

7. Women as Agents of Faith Formation in the Chinese Church: Synodal Signposts

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Women as Primary Faith Formators in the History of the Catholic Church

In order to better comprehend the agency that Chinese Catholic women exercise in faith formation today, exemplifying what it means to evolve as church communities founded on the vision of synodality, I draw inspiration from women in the historical phase denoted as the early church. As early as the Jerusalem period, the family had already been the cradle for nurturing Christian faith and spiritual life. Numerous passages from the Scripture clearly describe the educational elements of Christian households. As Margaret Y. MacDonald points out, “When one approaches 1–2 Timothy and Titus with a focus on children, the house-church context emerges as a home-school context.”¹ In taking them as guidelines for the formation of children in a domestic setting, the Pastoral Epistles not only provide an educational program that integrates scriptural, doctrinal, ethical, and domestic elements; they also designate different roles and responsibilities to men and women.

Even though some Scripture passages convey a contradictory message about the status and role of women in the Christian community—such as the insistence on women remaining submissive (Ephesians 5:22) and refraining from public appearances (1 Corinthians 14:34)—other texts affirm women’s role in providing faith formation to their children and other Christians in a household and even community setting. 2 Timothy 1:5 and 3:15 clearly place the duty of educating youth on women. Referring

¹ Margaret Y. MacDonald, *The Power of Children* (Baylor University Press, 2014), 109.

to Titus 2:3–5, MacDonald argues that “the teaching role being assigned to the elders/fathers is in actual fact not terribly different from that assigned to older women, who must teach younger women, which no doubt included girls, what is good.”²

The study of Christian households and their educative function in the early church presents evidence that faith permeates every aspect of family life. Faith formation in the household settings often took place informally through daily conversation, family rituals, and most commonly, through setting life examples. Titus 2:1–10 makes explicit that an effective mode of teaching the Christian faith is through witness in the Christian household. As Scripture scholar Raymond Collins observes, “This household code stresses the witness value of the Christian message. The soundness of the message is proclaimed in the lives of all Christians, whether they be male or female, older or younger.”³ 2 Timothy 1:5 specially mentions the faith witness of mothers and grandmothers. Collins notes further that, “Older women are to instruct younger women in regard to feminine virtues; younger men are to learn the virtues of due discretion by following an example. By their example, virtuous people inspire others to be virtuous.”⁴ While the expression “feminine virtues” could pose a problem for realizing the synodal vision that takes women as equal disciples alongside men beyond gender stereotyped roles, it is important to acknowledge women’s agency for sustaining the faith of the Christian faithful within the household and in the ecclesial community.

The Teaching of the Catholic Church on Women Today

From the time of the early Christian household churches until now, the family is recognized as the foundation of the ecclesial community and of society. It is the first school of faith for future generations. The *General Directory for Catechesis* claims: “Parents are the primary educators in the

² MacDonald, *The Power of Children*, 127.

³ Raymond F. Collins, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 337.

⁴ Collins, *1 and 2 Timothy and Titus*, 334.

faith. Together with them, especially in certain cultures, all members of the family play an active part in the education of the younger members. It is thus necessary to determine more concretely the sense in which the Christian family community is a *locus* of catechesis” (no. 255).

In a similar vein, the Catholic Church holds that women have a unique and indispensable role in faith formation, both within the family and in the broader church community. Women, particularly mothers, are recognized as the primary educators of their children in the faith. Women’s educative role in the formation of faith has best been embodied in the life example of Mary. “The virgin Mary, who at the message of the angel received the Word of God in her heart and in her body and gave Life to the world, is acknowledged and honored as being truly the Mother of God and Mother of the Redeemer . . . far surpasses all creatures At the same time, however . . . she is one with all those who are to be saved” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 53). Mary’s unique role as bearer of Christ and her motherhood in the salvation of humanity can also be seen as emblematic of women’s—especially mothers’—role in bringing people into faith. Following the example of Mary, mother of Jesus, women are called to model Christian virtues and to cultivate an environment of love, prayer, and moral formation within the family. As a matter of fact, women often play a crucial role as catechists, teachers, and mentors in parishes, schools, and religious education programs. They serve in numerous leadership capacities within the church, such as pastoral associates, theologians, canon lawyers, and leaders of religious communities.

Pope Francis has repeatedly affirmed the need for women’s voices in decision-making within the church and called for greater inclusion of women in leadership roles.

It is true that women are excluded from decision-making processes in the Church: not excluded, but the presence of women is very weak there, in decision-making processes. We must move forward. . . . For me the process leading to decisions is very important: not only the execution, but also the development, and therefore that women, both consecrated

and laywomen, become part of the reflection process, and part of the discussion. . . . Because women look at life through their own eyes and we men are not able to look at life in this way.

The Catholic Church is increasingly aware of the importance of women in society and in the life of the church. For Pope Francis, “The Church acknowledges the indispensable contribution which women make to society through the sensitivity, intuition, and other distinctive skill sets which they, more than men, tend to possess. . . . The presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 103). Women are appreciated by the church as integral to the mission of faith formation, honoring their roles as educators, spiritual leaders, and witnesses to Christ. While certain roles remain reserved for men, the church emphasizes collaboration and the indispensable contributions of women to the life and growth of the faith.

Chinese Catholic Church—A Family-Oriented Faith Community

Rooted in the culture of the community and following the early Christian household model, Chinese Catholics have made their homes domestic churches. It is in their homes that religious devotion is being practiced, and faith is being embodied in their quotidian lives. Studies on the Catholic Church in China prior to and during the twentieth century demonstrate that Catholicism in China was never an individual faith. It has been the faith of whole families and clans, which have been the foundation and pillar of church communities. It is very common for the conversion of one family member, especially the patriarch, to lead to the conversion of the entire family. The major driving force behind this phenomenon of family conversion is the patriarchal nature and traditional Chinese culture of filial piety. As the head of the family or the patriarch of the clan, a man has the power to request the rest of his family/clan to follow his lead in matters of faith. The younger generation inherits their parents’ faith from the

moment of birth. Anyone, whether adult or child, who refuses to accept the faith is considered disrespectful to the patriarch—a betrayal of family values that results in marginalization by the entire clan. Thus, patriarchal notions are very much inscribed into faith practices, though women are the real agents of transmitting faith and sustaining it within the family.

In contrast to a male family member's conversion to Catholicism, a female's conversion rarely leads to the conversion of other family members. In fact, a woman's conversion to the faith often subjects her to rejection and discrimination by her family, as well as the risk of marginalization or even severe persecution, unless she is the matriarch. One exception to this marginalization occurs when a woman converts to the Catholic faith through marriage into a Catholic family.

The Chinese Family as the Locus of Catholic Faith

Chinese Catholic families have been places of evangelization and improvised catechetical schools. In a Chinese Catholic family, faith formation for children was carried out predominantly through family rituals, such as daily prayer, the practice of spiritual devotions, saying grace at the dinner table, and attending family Mass. Making faith an integral part of Chinese Catholic family life effectively safeguarded the continuity of Catholic faith from one generation to the next. Those Catholic families not only produced many devout believers, but they also encouraged many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. A study of genealogy of the Miao clan in part of southern China reveals that within four generations, male members of the Miao clan increased from 6 to 111 and made up a powerful force in the local church. Within a hundred years, twenty-five women from the Miao clan formally consecrated themselves as Catholic virgins.⁵

The <拳時北京教友致命> (Quan Shi Beijing Jiaoyou Zhiming) is a

⁵ Xiaoxin Wu, "Rapid Progress and Remarkable Accomplishments: The Study of Christianity in China by a New Generation of Chinese Scholars," in *China's Christianity: From Missionary to Indigenous Church*, ed. Anthony E. Clark (Brill, 2017), 282.

series of books that records the Boxer Rebellion around 1900 and the martyrdom of Catholics in Beijing and Hebei during that time.⁶ The last fifteen volumes of the book record a total of 370 Catholics who were baptized either as infants or as little children. Among them, 50.3 percent claimed that they were given a good Catholic education or faith formation by their parents, 7.8 percent attended parish school, and 5.4 percent became virgins and devoted their lives to the service of the church. The data reveal the paramount role of family in forming the new generation of Catholics during early twentieth century China.⁷

During the last four decades, many Catholic families in China have become cradles for new vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The Hebei Faith Institute for Cultural Studies collected data on the family background of priests and religious sisters between 2009–2010. The result shows that traditional Catholic families often produce multiple vocations to church ministry and religious life. The data documents 693 clerics and women religious coming from more than 320 families. Among those families, one family had five vocations (two men and three women), and four families each produced four vocations. There are 274 families who produced more than one vocation. Even with the One-Child policy, there are still fifty-six families that sent their only child to the priesthood or religious life.⁸ These numbers reflect the great impact of the family spiritual environment on children as they grow in faith. Most of the priests and religious explored in the studies grew up between 1960s and the 1980s, when the churches were still shut down in China due to the Cultural Revolution. The only way children received faith formation was through the oral teachings of their family members, especially their mothers or grandmothers—and by following their example in family spiritual

⁶ Jean-Marie Planchet, *拳時北京教友致命 (Chinese Martyrs in Beijing During the Boxer Rebellion)* (Beijing Jiushitang, 1920).

⁷ Planchet, *拳時北京教友致命*, 235.

⁸ Xinde Editorial Department, “调查显示：全国有321个多圣召家庭 (Research Shows: There Are 321 Families that Produced Multiple Vocations to the Church),” *Xinde Culture Association*, December 30, 2011, xinde.org/show/13398.

devotions. In the absence of open churches, families functioning as true domestic churches, preserved and brought the faith to life among their family members, particularly the younger generations.

The Role of Women in Preserving and Educating Faith in Tibet, China

In the previous section, we discussed how Catholicism in China is a faith rooted in and nurtured within the family environment. This leads us to further explore the role of women, who play an important part in these familial and communitarian settings. To illustrate this, in this section, I take Yanjing Church, the only Catholic church in the entirety of Tibet, which is officially considered a territory of China. Examining how the church community there has been preserved through the efforts of female believers helps us to appreciate the significant contributions women have made in transmitting faith within the Chinese Church.

In Tibetan society and culture, there is both a positive recognition of women and a disdain and degradation of women that is influenced by male-centric thinking. Although Tibetan women do not hold high social status, they are the core of family life, responsible for all the daily affairs of the household. In traditional views, Tibetan women are seen as hardworking laborers, obedient servants, selfless contributors, virtuous wives, and great mothers. They work tirelessly day after day, bearing children, taking care of the family, and honoring the elders. However, they are not without power and dignity within the household. They have a decisive influence on internal family matters and hold a certain amount of power and status. When asked about who holds the most power in his household, male believer C from Yanjing Church openly stated that, within family life, neither the wife nor the husband controls the other, nor does anyone simply obey the other. In important matters, they discuss together, and they follow the one whose reasoning makes more sense.

The importance of women in Tibetan family life is also reflected in the history of the growth of Yanjing Church. Throughout numerous challenges and tests the Yanjing Church has demonstrated the perseverance,

resilience, and strength of a “women’s church.” In this context, it is important to acknowledge the contribution made by women religious and the contributions they have made towards the growth of the church community in Tibet.

Historically, Yanjing Village has produced six nuns. Four of them joined an indigenous congregation in the early 1940s, founded by foreign missionaries in Cizhong, Yunnan. Two others joined the Sisters of the Holy Family in the early 2000s. This latter congregation was established by a Chinese bishop after the reopening of the church in China at the beginning of the 1980s. Among the four who joined the convent before 1949, Sister Ani was sent back to her Yanjing home when the government disbanded their congregation in the early 1950s. Despite this, she remained single and upheld her vow of chastity. Another nun, Sister Theresa, who was with Sister Ani in the same convent during that period, also returned home. Due to health reasons, she later married. She is still alive today and affectionately known as Grandma De Ren.

Although the inability to continue their religious life might seem like a loss or source of regret on the surface, these two sisters played a crucial role in the survival of Yanjing Church. Upon returning home, Sister Ani continued to live a life of devotion, even without a community or fellow companions. Local government officials, aiming to suppress the church and the believers’ enthusiasm for their faith, repeatedly pressured and tempted Sister Ani to give up her vow of chastity and marry. To avoid being caught, Sister Ani moved constantly, like a guerrilla fighter, changing her hiding place every day. What needs to be acknowledged and celebrated is the fact that even in such difficult and dangerous times, she took on the responsibility of shepherding the believers. Sister Ani used her spare time to secretly teach catechism to her family and neighbors. Fearing denunciation, her catechism classes were held one-on-one, behind closed doors, in whispers. When a newborn needed baptism, Sister Ani became the most trusted person to perform the sacrament. Today, many middle-aged believers were baptized by Sister Ani herself.

In early 1980s, the faithful in Yanjing Church were finally able to live

out their faith life freely and openly. Since there was no resident priest, Sister Ani became the only shepherd whom the Yanjing Church could rely on. She led the faithful in establishing a temporary place of prayer, where they gathered daily to pray, and she took responsibility for all internal and external affairs of the parish. For many consecutive years, Sister Ani was often the only woman among a group of Buddhist monks at the Changdu regional CPPCC (Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference) meetings. This became one of the proudest aspects of Yanjing Church after the restoration of religious freedom.

From 1980 to 1996, when Yanjing finally had its first Tibetan parish priest, Sister Ani, although not an ordained member of the clergy, became the trusted shepherd in the hearts of the faithful as she let a synodal church evolve from the grassroots. To this day, although the elderly nun has been deceased for many years, her profound influence on the faith continues to inspire Yanjing faithful to loyally follow God.

Sister Ani's nephew, Aduo, is now a member of the lay leadership group of Yanjing Church. He shared that, due to his limited abilities and energy, he often feels unable to better serve the church community and has considered resigning from his position. However, whenever he wants to evade responsibility, the words his aunt Sister Ani spoke on her deathbed echo in his heart: "You must give your all to the Church. No matter what happens, never abandon the Church." It is precisely the power of his aunt's example that has kept Aduo steadfast in his mission, diligently and faithfully serving Yanjing Church.

In the growth and development of Yanjing Church, there were not only female leaders like Sister Ani but also countless grandmothers (known as *Ayi* in Tibetan) and mothers who served as key figures in passing on the faith. As previously mentioned, when the faithful gathered for prayer, most of the time it was grandmothers or mothers who carried or held their children as they attended. The seeds of faith were sown in the hearts of young children through the sound of prayer chanting and conversations of faith sharing between these *Ayi* or mothers and the children. When former priest Luren Di shared his vocation experience, he repeatedly

emphasized the profound impact of his mother's faith and the witness of her faith-filled life on him. Today, women believers remain at the forefront of passing on the faith in Yanjing Church.

In recent years, a new avenue for transmitting faith has emerged: interfaith marriages with Buddhists. Many Catholic women, through their life example, have inspired their Buddhist husbands to convert to Catholicism. Though the interfaith marriage does not necessarily lead to the conversion of the Buddhist members of the family, Catholic women believers have become exemplary models of fostering inter-religious harmony. The home of a Catholic woman believer Amoli is a true example of how Buddhism and Catholicism can coexist harmoniously within one family. Amoli herself and her two sons are Catholics, though her husband who is a government official, and her two daughters-in-law are Buddhists. When discussing how to handle issues of differing faiths, she shared:

I told my two sons: "You are marrying them, so you must respect each other's beliefs. No one should demand or force the other to change their faith." My younger son's two children were baptized into the Catholic Church, while my older son's children, due to the request of their maternal grandmother's family, were raised as Buddhists. At the time, my older son was a bit troubled. I advised him: "If they want the children to be Buddhists, let it be; don't let this issue cause family disharmony. Besides, when the children grow up, they can still choose the religion they want to follow."

In her relationship with her Buddhist daughters-in-law, Amoli did not act with a narrow-minded attitude by rejecting or forcing them to convert. Instead, she embodied Christ's all-embracing love, acting as an open-minded, wise, and farsighted mother-in-law who understood when to compromise. She recognized that love is the most important factor, and that conversion of faith must be rooted in love. This ordinary Tibetan mother demonstrated through her actions the Church's guidance on interreligious dialogue: "An attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions. . . . This dialogue is . . . a matter of 'being open to them, sharing their joys and

sorrows” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 250).

In the present-day Yanjing Church, although there are no female leaders like Sister Ani, one of the key figures in the community is still an extraordinary woman: Sister Magdalena, the church caretaker. She has remained unmarried, dedicating herself fully to Yanjing Church for over twenty years. From preparing liturgies to leading daily prayers, from cleaning and decorating the church to cultivating vegetables and grapes, from ringing the bell to remind believers to gather, to welcoming tourists and pilgrims—every aspect of Yanjing Church’s life, from its grounds to its people, is cared for and nurtured by her. Although her formal education is limited and her Mandarin is not fluent, her simplicity, piety, and quiet dedication have earned her the reputation of being a “saint” in the hearts of local believers and pilgrims alike.

Conclusion

In many parts of the world and even in some church communities, women continue to face obstacles in accessing equal opportunities to serve, minister, and exercise leadership. This ongoing struggle represents a form of limitation but also an invitation into what might be called a “synodal third space”—a space that exists at the margins of formal recognition, yet is rich with potential for dialogue, discernment, and transformation. In this third space, women are not passive observers but active participants in the church’s synodal journey, as it has been shown in the life and work of Yanjing women believers. They contribute insights, foster communion, and embody the church’s mission in ways that transcend official structures.

In today’s world, while women in these contexts may seem confined to informal or partially acknowledged roles, their presence and contributions cultivate a pilgrimage of hope. Through exercising God-given gifts and talents in ministries, catechesis, pastoral care, and social engagement, they have shown the world and the church that they are co-creators of the church’s future. The third space thus becomes a place of graced innovation, where the boundaries of institutional recognition are

expanded. By embracing the third space as a locus of discernment and co-creation, the church can appreciate women as agents of renewal, bringing new perspectives, creative energies, and prophetic courage into the ongoing synodal journey. Thus, the third space is both a challenge and a promise: a liminal space where women's voices are shaping the church's path, and where the church itself learns to listen, adapt, grow, and walk with all people of God in the spirit of synodality.

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