

## How the Social Systems Impact the Church (Especially the Priests and Sisters) Using Hongdong Diocese as an Example

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*Translated by Jacqueline Mulberge*

It is a pleasure to be able to speak to you about the social security of the priests and sisters, giving examples of actual cases, although I am not an expert in these matters. The information that I will present comes from those in leadership in my diocese, in the Sisters' congregation of my diocese and a few priests and sisters from other Chinese dioceses whom I consulted with regard to material for this talk.

### 1. The Financial Situation of the Dioceses, Especially of the Priests and Sisters: Where Does the Income Come from?

In China there are approx. 13 million Catholics of whom the majority live in rural areas; that means the great majority of sisters and priests exercise their pastoral ministry in rural areas. Their standard of living is similar to that of the middle and lower classes of the population.

#### 1.1 Funding of the Priests and Sisters

The priests do not receive a salary from the State; but they do get a limited amount from the diocese (between 800 and 4,000 RMB per month; the amount differs from diocese to diocese; e.g. in Shanghai it can be as much as 4,000 RMB); in addition they depend on donations and Mass stipends from the faithful.

Three parishes of my diocese are in the mountains. The faithful there are poor. The local priests receive a fixed amount of 1,200 RMB per month from the diocese instead of – as is customary for the priests – 30 Mass stipends, because the stipends in a poor area are very low. Soon after my ordination to the priesthood 10 years ago I helped out in one of the parishes. Time and again old people came to me and asked if they could pay for Masses with foodstuffs. That touched me greatly.

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Paul Li Haiyan, a priest of Hongdong Diocese/Shanxi, currently studying for a doctorate at the Catholic Theological Faculty of the University of Bonn, gave this talk at the 14th Annual Academy of the China-Zentrum on April 10, 2014 in Sankt Augustin.

Most of the Chinese Sisters' congregations are diocesan congregations. The sisters work in Church clinics, homes for the aged, homes for the handicapped and orphanages, as well as in pastoral ministry. They are concerned to help the poor and needy. They are not paid either by the State or the order. What they have at their disposal is merely pocket money which, depending on the order, varies between 50 to 600 RMB per month. In Hongdong Diocese the sisters receive 1,000 RMB per year, that is approx. 83 RMB – equivalent to 10 Euro – per month. Thus the sisters live from their own congregation and on donations from benefactors. If a diocesan congregation has very little income, i.e. has no means to achieve self-sufficiency, it is poor. There are some sisters' congregations, for example, that have no money for heating in winter. In addition the congregations depend for an appropriate income on the sisters' ability to work and on their health. This is e.g. especially the case for the sisters in Hongkong whose income depends on the success of clinics and hospitals. On the one hand their income by their social work is limited – I will touch on that in the following point – and on the other there are constant ongoing expenses. Among these are the salaries of the doctors but also the acquisition and maintenance of medical apparatus, etc.

## 1.2 “Social Welfare” Provided by the Sisters

The main focus of the sisters' work in my diocese is in the medical field. With the help of the diocese and the faithful they have built three ophthalmic clinics and a State accredited hospital, as well as establishing an optician business. In that they offer free service for the especially needy. E.g. they provide around 300 eye operations free of charge each year, for which they receive some compensation from the State – although very little. The sisters endeavor to treat the patients with the best methods of healing but ask very little payment from them. Three times a year the men and women doctors visit the poor, examine their health situation and provide them with free medication.

But how are things with regard to the social security of the sisters – and also of the priests – themselves, or rather with their security for health, pensions or unemployment benefit? I would now like to report on that.

## 2. Social Security: Do the Priests and Sisters Have Health Insurance?

China is huge and circumstances differ from diocese to diocese. A few dioceses in the cities are in a position to provide insurance for sickness, pensions and unemployment of the priests and sisters, e.g. the dioceses of Shanghai and Beijing. The majority of dioceses, however, are in rural areas and have hardly any reserves to enable them to take care of the social security of their priests and sisters.

### 2.1 Health Insurance

In 2004 the Chinese government introduced a rural health insurance scheme, or rather a new, village cooperative health system (新农村合作医疗). It means: the insured person

pays an annual amount of at this time approx. 100 RMB. If a person falls ill, he/she generally receives from the State or from the local council 70% of the total cost of treatment in a local hospital. The dioceses or the sisters' congregations can more easily join this new, rural cooperative health system with health insurance as it is relatively inexpensive.

In my diocese each priest pays for his own health insurance. If a priest becomes sick, the rural health insurance reimburses the expenses up to 70% and the diocese pays the rest.

If priests or sisters have minor ailments, they can be treated at a low cost in the church clinics. But if they are seriously ill and needing expensive treatment, they are often in real need. One sister of the religious congregation in my diocese e.g. had lung cancer and had to be treated in a hospital in Beijing. Her treatment cost 130,000 RMB (approx. 17,000€). Finally the congregation had to pay 70,000 RMB for her – alongside the 60,000 RMB paid by the health insurance (the health board paid less than 70% in this case because she was treated far from the place where she was insured. The nearer one is to the location of the health board, the greater the amount paid back). 70,000 RMB are an enormous sum for her congregation. Without donations or without lending money, the order would not be able to bear the costs of such a sickness. If two or three such cases arise in a congregation at the same time, it can easily impoverish the congregation greatly or burden it with huge debts.

One of the priests in my diocese has suffered from diabetes for the past 10 years. In the beginning he paid for his illness from his reserves. After that the diocese could not continue to help him by itself. He works as chaplain for the sisters. The agreement finally reached between the diocese and the sisters was that they would share the costs of the treatment for this priest. The priest commented: "If the diocese and the sisters were not able to pay for me, I would be dependent on gifts." Then it would be impossible to receive treatment for the sickness.

There are cases where the priests or the sisters have worked tirelessly all their life for the spread of the Gospel but at the end of their life were not in a position to come up with the finance needed for the expenses of their sickness and there was nothing for it but ultimately to suffer in great pain.

## 2.2 Provision for Old Age

The Chinese priests and sisters generally have no provision for old age. How is it possible for them to live appropriately in their old age? What happens when the majority of sisters and priests are old and there are few younger ones? What promises to solve the problem? Is it Church homes for the aged? Reserves? Insurance?

**Construction of Homes for the Aged:** Since 15 years ago some dioceses and religious congregations have been building homes for the aged to take in elderly, uncared for and single persons, often regardless of whether they are Christians or non-Christians. Naturally these homes will always accept old priests and sisters.

**Old Priests:** Many dioceses and sisters' congregations, however, still have no homes for the aged; in my diocese e.g. there is no such home. If the priest is reasonably healthy in his

old age, he can remain in the parish where he has been working and the faithful look after him. If, however, the old priest falls sick, he has to move to a house of the diocese where the diocese then cares for him. There is always a nurse, male or female, with him.

One old priest of my diocese died a year ago at the age of 103 years. After he retired he still lived in a parish for 15 years and helped out there. He spent the last 13 years in the diocesan central house; he was taken care of by a pious lay person. Fortunately there were no high expenses for illness.

**Old Sisters:** The sisters' orders are a community and as in a family, the younger sisters in China are duty bound to take care of the old sisters. For an old sister that means that where she lives in community, she is taken care of and that is her aged home. That works well as long as there are enough young sisters.

### 2.2.1 Shortage of Young People

For the past 15 years the number of vocations in China has gradually been dropping. I will cite just one example from my diocese. 15 years ago, when I joined the seminary, we were 20 seminarians in my course from my diocese alone. 10 years ago the diocese had a total of only 10 seminarians. Over the last 4 years only one young man out of the whole diocese entered the seminary.

The numbers of entrants with the sisters are the same; in the past 5 years there has been only one novice. Of course, there are many reasons for this but I will not go into that now. This situation is leading to great problems.

### 2.2.2 Future Problems in the Area of Care for Old Priests and Sisters

The great majority of the current priests and sisters who entered in the 1980s and 1990s after the Cultural Revolution at the age of around 25 are now aged between 40 and 50. You see that the religious personnel of the Chinese Church is comparatively young but many are gradually reaching middle age where their health is more fragile and presumably within a few decades the then aged "prolific years" will be followed by only a few young priests and sisters. It is not surprising, therefore, that those in responsibility in dioceses and congregations are not only thinking about vocation animation but also about security in sickness and old age. If they do not pay pension insurance now, what will they face later on?

When I look at the future in these circumstances and think of the Church care of the aged, it is clear that the priests and sisters will have a huge problem in 20 years' time. The old priests and sisters cannot be cared for by the younger ones. If they are to be correctly insured in old age, they have to pay in for their pension for at least 15 years beforehand. In reality the amount for pension insurance is too high and neither the diocese nor the sisters' congregations can afford it. In rural areas it is around 500 RMB per year per person, in cities 5,000 RMB.

For that reason the sisters in my diocese are trying to apply to funding agencies, requesting help with the payment of their pension insurance. Thus, due to the difficult financial

situation of the sisters in Hongdong, Missio has approved an application for bridge financing for the coming 3 years for 40 sisters. The contributions of the remaining 21 sisters will be paid in by the congregation itself.

## Conclusion

Although Christianity in China has a long history, the Chinese Church is still like an infant. On the one hand it must and should endeavor to go its own way – also financially – and on the other it still needs the partnership of the Universal Church, so as together to find the right way to continue the service of the Gospel and to solve the problems and difficulties that arise.