

# LA CIVILTÀ CATTOLICA

Catholicism in 21st Century China

Joseph You Guo Jiang, SJ



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BEATUS POPULUS, CUIUS DOMINUS DEUS EIUS

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CATHOLICISM IN 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY  
CHINA

# Catholicism in 21st Century China

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Joseph You Guo Jiang, SJ

Christianity first came to China over one thousand years ago but it did not last long. Alopen, a Syrian monk, introduced Nestorian Christianity in the Tang Dynasty and founded several monasteries and churches. Nestorian Christianity reemerged in the Mongol era in the early 14th century. Nestorian Christianity declined in China substantially in the mid-14th century. Roman Catholicism in China grew at the expense of the Nestorians during the late Yuan dynasty. Franciscan Bishop John of Montecorvino began his evangelization mission of the Mongols in Beijing, but his mission ceased with the end of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty in 1368.

With the arrival of Jesuit missionaries, Matteo Ricci and his companions in Ming Dynasty worked until the early Qing Dynasty before the Rites Controversy caused the Chinese emperor to ban Christianity for one hundred years. Prior to the banning, Catholics enjoyed a high profile and respect in mainstream Chinese society, including government officers, royal family members and scholars. The number of Catholics increased. After the second Opium War in 1842, the Treaty of Nanjing granted more privileges for Christian missions in the ports and eventually in other provinces and the Jesuits entered China for the second time with the political support of the French government. The first Jesuit arrivals were the intellectual leaders of Catholic Church and pioneers of East-West cultural and educational exchange. The second arrival of Jesuits and other missionaries faced a more complicated political, economic, and diplomatic situation that eventually

intensified the relationship between Chinese people and foreign religious groups.

During the Republic period (1911 –1949), Catholicism contributed significantly to Chinese society in the areas of education, social service, charity, medical care and earned the respect of many Chinese people. From 1949 until China's Opening Door policy in 1978, Catholicism faced different challenges and problems. In the 1990s to the end of last century, Catholicism in China became more dynamic and engaged in evangelization, services, and formation exchanges with foreign regions and countries. The younger generation of priests and nuns received a relatively good education compared to their previous generation of priests and nuns, and people flocked to church for Mass and other sacraments. As China moved quickly into the 21st century, the Catholic Church in China began to face new challenges.

#### Search for the meaning of life

China has become a more capitalist than communist nation in the last decade, with the rapidly expanding economy attracting more attention from global communities. In the midst of this rapid economic development and advancement, Chinese society and its people are searching for the meaning of life. Many Chinese actively affirm the spiritual dimensions of their own lives by confronting the deeper questions of personal meaning and the search for meaning and purpose in life through different traditions and disciplines, primarily through Christianity. The search for meaning and purpose through Christianity is a lively subject in Chinese social, political and educational discourse. Economic development and advancement does not drive away spiritual needs. Faith and spirituality contribute significantly to understanding human beings, their values and their aspirations.

Chinese society and people are now encountering not only a moral crisis but also, and more so, a spiritual or trust crisis. Life in all sectors has become too materialistic and utilitarian and has lured many people away from their moral and spiritual traditions and culture. Chinese society also faces a serious dilemma: on the one hand, many Chinese are searching for the meaning and the

ultimate goal of their life in the midst of economic development. On the other hand, they are also much attracted by materialism. Thus, the search for meaning in life and their own identity are expressed widely and intensely in different groups.

Many Chinese parents, families and schools are focused only on the academic performance and the material needs of students, neglecting the spiritual and faith dimensions that are integral parts of their lives and growth. The thinking and behavior of many contemporary Chinese are contrary to traditional Chinese mores and spiritual values, and to common standards as well. Has the Chinese Catholic Church thought of new strategies of evangelization and service for these people who are constantly searching for meaning? Is the Chinese Catholic Church ready to face this challenge?

#### The new materialism and formation of laity

Chinese Catholics are not exempt from secular movements and have either lost their faith or neglected their spiritual life because of the struggle between a life of faith and the distractions of life. The contemporary Chinese Catholic Church faces diverse challenges over which local communities to serve and how to be missionary. Unlike a decade ago, the Chinese Catholic Church today does not enjoy a relative autonomy and freedom from central and local government control in many regions.

Despite the conditional religious freedom in China, the Chinese Catholic Church can still play an important role in mission and service. However, how does the Chinese Catholic Church cope with the changes and challenges of contemporary secular society, and how does it address its role in spiritual and moral development in order to find its path in a more pluralistic and global Chinese society?

In the 1990s, the Catholic Church in China experienced a fast growth in vocations to the priesthood, but the number now is decreasing. The number of seminarians is down to less than 900 training for the priesthood at major official and unofficial seminaries. According to data from the Bishops Conference, the number of clergy is small—3,316 priests and 5,622 nuns to pastor

20 to 25 million Catholics, in addition to other ministries for different sectors of the population.

In an era with a more secular and market focused economic society, a life with luxuries have discouraged many Chinese youth from opting for a life in the service of the church where life is less comfortable and even poor in some areas. Furthermore, the One-Child policy also became a new barrier for parents and young people in valuing a religious vocation and its importance.

It is obvious that the shortage of vocations has hit seriously the Catholic Church's mission and ministry in many regions and countries. The Chinese Catholic Church faces a serious vocation crisis. While continuing to promote vocations and retraining clergy and nuns aimed at developing a missionary vision and spirit, it must also set a clear and comprehensive formation strategy for laity who are the potential resources and core of the future Church in China. Evangelization and mission need a deeply formed laity who can be an essential part of Christ's mission. The issue of formation of laity in some dioceses in China is in its infancy, while some other dioceses have no idea about this need or are not even aware of its importance.

In 2012, the Vatican Commission for the Church of China stated clearly that "the lay faithful in China must grow in grace before God and men, by nourishing and perfecting their own spiritual life as active members of the parish community and by involving themselves in the apostolate, also with the help of associations and Church movements which foster their ongoing formation." Thus, the Chinese Catholic Church must heed this urgent need for the mission and ministry by forming a more dedicated laity who can serve the local Church and her brothers and sisters in the midst of the decline in priestly and women religious vocations.

The Commission further emphasized that "Pastors, both Bishops and priests, should make every effort to consolidate the lay faithful in their knowledge of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, and in particular of ecclesiology and the social doctrine of the Church. Moreover, it will be useful to dedicate special solicitude to the preparation of pastoral workers dedicated

to evangelization, catechesis and works of charity. The integral formation of lay Catholics, above all in those places where rapid social evolution and significant economic development are occurring, is part of a commitment to make the local Church vibrant and thriving. Finally, an adequate response to the phenomenon of internal migration and urbanization is to be hoped for.”

With this timely guideline, the Chinese Catholic Church and its leaders at different levels cannot do anything but accelerate the planning and process of laity formation and to develop sustainable laity formation programs. Church leaders, such as parish priests and bishops, should continue to empower the laity to take more leadership roles in the Church’s mission and service and seek out those who are sufficiently qualified and professional to support Church’s activities.

### Faith and spiritual formation for Chinese Catholics

Traditionally, for many Catholics in China, attending Mass, personal prayer and the sacraments are the few ways they can hold on to and grow in their faith. Those Catholics who seek to develop their faith life usually have only the available them a few options: daily Mass, Eucharistic adoration, praying the rosary, the divine office and similar devotions. Faith sharing with a group, private study of the Bible and other works of faith are not common for many Catholics. In the past, when people were baptized, there were almost no other ways to help them understand Catholic teachings and doctrines and how to apply them to their lives.

In recent years, however, this situation has changed and there is a gradual rise of faith formation. Some dioceses and parishes have established different programs of faith formation – for example, Sunday school programs for children, summer youth retreats, young adult fellowships, Bible study, marriage encounters, prayer programs, spiritual formation retreats for Catholics, summer camp for university students, retreat directions, and social service activities.

These programs not only help faith development but also have made the Catholic Church known to the larger secular so-

ciety. In order to foster the faith formation of more Catholics, it is necessary for lay Catholics to receive faith and spiritual training that would enable them to lead a Bible study, faith sharing, religious education or social services. Although faith and spiritual formation for the laity are the priority of parish priests and bishops, many Chinese priests and bishops are overworked or do not recognize the need for faith formation programs. Thus, the laity must take on responsibility for this.

Hebei and Shanxi are regions with strong Catholic populations and are able to develop fairly effective youth groups, Bible study and prayer groups. Here, there is a larger pool of dedicated Catholics who can lead ministry activities and assist parish priests in their services in some other regions. However, the leadership role of parish priests and diocesan bishops is essential for encouraging Catholics' participation in the Church's mission and ministries.

Contemporary China faces many social and ethical problems. Young Catholics, the hope of the future Church, are trying to understand how to integrate faith into their lives and relate it to other social needs. They want to develop an effective adult ministry and that asks for greater collaboration and co-operation between clergy and adult leadership. This requires taking the initiative and providing regular activities.

#### Overseas returnee clergy, nuns and laity

In the last twenty years, a good number of priests, nuns and laity were sent to abroad for further study, e.g., to the Philippines, the USA, Ireland, Germany, Italy, France and Taiwan. Some even studied for doctoral degrees. It is clear that these returnee priests, nuns and laity have encountered a variety of difficulties and challenges when they have returned to China—for example, readjusting to the culture, leadership style, and relationship between clergy and laity. However, what they learned abroad in spiritual, pastoral, biblical, theological and ecumenical disciplines will benefit the Chinese church.

For example, since 1991, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers in the United States of America have helped to train 137 Chinese

Church leaders, including those now studying, so they could return to their homeland and enliven faith as seminary teachers, superiors of religious communities and pastoral ministers. Five graduates of the Maryknoll Project have been appointed bishops by the Holy See since 1991. Although Catholicism is always a minority in this large country, these church leaders can be a leaven as moral and ethical witnesses to Gospel values. Their contribution to Chinese society and their encounter with people from different walks of life will be highly significant.

A highly educated group of Church leaders will also change the views of non-Catholics to whom they can offer more a professional service and dialogue. In the last couple of years, more than one hundred Chinese priests, nuns, seminarians and laity have come to study in Taiwan's Fu Jen Faculty of Theology of St. Robert Bellarmine, the only Chinese-speaking Pontifical Faculty. Many of them are priests in their 40s, the majority of the religious men and women are in their 20s and 30s. Compared with Hong Kong, the Philippines or western countries, studying in Taiwan has the advantage of having Mandarin Chinese as the medium for teaching. Students do not have to struggle to learn a new language.

### The impact of the internet for Catholicism

In the last two decades, the internet has begun to reshape the life and social development of the world. Although the internet has influenced people both negatively and positively, the change will be felt even more forcefully on China in the near future. Over the past decade in China, internet access has not only generated positive economic impacts but has also benefited many other sectors. The internet has deeply changed the Chinese social structure and relationships. Although the government continues to monitor and censor the internet, it has nevertheless become a main source and window of information and knowledge. It has influenced and will continue to influence the ethical knowledge and decision making of Chinese from all sectors of life, particularly the younger generation. There are a few popular Catholic websites that provide basic information and knowledge of the

Church. However, more needs to be done officially and professionally. Many dioceses' websites are neither updated frequently nor do they function well. In an era of internet and mass media, the Chinese Catholic Church must readjust its mission strategy by adopting more social network methods for its services and ministries.

It is important that the Chinese Catholic Church utilizes newer information technologies such as Wechat, Sina blog, Weibo (microblog) and other mass media platforms to evangelize Chinese people and to share gospel values in a more efficient and effective way. As the internet pervades Chinese life, its influence has carried over into the areas of faith and religion, thus enabling a growing proportion of the population to search for and perhaps experience something about God in cyberspace. If Catholicism in 21st century China wants to play an important role in society, it must rethink and reimagine its social network approach for mission and evangelization in order to keep up with the times.

#### Dialogue with the local culture

With the development of globalization and internationalization, Chinese society and people have become more open to and tolerant of the Catholic Church. Religious life and practices in some regions are flourishing. The Chinese government and society value the important role and task of religious groups and their social service contribution. Because China is so different from the rest of the world, the Chinese Catholic Church needs to learn how to deal with the local culture and political authority. In other words, while keeping its Catholic identity, the Church has to establish a "Chinese Catholic Church with Chinese Characteristics," if it is to enculturate Church teachings and gospel values that are relevant to the Chinese people and serve both their and Catholics' spiritual needs. The Chinese Catholic Church and its leadership team have to adopt new strategies and approaches to reach a larger Chinese audience for dialogue and communication in a more secularized society where values and meanings are often misinterpreted. The Chinese Catholic Church must undergo a transformation to change its traditional ways of service and

preaching in order to remain relevant to the needs of the new generation.

The Chinese Catholic Church with Chinese characteristics will offer both the Church and people hope, faith and a promising future. Only when the Chinese Catholic Church goes beyond its own realm to embrace and appreciate other aspects of human life will it make a significant contribution to the cultural, spiritual and even social development of Chinese society. The Church does not only offer sacramental and religious services but can also dialogue with Chinese traditions and cultures through its rich history in arts, music, literature and poetry.

It has been long held that the Catholic Church can contribute to China's spiritual civilization process. For example, Church teachings on love, harmony, peace, justice, filial piety, marriage values, social stability and family values etc. are features that Chinese Catholic Church can preserve and with them attempt to revitalize Chinese culture and tradition.

As long as the Chinese Communist Party is the only leading party in the government, Marxism will continue to be the ideological guideline for society. Thus, the Chinese Catholic Church will have to redefine its role and relationship with the Party and its ideological theories. This does not necessarily mean that the Church has to agree completely with Party politics and values, but it must find flexible and effective way to continue its mission and ministry in China.

If a dialogue between the Catholic Church and Chinese society were to be established, the two will not clash in the 21st century. Chinese cultural and traditional values and gospel values and Church teachings - the Confucian tradition and the Christian tradition - have much in common.

### Conclusion

Twenty-first century China Catholicism faces many challenges and opportunities. The American Church historian Richard Madsen wrote that Christianity needs to deepen its ability to care for others and to make the Church a more authentic witness in

response to social need, particularly with respect to the suffering of the world and of others.

The Chinese Catholic Church will need to heed the needs of others, discern the signs of time and respond to them more promptly and efficiently. Although the Chinese Catholic Church needs to train a leadership team with vision and educate its clergy, both religious congregations and laity must discern new ways to achieve its mission. As China and Chinese society in general become more and more open to religions—and to Catholic Church in particular—Catholicism can find a stable place if it continues to be a Church of openness and a Church with Chinese characteristics and identity. Chinese society and the Church need to understand and appreciate the values embedded in each other's social and cultural traditions and contexts and to continue their dialogue to seek the common good.

This was exactly Pope Francis's message to China. In his first, historic interview on 28 January 2016 with Francesco Sisci for *Asia Times*, the Pope said: “[China] is a land blessed with many things. And the Catholic Church, one of whose duties is to respect all civilizations, before this civilization, I would say, has the duty to respect it with a capital ‘R’. The Church has great potential to receive culture”<sup>1</sup>

The message of dialogue, encounter and harmony has been repeated by Francis many times as he did recently, for example, on 21 May at the Regina Coeli. Appealing to Our Lady Help of Christians venerated at the Sheshan shrine in Shanghai, he said: “We will all join spiritually with Catholics in China”. And he went on: “To Chinese Catholics, I say: Let us look up to our Mother Mary so that she may help us discern God's will for the current path of the Church in China and support us in welcoming with generosity his project of love. May Mary encourage us to make our personal contribution to communion among believers and to harmony in the whole of society. Let us not forget to bear witness

1. Francesco Sisci, «Pope Francis urges world not to fear China's rise: AT exclusive», in <http://www.atimes.com/at-exclusive-pope-francis-urges-world-not-to-fear-chinas-rise/>

to the faith through prayer and love, always open to encounter and dialogue.”

Let us also recall that the year before, on the same occasion (Angelus, 22 May 2016), the Pope said: “May Chinese Catholics, together with those who follow other noble religious traditions, become concrete signs of charity and reconciliation. In this way, they will promote an authentic culture of encounter and the harmony of the whole of society -- this harmony that the Chinese spirit so loves”.