

The Church in China: Notes for ‘writing the future’

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In his Message to Chinese Catholics and the Universal Church, of September 26, 2018, Pope Francis wrote: “For my part, I have always looked upon China as a land of great opportunities and the Chinese people as the creators and guardians of an inestimable patrimony of culture and wisdom, refined by resisting adversity and embracing diversity.”^[2]

This was my interpretive key as I read the book *La Chiesa in Cina. Un futuro da scrivere* published by Fr. Antonio Spadaro. The only purpose of my talk today is to share my reflections on reading the book. The authors of the chapters in this volume have each written from their own perspectives and experiences, and the reader is drawn into a dialogue, bringing his or her own set of sensibilities and existential or intellectual points of view. It is a dialogue that touches on some aspects of the vast and complex reality of the Church in China.

The reflections I share do not represent the official position of the Society of Jesus in relation to the issues dealt with in the book, nor to the political situation of the Church in China. I myself have no direct experience of China; however, I belong to the Church present in China and to a body – the Society of Jesus – that has had, and continues to have, many relations with China.

The fact that the Church wants to be present in China responds to the Lord’s invitation to go to all the peoples of the world, to be in all the corners of the earth, to invite people to transform their lives, to make them more human according to the model that we have received in Him.

A look at the current world tells us that, if we do not reckon with everything that China represents, it is not possible to make progress in reconciliation between the peoples of the world. Nor will it be possible, without the conscious and active participation of the Chinese people, to arrive at a sustainable ecological balance for the planet or to achieve the United Nations’ goals of overcoming poverty and securing human development.

The Church and the Society of Jesus have sought, are seeking and will continue to seek to inculcate themselves in the complex and changing social reality of the immense nation that is China. This is an inculturation inspired by the incarnation of Jesus, who made himself present in human history in the midst of a reality of poverty and social, religious and political oppression. Inculturation, according to the style of Jesus, is a *kenotic* journey, that is, its point of departure is to untie oneself, to draw back from every position of privilege and power, to become “one of many” (cf. *Phil* 2:6-8).

For the Church to be inculturated in the reality of China implies her abandoning every claim to wisdom or social recognition in order to move to the new reality in which she desires to live fully. Inculturation involves leaving one's own home to go and live in the house of another, and so learn to live in a house other than the one you are used to.

Inculturation is an open and sincere encounter in which everyone puts themselves into play. Christianity has something very valuable to offer to every human culture, at each moment of history. Our treasure is the person of Jesus Christ, who revealed to us the merciful face of God and opened the way for fraternity, through which we recognize ourselves as human beings, brothers and sisters, responsible for the common home, where we can live in peace if, guided by the Spirit, we pursue social justice. The encounter that comes from the effort of inculturation takes place only if it is aroused by the love that God has poured into the heart of every human being and is reflected in many ways in the different cultural expressions of each people.

Since Christianity is not a culture but a religious faith capable of incarnating itself in every human culture, it does not compete with the cultures it meets and encounters. On the contrary, it offers each of them a new opportunity to go deeper into the knowledge of their own roots and to open up to the universal reality of full humanity.

For this reason inculturation makes possible the existence of "Chinese Catholicism," which is, at the same time, universal Catholicism. Chinese Catholics keep their roots deeply immersed in their culture and express their faith in ways that their culture offers to symbolize what they are and what they experience. At the same time, inspired by the Spirit of Jesus, Chinese Catholics participate in the universal body of the Church, which seeks to contribute to the process of reconciling all things in Christ.

"Sinicizing" Christianity is not easy. It is a complex process and always incomplete. It is as complex as the Chinese cultural reality, with its immense variety and breadth of traditions. It is incomplete, because no living culture is static: every culture, indeed, is changeable, so the process of inculturation involves a continuous effort over time, which is impossible to achieve once and for all.

No cultural, social, economic or political expression of the past or present can be considered the full inculturation of Christianity in China. An authentic process of "Sinicizing" Catholicism in the variety of cultures of China is a dynamic process, always open and unfinished.

As the history of China has shown, inculturation in the "kenotic"^[3] style of Jesus involves a considerable dose of humility. Consequently, to be part of the present and future of the Church in China means accepting the possibility of being humbled in order to transform humility into a source of new life.

Reconciliation in a world that is undergoing epoch-making change

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly universal, despite the ambiguities of what we call “globalization.” The interdependence between the peoples, cultures and nations of the world is a characteristic reality of our time, and it is projected as an essential dimension of the future world. To contribute to reconciliation and justice in the present and in the future implies, firstly, recognizing the richness represented by the cultural diversity of our world and, secondly, ensuring the just participation of every cultural expression in the multicultural face of universal humanity.

The Society of Jesus intends to collaborate in the work of reconciliation and in the promotion of justice, in harmony with the Church, with Pope Francis and Chinese Catholics, according to its “Universal Apostolic Preferences.”^[4] Among these, the following stands out: “Accompanying the impoverished requires us to improve our studies, our analysis and our reflection in order to understand in depth the economic, political and social processes that generate such great injustice; we must also contribute to the elaboration of alternative models. We commit ourselves to promoting a process of globalization that recognizes the multiplicity of cultures as a human treasure, protects cultural diversity and promotes intercultural exchange.”

China’s growing participation in the global process of the development of human society has opened many fronts of renewal within Chinese society. The Chinese Communist Party is faced with the enormous challenge of adapting to the new era of humanity in which it has decided to take an active and leading role. The political dimension of this challenge is of paramount importance.

The opening to the new era of humanity demands a radical rethink of the exercise of public power. The signs here may not seem very encouraging. Epoch-making changes seem to have brought with them a weakening of the democratic forms of government in many nations. In all the regions of the planet there are in fact rulers who pursue fundamentalist or populist ideologies, who claim to be the unique expression of their nations and govern them according to their own particular interests, without promoting the participation of peoples in making decisions that have as their goal the common good, both in the present and in the future.

The political dimension is central when it comes to promoting reconciliation between people. This is not achieved through the concentration of power in the hands of a few, either within each nation or internationally. It requires a return to the presentation of the common good as the horizon of political action, and the expansion of civic awareness as a guarantee of keeping this search for the common good alive. The decentralization of power and the balance between the social actors who exercise it under the control of a conscious citizenship is a condition for progress in social justice and reconciliation of peoples and nations.

There are many indications that the society of the future will be secular. In one way or another, all current societies are experiencing processes of secularization. In many cases secularization gives rise to extreme forms that fight against any religious expression, starting with militant atheism or religious fundamentalism, which leads to one single form of religion being idolized. Today we know of many forms of religious persecution associated with secularism or religious fundamentalism. In other cases, secularization produces religious indifference and interrupts the social transmission of religious practices and teachings.

When these extreme forms of secularism are overcome, a mature secular society begins, in which the conditions for the exercise of freedom as a characteristic of the human being exist. This freedom must be expressed in political, economic and social relations as well as in the cultural and religious spheres. The secular context therefore offers new possibilities for the exercise of religious freedom, both personal and institutional.

Other signs clearly indicate that in the society of the future, the city, or what is “urban,” will have a greater weight than it had in the past when life was characterized by the relationships typical of a village context. Urban Catholicism represents in China – as in many other regions of the world – a novelty and a challenge.

The novelty comes from the difference between the human relationships that are generated in the city and those that characterize the village context. The urban setting also finds itself in a rapid process of constant change, as the novelty is not limited to the transition from the village to the city, but requires the ability to keep pace with changes in each of these areas and in the relationships between them.

Faced with these human and social transformations, the challenge arises to transmit the message of the Gospel. The presence and action of the Church is pastoral, that is, it originates and stays alive in the commitment to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ in all corners of the earth and at every moment of human history. The activity of the Church in China, including the participation of the Holy See at various levels, is to be understood as pastoral and takes into account the details proper to current social relations within China and its political context.

Both social relations and the Chinese Communist Party are evolving. Understanding and waiting for such an evolution is a necessary condition for achieving the contribution to reconciliation and justice that the Church proposes to make in the fulfilment of her mission.

In China, the mission of reconciliation and justice has an internal dimension of special importance and complexity. As in any process of reconciliation, it is necessary to rebuild trust between all the protagonists of the institutional life of the Church. Restoring trust implies

knowing each of the active members and recognizing them as equal, as brothers and sisters. It involves knowing their history and recognizing the authenticity with which they lived it.

Rebuilding trust opens the door to friendship. In the case of Chinese Catholics, it is a matter of a friendship that comes from recognizing oneself in sharing the Eucharistic bread at the table of the Lord. There is no doubt that reconciliation within the Chinese Church will be a long process, through which it will be possible to overcome the conflicts of the recent past, heal many wounds and come to look together at the future to be written.

At the same time, reconciliation within the Church will allow us to walk toward reconciliation with many other dimensions of Chinese political, social and cultural life, in the midst of the rapid transformation of all its forms. Without doubt this is an exciting prospect for those who identify with the mission of the Church.

Notes to write the future

In light of Jesuit spirituality and a desire to serve the Catholic Church, participation in the fascinating task of writing the future of the Church in China has, as a primary requisite, the ability to discern. Pope Francis has repeated this often: the Church needs to grow in its ability to discern. To write the future of the Church in China we need to start with the question: How and where does the action of the Holy Spirit manifest itself in Chinese society today? To respond to this question we must grow in our capacity for discernment.

And this also goes hand in hand with growth in the spiritual life. The future of the Church in China, as with anywhere else in the world, depends on the depth of the spiritual life of its members and the spiritual vitality of Christian communities, leading to a valid institutional conversion. The Chinese Church must change significantly, it must live an authentic *metanoia*, that is, a change of mentality, which is possible only through the transforming encounter with the person of Jesus Christ and the willingness to let the Spirit be the guide.

To write the future of the Church in China is a process of mutual discernment that starts from the conviction, through lived experience, that God is at work in history and enters into a relationship with human beings. Discernment and good choices require that we free ourselves from bonds and disordered affections, to place ourselves completely in the hands of the Lord. The best pastoral service that can be given to the Church in China is to promote the conditions for mutual discernment, and to put it into practice in all areas of her life and action.

At the same time, to contribute to writing the future of the Church in China requires an enormous intellectual effort that will make it possible, above all, to deepen our understanding of the socio-political and cultural context of China and its evolutionary direction. It is an exciting

task for those who want to contribute to incarnating the Christian message in so many different realities and to humanizing history. It is a task whose complexity leads necessarily to its accomplishment together with others. It is a task that exceeds the capacity not only of any individual, group of researchers or institution, but also of the Church itself, and in which a place of encounter is created between so many people and institutions that pursue the same goal of a better future for all.

Knowing the facets of Chinese Catholicism is another requirement in the effort to understand the present reality and the paths toward the future, an effort that could be very enriching if we decide to learn from the experience of non-Catholic Christians and their lives in China. This is an effort that Pope Francis asked for in his already mentioned Message to Chinese Catholics and the Universal Church: “I ask you wholeheartedly to beg for the grace not to hesitate when the Spirit calls us to take a step forward: ‘Let us ask for the apostolic courage to share the Gospel with others and to stop trying to make our Christian life a museum of memories. In every situation, may the Holy Spirit cause us to contemplate history in the light of the risen Jesus. In this way, the Church will not stand still, but constantly welcome the Lord’s surprises’ (*Gaudete et Exsultate*, 139).”^[5]

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^[1] Spadaro’s introductory speech was published in the online newspaper *Vatican Insider* on its day of the presentation, March 25, 2019, with the title “There is no Silk Road without mutual trust between China and the Vatican.” The volume was published by Ancora of Milan. Archbishop Celli’s speech appeared in *L’Osservatore Romano* on March 25, under the title “At the roots of dialogue”: www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/alle-radici-del-dialogo-27marzo/ The final speech of the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was published on the website of the Italian Government www.governo.it/articolo/conte-alla-presentazione-del-libro-la-chiesa-cina-un-futuro-da-scrivere/11202

^[2] Francis, *Message to Chinese Catholics and to the Universal Church*, September 26, 2018, no. 2 http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180926_messaggio-cattolici-cinesi.html

^[3] *Kenōsis* is a Greek word that literally means “emptying.” It is used by Saint Paul in the Letter to the Philippians, where we read: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, born in human likeness” (*Phil* 2:5-7).

^[4] After two years of mutual discernment, the Society of Jesus has determined some “universal apostolic preferences.” These are four apostolic accents for mission, which should characterize the Jesuit way of proceeding and commitments over the next ten years. They are: 1) to show the way to God through the Spiritual Exercises and discernment; 2) To walk with the poor, the outcasts of the world, those whose dignity has been violated, in a mission of reconciliation and justice, 3) to accompany young people in the creation of a hope-filled future; 4) to collaborate, with Gospel depth, for the protection and renewal of God’s creation, in the care for our common home.

^[5] Francis, *Message to Chinese Catholics...*, *op. cit.*, No. 7.