

The Priests' Responsibility in Communicating with Non-Christians

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My concern with this question originates from the experience of Chinese priests who spent about five years in France for theological studies. A few of them were from the Diocese of Zhouzhi in Shaanxi. Some of these students were supported by our Paris Foreign Missions Society, others by the Assumptionists. At least five of them failed to find their way into a Church ministry after going back to China. Some got married and came back to France. Others felt that there was no room for them in their diocese, all the churches having their parish priest. Without holding a post as a parish priest, they would have no income and no work. They were priests for Catholics. They were not aware that priests may be good shepherds to all men.

A. What Are the Reasons for This Lack of Awareness?

1. The remote cause may be their growing up in **the ritual Catholic family tradition** of a village Catholic community, strongly structured around reception of sacraments and practice of devotions. The parish priest in such a community is fully occupied in administering the sacraments. He is highly respected whatever his lifestyle. Even among very poor farmers, he lives a comfortable life. If he gets in touch with non-Catholics, it is usually to care for catechumens who are brought to Church by Catholic friends.

2. A further cause may have to be sought in a **Seminary formation** that stresses canonical duties in the administration of sacraments and self-discipline in keeping away from the evils of a pagan society that is becoming worse and worse with modernity. Some openings, however, may be secured when non-Catholic lecturers are invited to give courses in the seminary on local religions, history, social sciences. Deacons may have a year of pastoral experience before they are called to priesthood. Has the course in apologetics been updated? Are they prepared for a meaningful dialogue in which they respect and understand the views of their partner?

3. For a number of priests sent to Europe there may be a **lack of pastoral experience**. They were sent to Europe immediately after being ordained or even before. Once in Europe, they suffer in learning the foreign language, abstract theological expressions and

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methods of work based on a critical approach which is not familiar to them. Few offer a pastoral service even among Chinese Catholics. They enjoy comfortable surroundings and can easily acquire gadgets of an enjoyable life. Challenged by non-believers, they do not know how to witness the essentials of our Faith. They fail to understand the meaning of Christian faith in daily life and are not prepared to discuss it with non-Christians.

B. Can the Non-parochial Experience of French Priests Apply to the Chinese Context?

One or two decades before the 2nd Vatican Council, a number of initiatives were taken by priests who advocated immersion among non-Christians. Charles de Foucauld's witness among Tuaregs in the Sahara inspired Fr. René Voillaume's book *Au Coeur des masses*. The Little Brothers and Sisters of Jesus were founded to live God's saving love among non-Christians. This would inspire priests as well. The "Mission de France" was founded with priests who could exercise their priestly ministry outside the parish context. Also priests of the Prado in Lyon were ready to share the life of workers in the secular world. A number of vocations to the priesthood came from lay apostolate movements such as the Young Christian Workers. "Catholic Action" developed in the 50ies with a purpose of sharing the Gospel spirit and witnessing its requirements in a secularized society.

In Europe, the purpose of these movements and foundations was to reach out to areas of society which had drifted away from the Church. Priests had to drop their clerical habit and outlook in trying to reconcile with people who had suffered from the Church in their school education or from the behavior of some Church people. Educated people often were trained in the spirit of the French Revolution and of the French philosophers who had prepared the revolution, such as Voltaire and Rousseau. It was a spirit of revolt against the authority of the Church and its privileges. Such hostility does not exist in China even though Marxist leaders may have absorbed some western criticism of religion. Enlightened Chinese intellectuals hostile to religion learn from Auguste Comte. They have a scientist's approach to the superstitions of "feudal" society. But Christianity to them is in fact associated with modernity. Their defiance of Christianity is due to their historic experience. They keep in mind the imperialistic role of Christianity due to the French protectorate during the colonial era. They have a patriotic, anti-foreign mind.

In China, religion never enjoyed the power it had acquired in western society. Religions are part of the existence and accepted as such. Christianity today may even be favored as an ingredient of democratization and sound modernity. The process of urbanization in China destroys traditional village communities. New dynamic Catholic life develops in large cities. Catholics are urged to interiorize their faith and make it a basis of their vision of existence (人生观). Daily mixing with non-Christians, they have more opportunities to give an account of their ideals. Are the priests prepared to respond to these challenges and to guide the faithful in their mission to the world?

C. Updating priestly formation in the Chinese context

The ability of the priest to communicate and dialogue depends on psychological and intellectual foundations. Training in the seminary may have to be updated to take these requirements into account.

Psychological formation may be improved by providing more opportunities for encounters with non-religious youth or youth belonging to other religions. There may be programs of vacation time immersions in non-Catholic surroundings or services in cooperation with non-Catholic welfare organizations. Self-centeredness, fear of exchange, the escape into silence have to be checked and fought against. Sociability, welcome of unknown people, propensity to trust others have to be developed.

Intellectual formation should include the critical approach of Chinese writers who opened the way to a sense of personal responsibility and social consciousness. While loving their Chinese heritage, some of these modern writers were critical of the formalistic and hypocritical aspects of the Confucian tradition.

Catholic urge for inculturation has been too much focused on the Confucian stream. Other streams of the Chinese culture might be closer to the gospel message. The Daoist masters encourage inner liberation and creativity. Buddhist criticism of the ego and concern with suffering souls may be associated with the Christian mystery of salvation. Modern writers of the New Literature movement in the 1920ies applied to the Chinese conservative context what they learned from the criticism of traditional Christianity by Western writers. They denounced the servile mentality produced by conservative Confucian norms. Lu Xun in his *Nahan* 吶喊 collection of short stories was inspired by Russian Christian writers and by Nietzsche in his criticism of a paralyzing type of Christianity. He also drew inspiration from the Chinese stream of Zhuangzi and of Buddhist thought. It would be appropriate to introduce the study of his works in the seminary cycle of philosophy. Political cadres may not agree on this.

Seminarians and young priests might learn from communicating with university students who do research work on Christian history and thought with a scientific and objective approach. The Beijing theological course for university students initiated by Fr. Peter Zhao Jianmin is a great experience which should inspire seminary students.

D. The Status and Mission of Priests in Secular Society

In the Church mission to the world there is a scope for priests involved in secular activities. As priests, however, they come under the bishop's authority and have to fulfil their mission in communion with their fellow priests. This may be achieved in different ways:

Religious Priests

Priests who belong to a religious society, Jesuits, Franciscans, Lazarists, are secured in their vocation by their rules, their spirit and their regular links with their community. In China, however, they are not supposed to belong to religious societies which have supe-

rriors overseas. This may deprive them of gatherings and spiritual exercises which would support their faith.

Priests' Societies

Are there priests' societies in China offering a strong link and support to the members?

Do associations such as "priests of the Sacred Heart" provide strong links and moral support to their members?

Priests in China are diocesan priests. Do their bishops enjoy enough authority and personal links with them? Is there a senate of priests and are there regular meetings of priests in the various districts of a diocese?

Challenges to Priests in Secular Surroundings

Are priests involved in secular commitments different from lay people? Why should they keep loyal to their priesthood?

Does their priesthood mean a specific contribution to evangelization?

Practically their main difference with lay people is their celibacy. It may be a sign of their belonging to Christ. It may be a reminder that as priests they are called to act as "another Christ" with a mission to teach and sanctify. *Sacerdos oportet docere et sanctificare*. In Europe secularized Catholics may be aware of this and expect this service from a priest. In China, being celibate is not so meaningful, but it can be explained.

Can these priests teach the faith? Eventually they may assist in parish work and preach the homily at the Sunday mass. But their mission to announce the Gospel of Salvation is fulfilled in friendly dialogues with their co-workers, or with their students if they teach. They just have to answer their questions in a meaningful way. How can they "sanctify"? They may help on occasion by hearing confessions, but their way to sanctify is more in communicating the call to holiness through their own witness to humility, service, charity.

Can a parish be asked to support a **resident priest** committed to external missions?

It is probably the case for a number of priests. It is no problem in Europe. Do Chinese authorities tolerate a mixture of professional service in a hospital or in a school with other services in the Catholic community?

In any case, these reflections and suggestions call for an updating with reference to the latest developments in the Church life in China. It is up to the Chinese priests to find their own way. They may find outstanding models in their own ranks.