

Report on the Experiences Made by Religious Sisters in Mainland China with Their Present Efforts in the Work of Evangelization

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I. The Context in Which We Are Working

1. The Social Background of Present Day China

In order to come to an understanding of the evangelization work the Chinese sisters are doing, it is of utmost importance to be familiar with the local Chinese culture and the present economic situation. China has a history of 2,400 years of a feudal social system; within this feudal system the social position of women was very low, they were not allowed to receive an education, because the ancestors often realized that those women who had received education frequently did not know their place and would act in a way that violates women's moral code of behavior. The Confucian moral injunctions: *sanchong side* 三从四德 mean: 三从: children have to obey their father, the wife her husband, and when the husband dies, she has to obey her son; 四德: the four virtues – the virtue of the woman, the word of the woman, the appearance of the woman, the service of the woman. This was the norm for how the virtue of a woman was defined in old China in order to safeguard the stability of the family. There was a need to guarantee the patriarchal order for the benefit of the family, following the principal of “separating the inner from the outside,” and the doctrine “male respect, female humbleness.” According to the Confucian code of ethics regarding women, they are defined by virtue, conduct and self-cultivation as the norm of behavior. Even the great Confucius says: “Only women and people of low moral standards are hard to educate, if you get too close to them, they become arrogant and impudent; if you keep distance from them, they become angry and resentful.” (*Lunyu*, “Yanghuo”)

Beginning from the reform movement and opening up in 1978 until today, China's economy has made tremendous progress. However, faced with a complex value system, people in general lacked the ability to differentiate and easily got lost in a big haze. On February 12, 2014 the Central Government made an official statement on the core values of Socialism, the content: “prosperity, democracy, civilization, harmony, freedom, equality,

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justice, rule of law, patriotism, diligence, honesty, friendship.” It is stressed that this comprises in condensed form the concept of values commonly acknowledged by the Chinese Communist Party and the entire society, it represents the inner aspirations of Chinese Socialism with its special characteristics, something the entire population is striving for, being the soul of the country’s invigoration, the foundation on which the country is established, the basis of a strong country. This picture of the central values of the country is to stand for the common ideal of society and the spiritual home of all the countless millions of Chinese people.

Through the emphasis on these central values it becomes obvious that the current society is rather lacking in any concept and orientation regarding its values. Professor Guo Yiping from the Central Party School said it in an article: “There are three big problems that might bring China to a road of no return!” (Guo Yiping 郭一平, “San da wenti, keneng rang Zhongguo zou shang bu gui lu! 三大问题, 可能让中国走上不归路!”, www.peopleinfo.cn, November 11, 2015). Once he said it so loudly that even the deaf could hear it, when he raised the attention and conscience of a great number of Chinese people. He wrote in his article:

There are 30 years of reforms, the economy has considerably developed, but the belief of the people is lost. Money has become the shining sun in the hearts of the Chinese people. Money has become the primary and leading value in the value system, this definitely will create trouble. It is the biggest problem left over from the 30 years of reform. All the present chaos comes forth from the loss of faith. A value system has emerged in which, by common understanding of the entire population, money is considered the leading value.

2. The Rise of Chinese Female Religious Orders under the Particular Circumstances of the Chinese Church

The Church living under these circumstances was also going through the experience of this kind of brutal and senseless encounter. Everybody knows that during the fifties of the last century the Chinese Church had to suffer complete confusion and go through great changes. The disturbances caused by religious persecution swept through all of China. Foreign missionaries were expelled from the country; the local bishops, priests, sisters and a great number of believers were put in chains and thrown into prison, following Christ on his way to the cross. There were no churches left, no chapels for prayers, nothing of a religious atmosphere at all; all in all there was just one real, atheist country. Faith was buried in the hearts of those loyal faithful who were still waiting for the resurrection of Christ. The Church, as on Holy Saturday, entered into deep silence and into mourning for more than 30 years; it was a time of suffering. This period produced heroes, the trials generated countless martyrs and saints worthy to be praised with songs and tears, shedding their blood, generously giving their life for the Lord. Thanks to their earnest intercession in heaven, finally at the beginning of the 80ies the Chinese Church could see the dawn of a new era; facing a thousand things to be done, she began on top of a mound of miserable ruins the difficult and hard work of reconstruction.

Fr. Heyndrickx once said:

There is no doubt, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, established in 1957, did a lot of damage to the Catholic Church, not so much because she set up the so-called Patriotic Church, thus causing a division among the ordinary people, but rather because she brought a split right into the inner self of the sole, one Chinese Catholic Church. (Nan Huairen wenhua xiehui 南怀仁文化协会 (ed.), Yongyuan de Zhonghua chaoshengzhe 永远的中华朝圣者, Guangqi wenhua shiye 2007, p. 85.)

The actual problem with this “inner splitting,” or better the creation of an “upper-ground” and an “under-ground” community through interference from outside, is not so much the result of an inner separation of the Church due to conflict and hostility, but much more due to a historic procedure. Because to “implement ‘the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church’ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic.’” (Pope Benedict XVI in his open letter to the Chinese Church, no. 7). Within those years that the Church has gone public, the two communities of the “upper-ground” and the “under-ground”, by continuing to fight over diverse and confusing theories and crossing verbal swords, have enormously reduced the power of evangelization. Pondering on this painful experience, both groups strongly feel that the Church can only survive if she grows and develops. By placing the blame on each other they hurt the basic spirit; then it is still better to roll up the sleeves, everyone going ahead looking for one’s own road of growth. The recent more than ten years were relatively quiet, each one keeping busy with spreading the Gospel and doing formation work with their personnel. Actually, it is exactly as one bishop put it: “The fact that there exists an ‘upper-ground’ and an ‘under-ground’ community has, seen from a certain perspective, the benefit that some more free room can be won from the government for the Church to survive, and that she is able to gain to a greater extent the right to be in communion with the Universal Church.”

From last year [2014] up to now, while nobody knows from where this hurricane came blowing, they started violently tearing down crosses from Protestant and Catholic churches. On April 28 it started in Yongjia County, Wenzhou City. The big Protestant church in Sanjiang, that had been built in 2012, costing 30 million and covering an area of more than 10,000 m² was the first one to be leveled to the ground in no time; until today within the province of Zhejiang more than 1,200 crosses were torn down.

At this moment in our history, although many difficulties remain, there are also at the same time plenty of opportunities, fortunate circumstances and challenges, mutually interwoven, engendering one another and hard to separate, facing us; we might as well call the situation: two sides of one entity. The Church is like a seed buried in the earth and sleeping for many years; as soon as it is caught by the first ray of sun, the ears of grain will begin to germinate with irresistible force. The number of the faithful is increasing dramatically. At the beginning of the 80ies, everywhere throughout the country the Church was backward both economically and culturally. A few old priests and sisters who had returned from prison were in urgent need of evangelizers who would help the faithful to study the Bible

and to teach the catechism. Then, by the end of the 80ies and the beginning of the 90ies, all over the country a great number of women's religious congregations could be observed arising and rapidly growing. Some of the sisters came from convents which had been established before the Liberation (1949) and were fortunate enough to survive the disaster and could come back from various places and start some community life anew. Some of them were familiar with the medical profession, some had served as doctors. These started teaching the younger generation the medical know-how and setting up clinics. Thereafter the convents grew overcrowded with vocations for religious life; Hebei Province became the place with the greatest number of faithful and religious vocations in the whole country. The beginning of the 80ies was the time of revival of the religious congregations. Some congregations even had more than 50 applicants in just one year. Presently in Hebei Province there are about 1,000 sisters belonging to the upper-ground and 700 belonging to the under-ground. In the whole country there are about 60 congregations with about 3,000 sisters belonging to the upper-ground and ca. 30 congregations with 2,000 sisters belonging to the under-ground. The congregation with the largest number has about 300 sisters, the one with the smallest number has 10 sisters. Most of the sisters are involved in pastoral work in the parishes. Besides this there are 120 clinics, 30 homes for the aged, more than 20 kindergartens, 6 orphanages, 11 rehabilitation centers, 5 offices for AIDS care, 4 leprosy service centers, 14 family care centers and students' help centers, 1 institution for retarded children. Furthermore there are shops for devotional articles, liturgical garments, candles, etc.

One thing is still worthy of mention – in Eastern China, Fujian Province, there is a rather unique form of religious life, the so-called “virgins”. Their religious charism is taken from the former Dominican Order; they lead a religious life at home and serve in the parishes, taking care of 5 homes for the aged, 1 orphanage and 1 kindergarten. In all there are 680 members.

II. The Experiences of the Sisters with Evangelization

1. The Various Tasks Performed by the Sisters

A. Ordinary Pastoral Activities in the Parish together with the Faithful

China is a large country with an enormous population, confronting the Church with a huge area to develop. In certain areas the Church is developing with considerable speed but she is urgently in need of evangelizers to do a proper job. Up to now the Church still does not have a suitable and healthy system within the country to train lay people and entrust them fulltime with the spreading of the Gospel and thus solve the problem of worrying about the future. She relies on amateurs who are doing it in their spare time without receiving any remuneration for their services. Therefore most of the pastoral work in the parishes is the responsibility of sisters. Most of the sisters' congregations are diocesan with roots in the local Church and serving the local Church. There is no need to cross diocesan borders or take up overseas connections, thereby causing trouble. In recent years, as efforts to educate the faithful have increased, the pastoral work in the parishes

has become much more alive. Just to mention one example, in a church in the South with many Catholics, about 6,000, all the faithful are very busy during the day with their own business, but at night the church is quite similar to a school. They have 13 classes in all for various kinds of studies, for Bible studies, for catechetical studies, Church music, marital guidance, spiritual guidance, every week there is one study period. On Sundays there are 5 more study classes for the youth. Every class has 40 participants, with age groupings from the elementary school up to the adult groups of 40 to 50 years of age. During the summer vacation every year in July and August there is additional enthusiasm, with more than 500 students coming together in the church to attend the summer courses every night for 15 days. The heavy burden of arranging the study programs is borne by two sisters; for the summer activities they ask some competent lay Catholics to assist with teaching. For the music education a professional teacher is hired to give the classes and some able musicians from among the faithful are asked to help with the preparation. For the Sunday classes, 20 teachers from the kindergarten are volunteering to teach the children for free. The rest of the classes of religious instruction and faith education are given by the sisters. The three priests of the parish are busy enough taking care of the sacramental service to the 25,000 faithful belonging to this parish, but they are also ready to give classes in their spare time. In this parish more than 150 adults receive baptism every year, and also about 150 infants are baptized. The faithful are all very active, they arrange classes for catechumens, pre-marital guidance, care for the terminally sick, arrange visits to the sick, disabled, aged and weak among the faithful, they are also doing pastoral ministry in the hospitals (CPE), etc. Those serving in the hospitals are divided into 10 groups, each group has 10 people, and in all there are 100 people going to the hospitals in daily rotation, paying visits, praying for the sick and giving consolation and comfort.

B. Health Services during the Past Years

While most of the sisters are directly engaged in pastoral ministry in the parishes, the second field of their activity is health care. Countrywide they provide health care in about 120 clinics. In the provinces of Shanxi, Shaanxi and Hebei practically all congregations run health care units or even hospitals. Sometimes these are as old as the congregations. Some of the congregations opened a clinic right within the compound of the church, providing medical service and at the same time being involved with evangelizing. In recent years the government is dealing rather strictly with health organizations and keeping them under supervision, checking up on medical expertise and testing the equipment; quite a few of the smaller clinics had to close down. But many could still continue and even proved to be among the best. For instance the congregation of The Missionary Little Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Linfen Diocese, Shanxi Province, with 60 sisters: more than half of them are serving in the field of health care. The congregation manages three hospitals: the Catholic Huozhou Tongde Hospital; in Linfen City the Catholic Lourdes Eye Clinic and the Catholic Hongdong Hongde Eye Clinic. They are all non-profit-hospitals, their spirit of universal love and their very special way of serving the people in the Linfen area and in the whole province are well-known everywhere.

C. Charity and Care Services

Following the country's intensifying of the reform movement, a huge agricultural country of 800 million farmers was rapidly transformed into an industrialized and commercialized country, with the result that the young people from the country villages, in order to make a better living, started swarming into the cities in big crowds, bringing their wives and children along with them but leaving behind their old parents to take care of their home with nobody looking after them. Further, due to the Chinese policy of family planning, the younger generation grew less while the whole society began to age more rapidly; arranging a place for the aged to live and to nourish them became a matter of vital importance. Empty nests with only the elderly left are found everywhere, a great opportunity for the sisters to come in with their service. During the past more than ten years, the congregations have established more than 30 homes for the aged in various places. With loving care service and half profit institutions they attend to the lonely, weak and underprivileged population, helping them with their everyday life. Some of the places are rented, rather simple and outdated. This holds true especially for the homes of the aged run by the under-ground congregations. Some did not have any authorization from the government because their personal identity wasn't even acknowledged, so it followed that an originally purely compassionate, social project virtually became a religious institution. The situation was quite difficult, but it couldn't stop the sisters from giving their loving service to the aged. In Fujian the sisters of the congregation of the Little Sisters of the Merciful Heart in 2004 set up the "Renai Home"; they took into their care all those who had nobody at all on whom to rely, to help those left alone on the streets, the sick old people and those with mental disorders. Their everyday life, medical care until their passing away and their funeral, everything was taken care of in one coordinated process, administered by the sisters, including all expenses to be shouldered. "Renai Home" started by taking in three women with mental disorders left on the streets. Up till now they have taken in 84 people for care, among them 11 with a mental disorder; at the moment they still have in their home 43 people, 8 of them with a mental disorder, and 15 who can't take care of themselves. Their services are very much respected and honored by the people, even the government officials acknowledge it. However, what worries them is that the 20 years rent will expire soon, the house is dilapidated and they have no license. How to provide these old and sick and disabled people with a proper place to stay?

D. Setting Up of Stations for Spiritual Care and Guidance

Now people are searching for money and reputation as never before, but in their hearts and on the spiritual level there is complete emptiness. They have lost any feeling for values. Life is completely emotionalized, pressure and stress are taking control, a sense of insecurity has become an observable characteristic in the attitude of the people of our times. According to a special report by Wu Xiaodong in the *Phoenix Weekly* 2009, No. 12 under the title "Investigation on the present situation of mental illness in Mainland China" (Wu Xiaodong 吴晓东, "Dalu xinli binghuan xianzhuang diaocha" 大陆心理疾患现状调查,

in: *Phoenix Weekly* 鳳凰周刊 2009, Vol. 12, No. 325; <http://blog.sina.com.cn/phoenix-weekly>) he mentions:

A report of the Center for research and intervention on mental crisis in Beijing shows that in 1990 China had 25,600,000 cases of people with depression. According to related statistics of the experts, now in our country those suffering under depression already amount to 4% to 8% of the whole population, around 55,000,000 people. Besides this, a conservative estimate by the international conference on mental health says, in China probably 190,000,000 people need professional mental counseling service or treatment once in their lifetime.

It is obvious that many frustrated souls in China are trying hard to find some sort of spiritual home. Establishing stations of rest for these exhausted souls will without doubt be good news for the future of Chinese society. Many religious congregations are right now moving in this direction, however, lack of professional personnel, lack of a suitable environment and the absence of funds for appropriate equipment create problems. They can only organize retreats for the faithful of the parish, provide some spiritual guidance or pay visits to the faithful and listen to their sorrows. In some of the better developed dioceses and congregations they have already set up formal retreat centers, provide counseling, and have formation centers and faith education institutes at their disposal, like the Life-Fountain Center in Hebei, the Ci'en Retreat Center in Hebei which is open for all priests, sisters and faithful in the whole country, offering retreats, spiritual guidance and all kinds of constructive activities throughout the year. The Hebei Ci'en Retreat Center officially started its services in September 2012, providing the brothers and sisters with prayer sessions, study sessions, spiritual exercises, encounters with God, encounters with oneself, encounters and reconciliation with others and with all creation, re-establishing the proper order and harmony of life, providing help to find one's inner peace and adjustment, healing and integration. The Retreat Center has 8 sisters working for the center, 6 of them with professional expertise in counseling, 11 of the employees are foreign helpers and laborers. The concrete annual program comprises individually guided retreats, accompanied spiritual renewal sessions, special training courses for religious persons entering midlife called: "Religious persons stepping into adulthood" and a three-month course for persons of the Consecrated Life who are burnt out from many years of service and are due for a sabbatical renewal year. According to an estimate from the end of this June, already around 2,000 persons have so far taken advantage of the services offered.

E. Family Visits

The administration of homes for the aged is encountering a lot of difficulties; for example, for a Chinese it is hard to avoid facing the Chinese mentality that considers it unfilial behavior towards one's parents to send them into an old folks home. In recent years in some places they have tried to directly approach impoverished areas in order to look for people who need help, to offer compassion and provide services to the least of Christ's brothers and sisters. Beginning from 2007, the virgins in Fujian together with the faithful of the parishes have gone up to distant mountain areas to visit the sick and abandoned in

their homes and offer them loving care and help. Every Wednesday and Thursday they go regularly to carry out this charitable activity, sending all kinds of articles and food to the sick and aged, cleaning their homes, washing their clothes and cooking for them, and even bathing those who are not able to do it themselves, taking meals together with them, singing songs with them and entertaining them with various programs and sharing the Gospel message with them. At the moment they have more than 230 people participating in this service program; it is very much appreciated by the people. After the activities we often hear the people in the village saying: “The Catholic Church is doing a great job!” Every year due to this service there are about 40 people who receive baptism.

In one of the dioceses in Zhejiang Province, starting in 2006 the sisters, with the support of the diocese, have adopted a new, rather original approach to help families in the impoverished areas. They are providing the students who have left their home and dropped their studies with the possibility to continue their studies. They are mostly children from single parent families or orphans or from families where the parents are absent for a long time and are far away making a living, while the children are with their grandparents, missing the experience of a loving and peaceful family life. On one hand the sisters are trying through various channels to make contact with ordinary people but run the risk of being misunderstood and unjustly blamed of having a hidden agenda. They go from one house to the other, inquiring whether there are any homeless children; it's like looking after the lost sheep. On the other hand they have to try to find people who are financially better off and also ready to do something for the poor. With them they set up a charity partnership group whose members provide scholarships for the students. During the summer and winter vacation the students stay with their charity partner family to experience the atmosphere and love of a real family life and the joy of coming home. Besides this the sisters go to the school every month or to the family to visit them and bring their living expenses for that month and any necessary items, but especially to provide the students, who often suffer in their hearts from feelings of inferiority, with some particular guidance. Every year during the winter and summer vacation they bring the students who are interested to know more about the Church and her faith to the church to attend a catechumen course, free of charge for the services. 42 so far have registered for baptism and want to join the Church. Until now 109 students have already received this favorable treatment and have made their way from elementary school up to university. Among them are also quite a few who are non-Christians.

2. Challenges and Difficulties Encountered by the Sisters during Evangelization Work

A. Environmental Limits and Restrictions, No Stable Dwelling Place

Busy with evangelization activities, the sisters very urgently need a decent place where they can stay and rest and enjoy community life. But the situation of the sisters involved in parish work in Mainland China is very particular. Usually two sisters live together in the church, taking care of the Catholics and their faith life in one or more parishes, including organizing the liturgy, visiting the sick and the old, assisting those who are approaching

the end of their life, arranging for study groups according to age. The study sessions are usually at night, the distances between the parishes being 5 or 6 km, some with distances of up to 20 and 30 km further away. Returning after the study sessions is naturally often quite inconvenient, so they will remain in the parish. In the course of one year they return to the convent once or twice for one or two months at different intervals. The rest of the time they stay in one or more parishes. In some of the convents the sisters answer the requests of parish priests according to need, doing their service in different phases, staying for two to three months and after finishing, returning to the convent. In this way the life of the community in every convent, besides the monthly recollection, has to be arranged according to the actual situation of each community. Furthermore, a considerable part of the under-ground communities do not have their own convent, they live at the homes of the faithful, but none of them can possibly take in the sisters of the whole community. Community life then becomes a great challenge. Moreover, if two sisters are living in a parish and also the priest has his residence there, life, cooperation and human relations can definitely cause a lot of inconvenience. Sisters who work in a clinic might have similar difficulties. Over the whole year two sisters are busy with their health service, they hardly have time to go back and participate in the community life. In the long run their sense of belonging to the community will become very weak. This will create a real conflict between the community life of the sister and her efforts for evangelization. The reasons creating problems appear to be quite realistic ones, the small number of sisters, the large demands coming from the faithful, the big area to be covered, the lack of a suitable place for the sisters to stay.

Not only the residence of the sisters causes problems, in many places where the sisters are administering homes for the aged, the living quarters create many difficulties. Although the government is now encouraging the private sector to establish old folks homes, as soon as this undertaking has to do with “sisters” who are not recognized by the government as “sisters”, this will be considered outside the norm, and to apply for a license will become extremely difficult. At the moment some old folks homes are short of means, the living quarters are rather primitive. A few times fire had broken out in some of the homes for the aged in the country, which caused the government to implement controls more strictly. Administering services without a license faces imminent danger, the order to close down might come anytime. A home for the aged in the South-East of China under the administration of a sister’s congregation that has more than twenty sisters and whose main occupation is taking care of this home for the aged, had to close two years ago. The place was rented, and when the government wanted to use it, the building was demolished and the inhabitants relocated. And since the sisters were without a license, they were not refunded. To make things worse, the congregation was not on good terms with the diocese, in the parishes they served also many problems existed. Now the sisters are very scared, they have troubles within the congregation and are worrying very much about their survival.

B. Lack of Maturity of the Congregation, Especially in Terms of a Sound Administration, No Clear Concept regarding the Characteristic Charism of the Congregation

More or less one hundred congregations exist within the country, most of them founded in the 80ies and 90ies of the last century. The greater part of them was set up as new congregations by bishops and priests who were released from labor camps or who helped former congregations to become re-established. There was urgent need of them for propagating the faith. They did not understand much about the essentials of a religious congregation and about the procedure to establish one. Regarding congregations that had a history of a hundred years and were in need of renewal, they were rather confused about what Vatican II had to say about the new understanding of religious life in communities. For some of the congregations, in the beginning only the bishops and priests felt authorized to arrange matters for them and manage their spiritual affairs and needs. The costs of living were distributed by the diocese, expenses for traveling had to be reported, medical expenses were fixed depending on the situation, all was similar to the treatment of employees of an organization working for the diocese. The congregation seems to belong to the diocese, the relation between them is one of hanging on for survival. Due to the growing number of members and the expansion of activities, the problems of extensive increase, the shortcomings of human nature become more visible, cooperation will run into difficulties. Moreover, since a great number of sisters are working in the parishes, doing low priced manual labor or are involved in free-of-charge activities, they will have no income. In some rich, big cities and areas along the seashore where the faithful generously support the sisters, they can still barely sustain themselves. If some sisters' convents succeed in harmoniously living together with the diocese, the diocese might, when the congregation is meeting particular difficulties, make up the deficiency and help without hesitation; however, if the relation is hardened and stiff, then that's another cup of tea. If they are not independent economically, administration is defective and will for sure influence the work of evangelization. If in matters of the transfer of sisters, their communication with the outside world, a conflict of opinions exists with the priest, what rights does the sister actually still have, what is her identity? Is she a catechist? A social worker? No. ... There is still something more: in recent years the number of priests and sisters who have close and regular contacts with the Church overseas or are returning from studies abroad has increased to quite some extent. These sisters more and more realize that their congregation has to be independent and autonomous, develop their own activities or demand remuneration for their services and the energy they have invested. This, however, will cause misunderstandings, making people believe that the sisters are displeased with the actual situation and looking for another opportunity. Due to all kinds of reasons, presently the relationship of a considerable number of congregations in the country with the diocese is tense or even falling apart. Two years ago a congregation with more than 20 sisters in Henan Province was forced to dissolve because of the reasons mentioned; more than half of them entered another, neighboring congregation, the rest of them chose their own way out. In spite of things being like this, other congregations in the country are doing very

well and show a healthy development. They have their own projects or from the beginning the congregation was following its own standards and norms.

All these unhappy experiences are closely connected to the fact that the congregation was not able to live out its proper charism. Young congregations with young sisters did not experience a “charism fully alive” and have no idea of how to live a charism, so they are not able to demonstrate the special characteristic of their community. We are very grateful that in 2011 an Italian professor visited every congregation, explaining to them their proper charism and mission, so that the sisters could form a clear concept of their own charism. With regard to living out one’s charism, I believe that the Lord will provide guidance to any group of good sisters who are striving to grow in holiness, so they will be able to live out their charism, make it visible and let it become fully alive.

C. Insufficient Education, Particularly regarding Personal Maturity, Spiritual Formation and Professional Training

The formation program of a congregation will safeguard a congregation’s growth to maturity. When the congregation was just established, the sisters all received their formation under the guidance of old sisters who were following the traditional concept. The observation of rules and regulations was stressed, blind obedience was expected, reasonable demands of human nature were neglected or even suppressed. Everything was unduly spiritualized, turning consecrated life into a high-sounding edifice in the air. Beginning from 2004 the Chinese Province of the Jesuits started a formation program for spirituality in Mainland China. Thereafter the priests and sisters who had studied abroad came back and set up all kinds of formation courses, working programs, and the sisters gradually realized the importance of formation of personality and character. True spiritual formation includes body, mind and soul growing into one integrated entity. However, the Chinese area is very large, congregations are spread all over the country, the level of openness is not the same everywhere, and an overall education system is hard to achieve. It is particularly difficult to find qualified formators and spiritual directors for all the congregations. The sisters entering religious life mostly have high school education as their cultural level, a few might have graduated from university, after 3 to 5 years they will usually pronounce their first religious vows. After their vows only a small number will continue to study philosophy and theology or enter some professional education program. If the sisters pass their initial stage of training and reach a certain level of personal maturity and also show some deeper understanding of the values of the Gospel message, body, mind and soul being equally developed, then they will receive further systematic formation. They then will start spreading the Gospel in a rather complex and intricate, secularized human society where values are dictated by materialism and hedonism, and give witness to the truth without being absorbed by a secularized atmosphere. This surely will not be easy for them. All the more if the formation left many deficiencies still remaining; how can an immature personality spread the Gospel? This concerns particularly those who belonged to the older generation and received no proper education but are now entering midlife and are still entrusted with burdens of responsibility on behalf of the congregation. It is like a boat

leaking underneath, paddling towards the ocean and its great turbulent waves in order to go fishing; isn't this risking to sink into its depths?

Besides, the China of today is no longer the same as before, its economy has dramatically developed, the standard of education of its citizens is rising every day, the society is in rapid progress, but the hearts are lonely as never before. The expectations and requests of the faithful towards the priests and sisters are extremely high, they expect that priests and sisters will help them not only in matters of faith, knowledge and proficiency, but hope even more that they can offer assistance with regards to their marriage, family problems, education of their children, personal relations, psychological matters, etc. and provide solutions. Facing these expectations quite often the only thing we can do is to admit our limits. In all frankness, we have to acknowledge our own limits, as well as the limitations of the Church in trying to help them, not being able to match their needs at all. We only ask the faithful to read their prayers, abide by the rules and regulations, not to divorce and tell them some excellent theories. Facing the pains and troubles in their hearts, the tragic situation of their marriage with all their difficulties, we don't dare to touch. If it is like this, how can we leave their broken hearts without comfort and consolation? How can we let them feel that Christ's Gospel message is providing them with joy and fortune? Furthermore, in today's secularized world, inclined to hedonism, to live out our consecrated life with its three vows has already become an extra challenge and trial. If we find it difficult to live out joy and freedom in our hearts, how can we bring joy to other people? If our relation with the Lord is distant and strange and our prayer tasteless, how can we bring God's love to people who are suffering? If our evangelizing is doctrine oriented teaching but lacking witness coming from a deep spiritual experience, then our evangelizing has lost its essential drive.

In China the Church still can be considered a weak and marginalized group, constantly behind the mainstream of society. We have no outstanding talents as at the beginning of evangelization at the time of Matteo Ricci, well-known far and wide, nor some influential organizations with great projects introducing the Church into society and making her known, this is also a difficulty we constantly have to face.

Due to many reasons the sisters everywhere feel less capable than they would wish, and they are suffering a lot of pressure. But being convinced that a thousand mile journey begins with the first step, we have to grasp this very moment, then the Lord will do the rest.

D. The Supply Doesn't Meet the Demand, Lack of Qualified Catechists

According to an estimate of the 2014 *Guide to the Catholic Church in China*, the number of Catholics in China is about 12 million, ca. 3,500 priests, ca. 5,000 sisters. More of them are in the North rather than in the South; Hebei Province alone has more than 1,500,000 Catholics. In every diocese the number of priests and sisters in relation to the number of Catholics is partly more, partly less; however, supply does not meet demand; there is a shortage of evangelizers everywhere, this is a phenomenon all over the country. For example, the Diocese of Wenzhou has 120,000 Catholics, about 50 priests, 100 sisters, 188 parishes. Wenzhou City has 6.2 million inhabitants. Even without considering evangelization

of the non-Christians, just trying to keep and consolidate the present number of Catholics by developing all kinds of parish activities, how do you remunerate the 100 sisters who are doing their service right now? Furthermore, among these many sisters, not all are able to cope with the responsibility entrusted to them. If one is taking up too heavy a burden for her to carry, if she is forcing herself to do what is beyond her ability, isn't she just going to suffer? Actually these kinds of things happen quite often. The faithful have their expectations, the priest has his requests, maybe too much for a sister, she might just feel helpless, these are all facts the sisters now have to face in their evangelization work.

Conclusion

An overall survey of the situation of the sisters doing evangelization work in China shows that there are those who weep going out to sow their seed, and there are those who come back singing for joy as they bring in their harvest. We are trying to cross the river by feeling the stones, but there are also some who are not aware of the power of the river and are carried away by the water. In a country like China, governed by socialism with special characteristics, Chinese sisters' congregations also have their local characteristics. Even though the prospects look rather difficult and challenging, God's grace will be all the more rich. God's Spirit will in an extraordinary way give guidance to the Church of China and carry it forward. We strongly believe that the Chinese Church of tomorrow will be better off, and Chinese sisters' congregations will be closer to sanctity. Finally, let us all pray to the Lord, and please – offer suggestions, contribute personal and material support, give generously and help each other. We also sincerely welcome publishing houses that have texts translated into Chinese, to provide intellectual property rights free of charge to support Chinese publishing houses, that God's wisdom may spread even farther and wider.