

## Present Situation and Future Development of Sisters' Congregations in China

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### Introduction

The Catholic Church in China has been developing a lot since China's economic and social reforms began in 1978. The Catholic Church makes many contributions to society and has a good reputation. These positive results are inseparable from the contributions of the Sisters, the religious women dedicated to service everywhere in China. Women religious participate in a wide variety of service activities, including giving comfort and support after earthquakes, helping to spread information to prevent HIV/AIDS, offering inexpensive medical treatment, visiting the sick, poor and elderly. Religious women live and proclaim the Gospel to society especially in the social service area. It is largely the Sisters' loving service which makes the Church relevant to society, embodying the image of Christ for a generation of young non-believers, counteracting atheistic propaganda. Through their loving service, they make God's love visible.

There are an estimated 5.350 religious women in about 160 congregations in China today (Holy Spirit Study Centre 2010).<sup>1</sup> Statistics show that there are about 100 dioceses in mainland China. This means that, on average, in every diocese there are one or more Sisters' congregations. These figures indicate the importance that religious Sisters have for the Church in China. Thus the development of the Sisters and of their commitment to their vocation will definitely have an effect on the overall development of the Church in China.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 See the "Statistics of the Catholic Church in China" for the year 2010 in: Sergio Ticozzi PIME, "China Church and News Update," [www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/tripod\\_en/en\\_tripod\\_160\\_10.html](http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/tripod_en/en_tripod_160_10.html).
- 2 Cf. Victoria Lau FFM, "Reflections on the Formation of Religious Sisters in Today's China," [www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/tripod\\_en/en\\_tripod\\_159\\_05.html](http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/tripod_en/en_tripod_159_05.html).

The degree to which Sisters can continue their positive contributions to the Church and to society in general depends on how much energy and what abilities the religious women have. In order to support the development of the Church, it is imperative to promote, educate and empower the religious women, so that they may have the ability and resources to continue their service and input for Church and society.

## I. The Historical Background

### A. Historical Background of Chinese Women

In Chinese history, over thousands of years, a woman had no self-image apart from her relationship to the males in her life and family. The “three obediences,” “four virtues” and “lotus feet” or “foot binding” are well known. In Confucianism there was a set of basic moral principles specifically for women. A woman was bound to “three obediences”: that is to be subject to her father prior to marriage, to her husband after marriage and finally to her son if she became a widow. The four feminine virtues were morality, proper speech, modest appearance and diligent work. The foot binding was the custom of applying painfully tight binding to the feet of young girls to prevent further growth. The physical and mental abuse through the three obediences, four virtues and foot binding, which characterized traditional Chinese gender relations for centuries, have left distinct scars on the history of China.

In 1989, the All-China Women's Federation, the largest women's organization in China, advocated the women's “four-selfs.” Those being self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance and self-strengthening – values which all Christian women well appreciate. Women have to better themselves in order to make greater contributions to humankind.

However, the Catholic Church as a whole has not been influenced by this movement. The feudal belief in men's superiority over women, particularly in China, is so deeply rooted in the minds of people in the Church that it is very hard to overcome. The major cause of this is the way in which the Chinese Church has developed. After the Chinese Rites controversy of the 17th / 18th century, the Catholic Church in China was to some extent cut off from Chinese culture and society, so that the Chinese Catholic Church has not been much influenced by progressive social changes.

### B. Historical Background of Chinese Religious Women and Sisters' Congregations

For more than 200 years, religious Sisters were key factors in the revitalization and growth of the Catholic Church in China. After the Chinese Rites Controversy, almost all foreign missionaries were expelled from China. At that time, China did not have a local clergy; so women, especially the so-called consecrated virgins, took on significant functions to build up the faith of believers and to continue the Christian mission. For more than 200 years, they played an innovative role in adapting Catholicism to Chinese culture.

In 1926, for the first time in history, Pope Pius XI ordained six native Chinese as bishops. By 1929 the majority of indigenous Chinese women's religious congregations had been es-

tablished for the Christian mission. The effects of World War II coupled with revolutionary movements destroyed all religious institutions. After more than 30 years of persecution, the pre-War foundations of the Sisters' congregations were completely obliterated.

The Chinese Sisters and consecrated virgins prior to 1948 provided valuable service to the Church that assured their financial self-sufficiency. They were esteemed – or at least tolerated – by the hierarchy and the laity, and enjoyed a lifestyle and social status that many young Chinese women found attractive.

After Mao Zedong came to power in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party began a sustained attempt to control and ultimately eradicate religion. All the Sisters' convents were closed, their educational, medical and social institutions were nationalized, and their property and income confiscated. The Chinese nuns were ordered back to their villages. A remnant of these women stayed celibate and continued to live secretly as Sisters. Others married and worked as factory workers, nurses, doctors, teachers, clerks and farmers.

After the reforms of 1978, religious orders were not allowed to work autonomously in China. Administratively, the Religious Affairs Bureau held each bishop responsible for the religious staff in his diocese. This put the Sisters in a rather passive position since they were legally unable to initiate any new forms of Church service by themselves. Between 1980 and 2010 many congregations were started or reestablished. Most congregations were started by bishops for pastoral work, with only a few congregations started by the Sisters themselves. The Sisters had to perform the tasks desired by the bishops.

## II. The Present Situation of the Chinese Sisters

### A. Number of Sisters, Congregations, Apostolates and Current Trends

According to surveys by the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, in 2010, there were about 160 congregations with 5,350 Sisters in China. 70% of the Sisters are members of about half of the congregations. They are members of the public Church, but are not necessarily members of the Chinese Patriotic Association. Another 30% of Chinese Sisters who are members of the other half of the congregations are members of the underground Church.<sup>3</sup> My personal research suggests that additionally there are also some 1,300 women working as consecrated virgins in parishes and serving the elderly in south-eastern China.

Most congregations have small clinics. The majority of the Sisters work in parishes. Some Sisters work in kindergartens and nursing homes sponsored by their congregations. Some Sisters work with NGOs and charitable institutes, such as orphanages and special education centers for children with special needs. A few Sisters work with lepers and HIV/AIDS patients. While leprosy is decreasing, the number of people affected by HIV/AIDS is increasing in many regions.

**Parishes and clinics:** Over half of the Sisters work in parishes or training centers. Sisters teach Sunday school, lead prayers, Bible study groups, yearly retreats and workshops, and

<sup>3</sup> See the “Statistics of the Catholic Church in China” for the year 2010 in: Sergio Ticozzi PIME, “China Church and News Update,” [www.hsstudyc.org/hk/en/tripod\\_en/en\\_tripod\\_160\\_10.html](http://www.hsstudyc.org/hk/en/tripod_en/en_tripod_160_10.html).

manage the affairs of the parish. The majority of the Sisters receive no or extremely low salaries for their work in the parishes. Due to urbanization and migration, parish work has become more and more difficult. Some Sisters try to set up small groups of migrant workers whom they visit regularly, but it is not easy to help them. Migrant workers have many family problems and are facing new challenges due to the changes in society. Clinics are established as both a small source of income for the Sisters, as well as a method to connect with the local people. Through work in health clinics, Sisters easily build up good relationships with the local people and help them grow spiritually.

**Nursing homes:** There are over 100 Catholic nursing homes or homes for the elderly in China. Sisters run or manage around 60 of them. The Sisters' work in nursing homes and kindergartens is also a way to spread the Good News among the people.

**Charitable work:** There are more than 20 orphanages run by Sisters, consecrated virgins and Catholic laity; 15 centers meet the special needs of disabled children. Among these orphanages, only two have a legal status in their provinces. These two are the Liming Family in Hebei and another orphanage in Xinjiang in Shanxi Province. During the last two years, the government has begun to recognize the charitable work done by NGO orphanages. We believe that the Liming Family might be the first Catholic orphanage that the government has cooperated with – a cooperation in which the government is to provide financial support and the Sisters would provide the services.

There are also a few retreat centers run by Sisters, but some retreat centers do not have their own spiritual directors. Therefore, the houses are used for other activities and meetings.

## B. Networking Helps the Sisters in Their Apostolates

There are no resources on which the Sisters can rely on a long-term basis. Small projects usually find support from foundations, such as Caritas Hong Kong, Verbiest Foundation in Taiwan or other social foundations inside China. Sometimes, through friends, it is possible to find some resources from outside of China. Usually the support is for a period of two or three years and the Sisters are encouraged to take steps to find additional funding.

An example of this process is the Liming Family, an orphanage for disabled children run by my congregation, which was founded in 1988. In 1997 we got a grant from Caritas Hong Kong for family foster care for 10 children for one year, renewable for a second year. In that way we found support for a couple of years. This project encouraged us to find resources inside China, so I wrote letters to friends asking them to help by supporting one child in family foster care. Gradually we found families which could help a child for perhaps six months or one year. Though this was only a short-term solution, it helped us a lot. For the leader of a congregation, one of the big responsibilities is to find financial support for the professional development of the Sisters and to cover the costs of services for the clients, because they are too poor to pay their fees.

The Sisters' service institutions for disabled children with cerebral palsy have set up a network that has contact with 50 organizations inside of China. From 2011 to 2013 they

gained the support of Yi Jijin, One Foundation. This is a domestic public welfare foundation in China. This project came to a conclusion this year (2014), so the Sisters are looking for other domestic resources now. Just this year the Chinese government has begun to pay attention to the need for funding social work and I hope the future will be better.

To summarize, for domestic education and also spiritual help, congregations get help from inside the Church but also maybe outside of China. In order to support their charitable work, the Sisters have recently been trying to get help from resources inside of China, but outside of the Church, because society has become aware of the work that needs to be done. Usually there is no guarantee from a support network for long-term funding, since the conditions are constantly changing.

### C. The Relationship with the Church Leaders and the Government

**Relationship with the Church leaders:** Since the bishops' primary concerns are the needs of diocesan evangelization, many simply consider the Sisters as female extensions of the diocesan working team and show little interest in whether the women have been adequately trained in spirituality and values of religious life. The authorities of the dioceses have taught the Sisters that they are part of the structure of the diocese and that they are accountable to the bishops and priests rather than to their own religious superiors. Therefore, some of the Sisters have the misconception that they belong to their diocese, as do the priests. Thus the leaders of congregations are confronted with multiple external and internal difficulties.

Circumstances differ widely in different places. Sisters in independent congregations – that is, congregations which to some degree are administratively independent from the diocese – have been struggling for their rights to autonomy. Their Sisters are aware of the need to struggle to maintain their rights, but the bishop or priests sometimes are hostile to these groups. In contrast, many congregations are completely under the control of the dioceses, relying on the diocese for all the needs of daily life, including meals and clothing; these Sisters do not even have a convent or a house as their home for gathering. Most of these dependent congregations have friendly relations with the priests and bishops. However, for a few dependent congregations the situation is horrific. The leaders of these congregations very often receive threats. For example, the dioceses threaten to cut off the Sisters' money for food if they do not agree with the new job or new order from the priests.

Most priests show respect to Sisters who work as partners with them. However, some priests do not see Sisters as “their sister,” but as low-status laborers. When these priests need the Sisters, they ask for help; after the Sisters have done the job, the priests feel that the Sisters have merely done what they ought to do. Instead of seeing Sisters as helpers, they look down on the Sisters and see them as a burden.

The reason for this kind of treatment is a misunderstanding regarding the Sisters' identity and dignity. The Sisters were taught that they belong to their diocese, so they should listen and be obedient to it. Sisters have also no power with respect to the sacraments and sometimes priests threaten to withhold them if the Sisters do not comply with their orders. The long tradition of Chinese women staying “behind the screen” contributes to current mind-sets. Therefore, many Sisters do not have a sense of self-identity, and clergy

treat them without dignity. The consequence of this misunderstanding is mistreatment. In some dioceses, the bishops and priests see the Sisters as cheap laborers, cleaners or maidservants inside their church. Those bishops and priests think that Sisters do not need education and that it is enough if the Sisters listen to them. These ideas still exist in some dioceses even now, especially in the underground ones. Those Sisters see the bishops and priests as almost equal to GOD and they really believe that they need no education. Based on this situation, many congregations do not have their own formator or spiritual director, because these Sisters do not believe they have a Sister who is capable to be a formator or spiritual director.

Sister Clara Liu has been the director of a training center for ten years. During these 10 years, her training center has accepted some 300 Sisters. In June 2014, she told me that even now some diocesan clergy continue to believe that Sisters do not need education. She said that she has been trying hard to help the Sisters to understand their dignity and identity in the eyes of God. Many Sisters do not have the opportunity to study or discern about their vocation, nor do they have an example to follow. Good virtue for them is to gain the appreciation of the Church authorities since they were taught that their obedience to the clergy is the highest virtue. Those Sisters do not have a sense of self-esteem. Some Sisters come into the congregation with a holy longing, then they become traumatized and leave. When they have left their congregation, they sometimes even leave the Catholic faith.

Sisters have no opportunities to hold positions of leadership in their diocese and no opportunities to speak at diocesan meetings although the Sisters are the main force in the missionary work and the clergy is happy to say that the Sisters are members of the diocese. Can you imagine an association in which more than half of the members are voiceless? Our Church is like that. Many Sisters are asked to do everything that is required by the clergy in their dioceses. The Sisters are like repair technicians; they go to any place where workers are needed.

Sisters also often work without income, leading lives without any financial security. Many congregations' Sisters still have no income for their services in parishes. It is not only that they have no income but also that the diocese takes from the Sisters' congregations what little they have, if the diocese needs it. For instance, in one diocese the old bishop had consideration like a father for the Sisters' problem of receiving no income for their service. The bishop decided to take precautions for his Sisters and deposited some money in each Sister's account after her profession. Thus the Sisters could have a little money to face emergencies. A new bishop appeared after the old bishop had died. The new bishop decided to take away all the deposits from the Sisters because the diocese needed money. The Sisters' superior general did not agree with the new bishop's decision and refused him. A couple of months later, the new bishop declared that he himself was the Sisters' Father Superior now, and he replaced that Sister superior general. Since the new bishop took office, many Sisters have left that congregation because they felt threatened. Their numbers decreased and no new members have joined that congregation since that event.

**Relationship with the government:** Most congregations are not registered with the government's Religious Affairs Bureaus and there do not seem to be any benefits from regis-

tering. In the eyes of the government, they have no independent legal status, because all congregations are considered to be part of their diocese. As they are not registered with the government, most congregations are technically underground. Their Sisters, however, feel that they function as a legal congregation since they are legal citizens. When I was the first leader of the Association of Superiors General of Women Religious in Hebei in 1999, I sought to gain legal status for all the congregations in Hebei Province, but the government refused.

It is very important that Sisters know how to deal with the government and with other extra-Church relationships. Sisters should take advantage of the fact that they provide valued social services. The government treats Sisters very differently, depending on the region and the circumstances of the congregations and the dioceses. Sisters receive better treatment in the North and in regions with a higher percentage of Catholics. If the relationship is bad between the clergy and the government, then the government takes more control over the Sisters. Under normal circumstances the government does not pay much attention to the Sisters.

#### D. The Vocational Education and Ongoing Formation

Women are more than half of the Church; when we lift up the women, we lift up the whole Church. The whole issue of vocation and education of Sisters revolves around the question of how to empower Sisters and restore their human dignity through theological and spiritual education.

Each congregation is dependent on its ability and resources to form new members and young Sisters. Some congregations have formation systems for younger Sisters, but some congregations, especially those which are totally dependent on the diocese, often in the underground, and especially those with less than 25 members usually do not have a complete formation or no formation program at all. Some formal congregations work very hard to gain opportunities to meet the spiritual needs, working not only for their own members' growth, but also to help other congregations. Some on-going training programs are taking place in some congregations. However, many needs cannot be met since the resources are very limited. Additionally, many Sisters lack finances to support their training.

Recently some combined training classes for novices under the auspices of the Association of Superiors General of Women Religious in Hebei have begun. The reason for this is that vocations are decreasing and many congregations have no new members or only a few.

Currently there are four seminaries and one training center accepting Sisters for theological studies. These are the seminaries of Xi'an, Shenyang, Shijiazhuang and the National Seminary in Beijing, plus the Taiyuan Sisters' Training Center. One out of six Catholic Sisters have had one to two years of basic level education in the above organizations. One Sister in ten has had the one month of preparation for the final vows in Beijing through 2009–2014 (see below). The above are some publicly organized training courses.

The Sisters of many congregations are working in the field of the education and spiritual development of Sisters. Bishop Li Du'an, Sr. Clara Liu Qiaomei and Mr. Liu Bainian

have greatly contributed to this project. Under Bishop Li Du'an, the seminary in Xi'an started training classes for Sisters in 1995. Approximately 800 Sisters have received basic education in Xi'an in the past 19 years. The course was first designed as a one-year program from 1995 to 2002; in 2003 it grew into a two-year program, and this year, 2014, it will become a three-year project. Sr. Clara Liu Qiaomei has set up a training program in Taiyuan since 2004. Some 300 Sisters have received an education of two years there. There are 60 Sisters studying at the training center now. In the two institutes Xi'an seminary and Taiyuan, the programs are designed according to a basic curriculum, since most members come from regions with few Catholics or congregations with a low number of sisters. In 2005, Shenyang Seminary began to accept Sisters as students. It usually only accepts around 10 Sisters at a time. This year the program has 13 Sisters in Shenyang. The National Seminary in Beijing has accepted Sisters to study for a Master's degree since 2011. In the same year 2011, the seminary of the province with the highest percentage of Catholics, the Shijiazhuang Seminary, began to accept Sisters to study there. The Sisters are in a one- to two-year program. Every year from 1992 to 2010, Mr. Liu Bainian organized groups of 20 Sisters (from different congregations around the country) to go to Hong Kong for a one-month training at the Catholic Institute for Religion and Society. From 1995 he began organizing one-month training programs each year for groups of around 20 leaders of congregations at the National Seminary in Beijing. In the fall of 2004, he organized a spiritual direction training group and invited three supervisors from outside of the country as teachers. The spiritual direction training course consisted of two months of classes per year over a period of 6 years. Now there are 14 Sisters who have become spiritual directors and they have been giving retreats to many congregations. I am a member of that group. Since 2009, there has been a training program twice a month for Sisters throughout the entire country preparing to take perpetual vows, regardless of whether they are joining communities that are underground or public. All Sisters preparing to take final vows are welcomed. The spiritual direction group is offering participants an eight-day one-to-one retreat. Each year, around 100 Sisters receive that training.

In many places, the Sisters' educational qualifications are insufficient, because they never received an education along with their vocation and mission. In addition, many Sisters did not have a good educational foundation when they entered their communities. It is well-known that Chinese society has undergone very rapid changes during the past 30 years. As a result of these changes, even at the parish level, every job requires some professional knowledge and training. However, most Sisters do not have the education and training to support their missions, because in the early years too many demands were placed on the Sisters, who were kept constantly busy responding to the needs around them. Another reason for many Sisters lacking professional training is that in many congregations the bishop interferes too much and the leaders change very often, so no one has defined a sustained, prophetic vision, or if there is such a vision, communities lack resources to pursue that vision. Among all the reasons for Sisters lacking the needed educational background, the greatest one, as mentioned above, is the attitude of some bishops and priests. Some clergy worry that if the Sisters get a good education, they might leave their congregations, but in China that is not true. For example, in the fall of 1994, when I sent three Sisters to



the medical college, one priest who helped us spiritually was very angry with me. He said that if the Sisters whom I sent did not come back or lost their vocations, I would have to take the responsibility for their (lost) vocations. He said it was too dangerous to send Sisters out into society. Maybe he was right since the identity of Chinese women outside the Church has been improving very much and they now have equal opportunities with men in education and economics. However, I have never heard that the Sisters left the congregation because of education.

**Vocations decreasing:** The vocations in China peaked between 1985 and 2000. Now vocations are decreasing. In the last five years, one in three congregations had no new members. In addition, some Sisters who have taken their final vows have left their congregations. Some congregations have suddenly disbanded in recent years; sometimes several Sisters left their congregations in a group.

Reasons for the decrease in Sisters' vocations include the one-child family policy and the fast development of society which gives young people many lifestyle choices. Other reasons are connected with 1) the Sisters' sense of powerlessness and frustration in their mission; 2) Sisters have not clearly articulated their testimonies; and 3) difficult interpersonal relationships within some congregations fueled by personal and emotional problems. However, the situation inside the Church may be more important than external reasons. Many feel that the power gap between nun and priest is the main reason for fewer women wanting to become Sisters.

It is impossible to measure the power gap between Sisters and priests, but it is large. 20 years ago, many parents wanted their daughters to become a Sister, and a Sister wanted her siblings or nieces to become a Sister, but this is no longer the case.

Most Sisters have high spiritual and social awareness and are eager to give better testimonies and attract young women to join their life. However, many lay people see the difficult situation of the Sisters and they do not want their daughters to be a Sister, although Sisters have a better reputation than priests among Catholics, with the government and throughout society.

### E. Congregations' Major Worries, the Signs of a Midlife Crisis and the Provisions for Old Age

The major concern of Sisters' congregations are their members' continuing education, the opportunity for members to explore their charisms, concerns over members' midlife crises and securing members' health care and retirement support. However, most Sisters are concerned about how to be a good witness for their vocation, not about their living conditions. The majority of the Sisters have a health insurance that is connected with the New Rural Cooperation Medical System (NRCMS), but many Sisters' parents or siblings help to pay for the NRCMS. The Sisters aged over 40 just have the average health examination once every two or three years. There are only a few Sisters who obtain the Minimum Living Standard Assistance in big cities from the government.

**The signs of midlife crisis:** Because of the lack of foundational education, continuing education and formation are extremely significant now. The signs of Sisters developing midlife crises are not very obvious at present, but I believe we will see them soon. The average age of most Chinese Sisters is between 38 and 45, since many congregations are still young. Many elderly Sisters, the first to enter their communities, have a deep faith and are devoted to their vocation. But the high expectations regarding women, on the part of traditional Chinese culture as well as on the part of the Church, have put a kind of pressure on the Sisters which has proved to be destructive. Sisters sought to cultivate the virtues of self-sacrifice, selfless devotion and dedication, but under the guidance of these great values, many Sisters worked tirelessly only to exhaust themselves. The midlife crisis of the Sisters of some congregations comes from the lack of a sense of security on account of the situation around them. Each congregation may have a few Sisters at the stage of midlife crisis, but such crises are very hard to deal with, since the congregations are without the space and resources that would allow the Sisters to restore their vitality.

The majority of the congregations do not have old-age insurances for their Sisters. In some congregations, only a minority of elderly Sisters have it. The majority of the Sisters living in cities (or those who are registered in cities) usually have old-age insurances. Many data show that the majority of the congregations do not have the financial ability to support their Sisters in old age. Resources for this simply do not exist.

The financial situation of Catholic Sisters does not look bright. In many congregations it is not merely discouraging, but actually terrible, because the Sisters work in parishes or diocesan institutions without salary or for extremely low salaries. In addition, the majority of the congregations do not have property although their diocese might have much. This situation puts the Sisters' congregations permanently in a passive position – they need to be helped. In many congregations, since all their needs for daily life (except for salaries) are provided for by the diocese and donations of the laity, the Sisters' very livelihood is very often threatened.

**Spiritual Needs:** Some congregations realized at an early stage that their members need on-going spiritual formation. The relatively formal congregations have people in charge of spiritual formation and spiritual directors. They may also try to help other congregations. Some international congregations have helped with the spiritual needs of Sisters in recent years, but some congregations have no way to meet their Sisters' spiritual needs. If the congregations do not have a convent and rely on the diocese for housing, the sense of community among the Sisters is very low, and it is not easy for their spiritual needs to be met. In some congregations, as in our congregation, we began to give retreats more than 10 years ago in our convent. Our retreat center, which is open to Sisters from other congregations, has been running for over 3 years, and the schedule is always full. We try as hard as we can to provide good food and help. Since Sisters do not have any income or their income is very low, our charge is only for the basic operational expenses, so there is almost no surplus.

## F. The Connections between Congregations

The connections between congregations in the open Church and those in the underground depends on the attitude of the underground part. If the underground congregations are willing to connect with other congregations, they would get help and support. However, very often the underground congregations do not accept such a connection and do not want to connect with or have any relationship with others. An example is one underground congregation in northern China. When other congregations have some training workshops, they invite this congregation's Sisters to participate but the bishop and their Sister superior always refuse the invitations. Some congregations willingly accept other congregations' help, then it is easier for them to get their spiritual needs met.

## G. Where the Sisters Need Help

Sisters need help with continuing education and formation and with programs to restore wholeness and vitality. First, continuing education and formation can empower Sisters in the spiritual structures, to build up the spiritual life of their congregation and be independent administratively. For example, the sisters urgently need spiritual renewal programs. As another example, if support is given to congregations who have greater abilities and resources to act, those sisters' congregations will be put in a position to help other congregations, since we have similar experiences and know where the real problems lie. Secondly, it is important to support some projects which help the sisters to integrate life and restore life vitality. For instance, through formation and education some inspiration is given that helps the sisters to explore their charisms. Hence, sisters from diverse congregations can support one another and build up spiritual networks to spread the gospel throughout China and beyond.

## III. The Perspectives for Future Development

Chinese Sisters are in search of the Lord, searching for the way of salvation. We say Chinese Sisters lack nurturing, knowledge, experience, good organization and skills. I feel these so-called lacks are not so important in the end. What is important is that the Holy Spirit has called us and is still calling us to continue in our vocation. If we lacked reliance on the Holy Spirit and our Lord, there would be a deficiency, a true lack. The so-called lacks in the religious Sisters of China are relative compared to other big international congregations. Chinese Sisters truly do lack something to some extent; Chinese Sisters have lacked many things. However, until we find the causes of these lacks, we cannot correct them.

Many diocesan leaders and priests do not think that Sisters have to be formed before being sent out to do ministry work. Bishops and priests need to let go and empower their Sisters. The Sisters need to be encouraged to find spiritual resources to explore their charisms. Men and women in the Church are like the two legs of one person; when one leg is longer than the other, the person cannot walk in balance. Sisters need education and formation before they go on mission. Therefore, building the Sisters' capacity is essential

and education is a key issue in enhancing women's participation in the Church. Many Sisters have the prophetic vision and spiritual discernment for the people of God and are very sensitive to the call of God. They have the gift and the ability to read the signs of the time. They need a place to have a voice in order to share what they see, feel and hope for. "The main point is: as women, we should aim at being recognized by the Church as having equal dignity and equal opportunities," as Maria Voce, the leader of the Focolare, said recently.

Within congregations, Sisters need to be built up and re-educated with respect to personality integration, spiritual growth and professional development. So the first steps of reconstruction or development are inner spiritual growth and integration of religious vocations. The second step is to explore the charism of both individuals and the community and, according to the charism, to reshape the vocations of the Sisters. We must admit our limitations and then focus on the charism of service, to respond to God's call. The third step in rebuilding communities is to be attentive in dialogue with the world. Let me explain it.

First, let's consider inner spiritual growth and incorporation of religious vocations that are the foundation of religious life. Inner spiritual growth requires being deeply rooted in Christ, in whom we believe. It is significant that it is through Jesus Christ and in Him that we are able to integrate our religious life to do God's will. If one's life is in Jesus Christ, one can have the ability to read the clouds, the signs of the time. "But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard?" (Romans 10:14)

Second, we consider exploring the community's charism and, according to the charism, to reshape the vocations of the Sisters. In faith, communities follow their charism and then select the pastoral service area and, according to the charism, cultivate professional abilities. The diocese where the Sisters live needs to respect the Sisters' charism if the diocese expects its Sisters to render better services. The diocese should let the Sisters grow; and Sisters should strive for their charism and improve their professional service, thus gradually becoming independent. The Holy Spirit is in the world and calls us through signs. Let us look for and find out what the call is. I believe that the Sisters have the grace to discover God's call for their mission in the world.

The third step in building and rebuilding communities is to be attentive in dialogue with the world and, through what we do, to let people know what we believe. Let the world know us and our faith through our dialogue and communication with the world. Chinese society is not only a big market for material goods, it is also a big market for Jesus' Gospel. We cannot stay only inside the Church; as Pope Francis says, we should go out to declare the Good News. In order to show what we believe and what we are doing, we must dialogue with society and government. Sometimes it is important and necessary to take the risk of entering into the secular community.

**The progress in China, time for dialogue:** Chinese society is in an era of transformation and needs spiritual values. Religious people can help, although the government does not want us to. Many people's hearts are fallow land waiting for the good seeds of the Gospel

and Sisters should sow these seeds. Sisters should not simply serve and try to maintain the current Catholic community. Now is the time to spread the Gospel.

Many factors show that providing social services to help the little ones is a good method to spread the Gospel. Now this is happening in China. Sometimes keeping silent with the mouth but talking with the hands is necessary. Looking at the situation in China from the perspective of the Catholic religious, we need wisdom and courage to be in touch with society, to demonstrate our attitude, values and longing. We need dialogue with society and the officials.

In China, as a result of the World War, domestic wars and movements, especially the Cultural Revolution, Christians were seen as outside the mainstream and alienated from society. Christians were made out to be foes of society. This has had a deep impact on the thoughts and feelings of Christians, especially on middle-aged and elderly people. For this reason, dialogue is a big challenge for Christians, especially for Catholic leaders. We need to release the mind and free it from the impact of the past and focus on the present and the changed society, to dialogue with our culture, society, other religions and neighbors. Particularly in our relations with government officials, we need to remove the prejudices and obstacles and create a harmonious and friendly environment.

Today's world is a dialogical world. We see dialogue between cultures, religions, nations and countries everywhere. Pope Francis said: "If we go in search of other people, cultures, ways of thinking, other religions, we come out of ourselves and begin that beautiful adventure that is called 'dialogue.'" The Pope continued: "Dialogue is very important for one's maturity, because in relation with other people, other cultures, also in healthy relations with other religions, one grows, matures." The Holy Father emphasized as well that peace cannot be achieved without dialogue.

From the traditional concept, the Christian does not boast when doing good deeds, as Jesus says, "When you give alms, do not let the left hand know what your right is doing" (Mt 6:3). However, based on some Chinese conditions, I think that the Church needs to explain what we do for the people and to petition the government for cooperation in the service for the poor. "Through our deeds to show our faith," St. James says. Let the officials have a chance to rediscover the Catholic Church today. Let them see that Catholic leaders are thinking about how to help the people to obtain a better way of living. Because this commitment to social justice is at the heart of who I am and what I believe, it must be shared more effectively with people in society. "If you want peace, work for justice" (Pope Paul VI).

The central government has emphasized: "Seize the opportunity, free the mind." I think this slogan is not only useful for developing the economy, but also for spreading the Good News. It is not only the officials who need to seize the opportunity, but also the Church leaders, the Sisters need to do the same.

The Chinese philosopher Lao Zi once said, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," and Christ said "Come follow me." I think Chinese Sisters are ready to take steps to follow the Lord wherever He leads us and I believe that the Lord will provide the resources we need to make this journey.