.



Priest Ren in front of the stained glass windows. Photo: *Xinde*.

In fact, I think that it is precisely the ray of light in the darkness that gives people a feeling that is different from that in other buildings; become inwardly quiet, rejoice in God. And when I showed the first draft of the design to the parishioners, their first reaction was: “This doesn’t look like a church at all!” After that, the architect revised it, one draft after the other, each time trying harder to modify the original and bring it closer to the shape the parishioners had in mind for the church. And in the end, by the time of the seventh draft of the design, everyone still thought that it was difficult to see the shape of a church.

You see, this is a little insight into the whole process of building a church, and it can quite well represent the contradictions in the entire architectural design process.

Question: Why did you want to build such a modernist church? How did you eventually convince everyone to accept your design concept?

Answer: Personally, I like modernist churches very much, and modernist churches are not only clearly distinct from ordinary buildings, they make people calm down and reflect on nature and life, and they can leave future generations with an impression of the life and aesthetics of people today. So when I first decided to build a church, I went around collecting these types of churches everywhere and during this process I got to know the architect of our Liulin Church, the Catholic Li Yikao 李以靠, through a picture of a completed modernist church – the Qichun Catholic Church in Hubei.

When I approached Li Yikao to ask him to design the Liulin Catholic Church, he told me that he would only design churches in the modernist style, otherwise he would not accept the assignment. Secretly, I was a little glad that he was so much in line with my ideas. And on this basis it was finalized.

But like you said, the churchwarden and the parishioners grew up in this local environment with very traditional thinking and ideas, and in my opinion, just talking would not have had any effect. So I took them around to visit different places to see and hear what the people there share. Finally, they still only reluctantly accepted my idea. Nevertheless their thought was: “Even though I don’t accept it, what the priest is doing has never been wrong.”

Question: Changing the design several times and starting anew was really no small challenge for the architect.

Answer: Yes, that’s right. The architect, Li Yikao, is a very devout Catholic parishioner. He helped design Liulin Catholic Church without taking any remuneration. When the draft was rejected several times, I said, let me at least give you some money for your travel expenses, but he refused. I think it was in keeping with his design level and reputation. If the cost of his design had to be paid according to the market price, I would hardly have been able to pay it. His commitment is enormous and I am very moved. Those who know that he serves the Church gratuitously are also most touched by his magnanimity.

I once saw an interview with him in the media in which he related the following story:

He said, in the past he used to think that designing churches would make one famous. At that time, he was designing a garden for a priest in his hometown. The priest liked his design very much but there were many people who rejected it. The priest asked for his opinion. But he insisted on creating the garden. Later, the priest left that place for various reasons. This incident was something that since then always gave him a feeling of shame and remorse.

This time he designed our Liulin Church and he himself thought the first draft was particularly good but the parishioners were very much against it. The parishioners wished the church to appear in some traditional, concrete form and that could not be something that does not look like a church. In fact, these claims of everyone were also justified. After he had spoken about his design twice, he again met with the parishioners for face-to-face communication on site. After one round of adjustments he reported once again. This time no one expressed any objections and he thought that the deal was now closed.

Not much later, Li Yikao received another phone call from me. When he heard that the parishioners still did not agree, it was actually he who insisted that I continue to push



The architect Li Yikao during a site survey. Photo: Xinde.

the design further. One day, however, when he sat down and read the Bible, he thought of the priest in his hometown whom he had encouraged and with whom he had insisted on creating the garden. So, he decided to offer a few more drafts for everyone to choose from.

Later, the construction drawings which had emerged from two drafts were rejected again, and in the end a design came out with which everyone was relatively satisfied, but

which he personally did not like so much. Finally, the church was built. He said: “This case really taught me to make concessions and compromises in the design and to look at problems from the user’s point of view. When I make a draft now, I put myself in the position of the client and calculate the investment costs. Furthermore, I develop the design strictly according to the budget and I do not use the resources of other people to satisfy my own design aspirations.”

Li Yikao said that his conceptions of architectural design had now changed compared to the past. To be an architect is a profession with a sense of mission. “God let me become an architect out of His amazing grace. Designing a church is, so to speak, God’s training for me, so that I do not become impatient and careless, and gradually come into contact with and reflect on the most essential matters of architecture. When you design for a priest, the budget is always tight. You can only plan for very low-cost materials and should control the budget strictly. You cannot allow the church not to be built because you want to express something about yourself.”

Question: Why did you stand by your ideas despite so many people opposing them?

Answer: Bishop Meng Ningyou of Taiyuan Diocese once uttered a sentence that made a deep impression on me and that I have always kept in my heart. He said, no matter whether a church is big or small, whether its decoration is opulent and magnificent or not, the church has to be a place that has its own uniqueness and shines before people’s eyes. Building such a church also means leaving a “photo” to the future: Look, this is the architecture of our time!

To be more precise, I am not only building a place for parishioners to participate in Mass and Church activities. Rather, I want to integrate the church set on a hill with the environment and the lives of all the people living in the small town down the hill. When they experience inner unrest, when they want to look for a quiet place, when they as family want to enjoy recreational and leisure activities, in all these cases, they can always come to church to escape the annoyances of the secular world. From above, they can even look down on the small town where they themselves live year in, year out. They can also sit on benches in front of the church watching the children running around in the great outdoors.

Question: This church cost a total of more than 3.15 million RMB, not including volunteers and materials that were donated. Surely that wasn’t so easy for you and the local Church. Could you please tell us something about your experience of the construction phase of the church?

Answer: In 2016, the construction of the church began with the laying of the cornerstone, and it was fully completed only in May of this year (2021). Over this period of about five years, construction was carried out and stopped many times. I would like to thank the parishioners for their donations and their support. Also, I wish to thank the architect Li Yikao for his strong support. Not to mention the dedication of the parishioners; not only did Li Yikao not take any payment for his design, but he also continually brought in a great many experts helping for example with sound planning, lighting, etc. And when

these people saw that the design was for a church, they all helped out free of charge. For example, the rose window, valued at over 200,000 RMB, was also donated by a friend of Li Yikao.

Every time after a break in the construction, before the construction work resumed again, I was worried that the funds for the construction of the church would not be sufficient and there would be no materials available. But just before work resumed, miraculously, someone would come along and ask: “Father, is there any money left? If there is nothing left, I can donate something.” “Father, do you need anyone else? If there is no one else, I can take it over.” After the church was erected, my greatest feeling was: “Although we are not rich, we have never lacked anything.” It is all the Lord’s grace. This coincides with the thematic design of “five loaves and two fish” in the interior of the church. Everything is so perfect. The construction of this church has been done with the enormous efforts and the sweat of very many people! Thanks be to God! Many thanks to all the people who worked so hard!

Question: Today everyone talks about Sinicization. But you did not choose to construct the church in the style of a traditional Chinese temple hall. Does this contradict the Sinicization we advocate?

Answer: The definition of modernism in the internet is: From the words and actual works of Walter Adolf Georg Gropius (1883–1969), Le Corbusier (1887–1965), and other architects it can be seen that the “modernist architecture” they promote is emphasizing the need that the architecture keep up with the times, and that modern architecture should adapt to the industrial society; “modernist architecture” stresses the need that the archi-



The interior of the church. Photo: Xinde.

itects investigate and solve practical functions and economical questions regarding the buildings; it advocates the active use of new materials and new structures, and applies the specifics of new materials and new structures to the architectural design; it favours a resolute shifting away from restrictions of outdated architectural styles and gives free rein to create new architectural ways of expression; it advocates the development of new architectural aesthetics and the creation of a new architectural style.

As far as our church is concerned, since the Second Vatican Council “inculturation” is favoured. But what does inculturation mean? Does that mean the outer appearance is designed like the Imperial Palace or the Temple of Heaven and in the inside, icons of traditional Chinese painting are hanging? I do not think so. Sinicization or inculturation should be internalized, should take root in the hearts of the Chinese and should influence



A painter at work on the fresco of the church. Photo: *Xinde*.

the mode of their thought and behaviour subtly. If you look closely, you can see the roof tiles of the church. Is that not an “Easter egg”?

In the case of the church I built, an impression is given of the local people and the local life in the area, as well as of today’s religious life and of the aesthetic habits and, furthermore, this is all naturally integrated into one unity. Surely that is a different kind of Sini-cization.



View of the Liulin Church from above. Photo: *Xinde*.

Question: We have found that the Liulin Church has now become an internet sensation. Many young people post pictures of the Liulin Church because they like it and want to have been there themselves. Can you tell us something about your plans for the future of the church?

Answer: Thank you all very much for the “likes.” Indeed, there are a lot of young people from very different places who come to the church in person. Moreover, you have not yet addressed the fact that a lot of priests also come to visit with their parishioners. One priest said: “Father, if only you had built this church a little earlier, then I could have built a church following your example.” This is a great encouragement for me and for anyone who has worked hard for the church.

Actually, there are a lot of young people who are attracted to come here now. Young people are a symbol for vitality, development and future. Good things are naturally attractive in themselves. For the future I can only say: keep your eyes open and wait.