

MODERN
CHINESE
THEOLOGIES

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Volume 1

Heritage and Prospect

Chloë Starr editor

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Despite their many differences in approach, both Wang Weifan and Li Zhizao perform a similar historicizing of the stele for contemporary readers, using it to comment on the present: for Li, this is with the Jesuit mission in mind, for Wang, with the reclamation of Chinese culture after the Cultural Revolution and the revitalization of the Chinese people. Both use the text to speak to the church and the state and broader social issues. The question of translation does not arise for either in the way it has exercised non-Chinese readers of the stele and histories of its reception: both writers assume their own capability in reading what the text meant in its time and in relating that to their own Christian understanding. Ecumenical questions—moving between the church of the East/Orthodox theologies and their own traditions—did not disturb Li or Wang, whether through ignorance or choice, and both bridged many hundred years of divide (and language, and ethnicity). Traditions of text reading and scholarship provide a shared language and shared habitus for these scholars, and the practice of text-reading as a Chinese method of theology unites seventeenth-century Catholic with twentieth-century Protestant.

CHINESE CATHOLIC NUNS AND THEIR THEOLOGY OF MINISTRY

Michel Chambon, *National University of Singapore*

This paper presents the role that nuns have played in the Catholic Church in China and discusses their underlying theology of ministry.¹ As numerous as diocesan priests, and belonging to diocesan orders that share similar structures and functioning from place to place, nuns are deeply involved in the pastoral care of Chinese dioceses. But how can one best describe their ecclesial role? What does it say about the Church as a whole?

To answer these questions, this article elaborates on ethnographic material collected between 2015 and 2017 and presented in an article “Chinese Catholic Nuns and their Organization of Religious Life in Contemporary China.”² In continuity with this socio-historical analysis of Chinese religious orders, the present article argues that the Church in China has generated a consensus on ministry that is quite distinct from the rest of the worldwide Catholic Church and rooted in its particular history and context. In the People’s Republic of China, nuns are a constitutive part of the diocesan clergy and their collective position is best described as a diaconal ministry. This Chinese consensus on ministry does not necessarily contradict the Catholic Tradition but manifests one localization of the Church.

The article proceeds in five steps. First, I briefly summarize how the Catholic Church in China has gradually developed quite distinct religious orders. After presenting an overview of how Catholic religious orders usually operate around

1 I would like to thank sisters Janet Carroll, Marinei Pessanha Alves, Theresa Shi, Mathias Guo, and other Chinese nuns who supported me during my research. This paper has also greatly benefited from the encouraging support of Chloë Starr and Stephanie Wong.

2 Chambon, “Chinese Catholic Nuns and their Organization of Religious Life in Contemporary China.” *Religions* 10 (7), 2019: 447.

the world, I underline how Chinese ones have tended to become uniformly multivalent, regional, and diocesan. Then, I explain how as a French Catholic theologian I position myself in this effort to uncover the theology of ministry in which Chinese nuns serve their communities. This clarified, I connect this paper with broader ecclesial debates and revisit conversations about women's ministry that, over the past fifty years, have occurred at various levels of the Catholic Church. The following section discusses how in China, there is an ecclesial consensus about the permanent existence of a formally institutionalized, officially blessed but not ordained diaconal ministry that women belonging to diocesan religious orders fulfill. I conclude by connecting this theology of ministry to the discipline of sacraments in order to suggest further adjustments to strengthen the involution³ of the Church in China.

An Overview of Catholic Religious Orders in China and Elsewhere

Catholic Religious Orders

In the Catholic Church, religious orders are usually formed of Christians who take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In contrast to the "secular clergy"⁴ serving local dioceses, consecrated people are not necessarily ordained. Their vows constitute their core identity, and often, their religious congregation is their primary community of belonging. Over the past centuries, Western Christianity, and later Roman Catholicism, has constantly encouraged religious orders to specify their identity and spirituality. Often, they identify a charism—such as contemplative prayer, a particular spiritual tradition, *ad gentes* missionary work,

3 To characterize the changes and complexification of a social system, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz uses the notion of "involution" to avoid terms like "evolution" or "revolution." In a modern context, those terms are politically and ideologically loaded. By contrast, "involution" emphasizes how a cultural system necessarily relies on internal resources to address external forces and challenges, and how through this integrative process, it successfully adapts and perpetuates itself. Thus, continuity and change are not a mere opposition between internal and external elements but the integrative collaboration of the two. See Clifford Geertz, *Agricultural Involution the Process of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. Monographs and Papers, 11. (Berkeley: Published for the Association of Asian Studies by University of California Press, 1963).

4 The notion of "secular clergy" is a medieval category distinguishing between clerics belonging to religious orders and governed by a "rule"—the regular clergy—and those who serve under the authority of a local bishop—the secular clergy.

preaching, and so on—as being the core foundation of their religious commitment. Thus, this charism becomes their distinct marker within the vast diversity of Catholic orders.

Unlike the secular clergy devoted to the pastoral and multifaceted service of the people of God present within the delimited territory of a diocese, religious orders are not bound to a territory nor a population—they operate at a trans-regional level—even though they may cultivate specific ties with particular places.⁵ Benedictines, Dominicans, Jesuits, Carmelites each hold to a specific rule defining their spirituality, framing their apostolic activities, and outlining the power structure of their institutions. Therefore, they are often called "regular clergy" in reference to the rule that defines their religious life, belonging, and charism.

Yet, Catholic orders are tremendously diverse. While most have a superior general holding authority on the entire network of local communities or convents, the Order of St. Benedict does not. Each Benedictine abbey is autonomous. The identity of orders can evolve over time. For example, the Sisters of St. Andrew were contemplative nuns during the medieval period. Later, they embraced Ignatian spirituality and committed themselves to school-based education. Today, they closely collaborate with the ecumenical Taizé community and engage with various apostolates worldwide.

Finally, in addition to the variety of their charism and structures, Catholic religious orders are highly irregular in their local presence. In certain regions of the world, the historical role and the pastoral leadership of some orders is extremely important in the daily life of the faithful. Yet, elsewhere, their existence is barely known. In other parts of the world, the diocesan clergy is almost alone and local Catholics have very limited interactions with monks and nuns. Thus, the variety of orders lies not only in their nature but also in their local significance for the Church.

In sum, Catholic religious orders are characterized by three specific features. First, their effort to embrace evangelical life produces extremely diverse lifestyles and structures. Second, they each seek to specify their contribution and spirituality. Finally, most of them have a worldwide or regional presence, and yet this presence is often unevenly distributed.

5 For instance, Franciscans care for specific sites of the Holy Land and Assisi, Trappists for sites in Normandy, and Salesians for sites in Turin.

Catholic Orders in China

In my article “Chinese Catholic Nuns and the Organization of Religious Life in Contemporary China,” I detail how Chinese consecrated women rely on two specific traditions to shape and define their religious life today. The first tradition is that of the consecrated virgins—or more properly named the *beatas*, the blessed ones.⁶ This ancient institution was widely present in Europe from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century,⁷ and during the seventeenth century, it was introduced in multiple parts of China to support the rapid growth of the Church.⁸ In this model of religious life, individual women chose not to marry but under the blessing of their bishop, served local communities. After taking private vows, they lived with their relatives or within a distinct building of the village to help with pious activities, children’s education, and religious rituals. Without belonging to a religious order or embracing conventual life, they created horizontal associations to train new *beatas*.

In China, *beatas* were crucial for the apostolate among Chinese women who, in late imperial China, were often segregated from public life.⁹ During periods of persecution, they gained more importance by taking care of religious education, administering baptism, visiting the sick, and gathering people for prayer meetings. Most of the time, they lived within their parents’ household and did not wear specific clothing.¹⁰ Today, this model of religious life is still alive either

6 In “Chinese Catholic Nuns,” I argue that the term “virgin”—and its sexual connotation—should be avoided and replaced by the traditional term “beata.”

7 See, e.g., René Lagier, “Une Institution Vellave: Les Béates.” *Cahiers de La Haute-Loire*, Revue d’Etudes Locales, 1979: 131–68; Intxaustegi, Nere Jone. “‘Beatas,’ ‘Beaterios’ and Convents: The Origin of the Basque Female Conventual Life.” *Imago Temporis: Medium Aevum*, no. 11, 2017: 329–341; Laurey Braguier, *Servantes de Dieu. Les Béates de La Couronne de Castille (1450–1600)*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2019).

8 Robert E. Entenmann, “Christian Virgins in Eighteenth-Century Sichuan,” in *Christianity in China, From the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, ed. Daniel H. Bays, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 180–94; Eugenio Menegon, “Child Bodies, Blessed Bodies: The Contest Between Christian Virginity and Confucian Chastity.” *Nan Nü* 6 (2) 2004: 177–240; R. G. Tiedemann, “Controlling the Virgins: Female Propagators of the Faith and the Catholic Hierarchy in China.” *Women’s History Review* 17 (4) 2008: 501–20; R. G. Tiedemann, “Chinese Female Propagators of the Faith in Modern China: The Tortuous-Transition from the ‘Institute of Virgins’ to Diocesan Religious Congregations.” *Religions & Christianity in Today’s China* VIII (2) 2018: 52–72.

9 Kang Zhijie 康志杰, *Jidu de xinniang: Zhongguo Tianzhujiao zhenmü yanjiu 基督的新娘: 中國天主教貞女研究* (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui kexueyuan, 2013).

10 See Nadine Amsler, *Jesuits and Matriarchs: Domestic Worship in Early Modern China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018).

in its traditional form in places like Fujian or through its exemplary influence on contemporary religious life.¹¹ Yet, the number of *beatas* has drastically declined over the last twenty years and vocations are rare.

After the Opium Wars (1839–1842 and 1856–1860) and the creation of European charitable organizations funding Catholic missions, the number of Western missionaries in China increased quickly and the role of the *beatas* had to be reshaped. While missionaries were reestablishing hierarchical control over the Church in China and implementing a post-Tridentine approach to Catholicism, they also worked at redefining and regulating the apostolate, training, and spirituality of the *beatas*. “Given the virgins’ [*beatas*] relative independence, religious initiatives and weak corporate identity, it is not surprising that from around the middle of the nineteenth century the European clergy promoted the idea of establishing Chinese religious sisterhoods to cultivate their religious lives and establish proper ecclesiastical control over them.”¹² Thus, the *beatas* were usually encouraged to form new communities and follow a Westernized model of religious life. This involution was inspired by the second main tradition that informs religious life in China: the missionary congregations. From the late nineteenth century until the end of World War II, many Catholic missionary congregations planted themselves in China and reshaped the ways the Church manifests itself. In partnership with male missionaries, female religious orders from the Western world sent countless groups of nuns to establish schools, orphanages, hospitals, leprosaria, and other “modern” institutions. While colonial powers were pointing at foot binding, polygamy, and female infanticide to portray Chinese civilization as oppressive toward women,¹³ the Catholic Church worked at reconfiguring the ways Chinese women embrace religious life and access to ecclesial leadership. Nonetheless, as Tiedemann writes, “the long and sometimes tortuous road toward the creation of indigenous institutes of women . . . did not produce any fully recognized indigenous female congregations before 1949. Instead, a great variety of Chinese Catholic religious communities of women had come into being, ranging from rather loose pious unions of virgins [*beatas*] to a few

11 See Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui, *Women, Religion, and Space in China: Islamic Mosques & Daoist Temples, Catholic Convents & Chinese Virgins* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 143; Chambon, “Chinese Catholic Nuns.”

12 Tiedemann, “Chinese Female Propagators of the Faith in Modern China,” 61.

13 See Kang, *Jidu de xinniang*, 494.

properly constituted institutes of diocesan right, on the verge of full papal approbation."¹⁴

After 1949 and the departure of foreign priests, nuns, and bishops, Chinese religious sisterhoods and institutes were soon dismantled by the new regime. Many Chinese nuns returned to a life similar to the one of the beatas. While conventual and collective institutions disappeared, Chinese nuns went back to their hometowns to discreetly support religious practice and education within local Catholic communities. Based at their parents' home without any distinctive sign, they were critical in maintaining an ecclesial continuity. After 1979 and the reopening of China, one of their tasks was often as a kind of liaison officer guiding foreign ecclesial visitors who circulated in China and searched for Catholic communities. During the late 1980s to early 2000s, various lay patrons, priests, and bishops also encouraged the beatas to regenerate religious orders in order to support the rebirth of the Church. With the increase of female vocations, many dioceses created a religious order, a congregation of diocesan right devoted to the service of local parishes.

Some thirty years later, 3,170 Chinese women belong to eighty-seven registered religious congregations, and 1,400 more belong to thirty-seven unregistered congregations.¹⁵ This means that most dioceses have their own order, each hosting an average of thirty-six nuns. A vast majority of these women are in their forties to fifties and vocations are now dropping. While individual beatas, sometimes organized in informal sisterhoods, continue to exist, diocesan congregations of various sizes have tended to become the dominant form of religious life in contemporary China. Some may have only a dozen members while others count up to two hundred nuns.

Depending on their size, the local socio-political context, their financial resources, and the relation with the bishop—four aspects that can greatly impact the reality of Chinese religious orders—these congregations engage with a variety of apostolic work. Most of the time, they support nearby parishes where a few nuns live and help with catechism, religious services, and housekeeping. But a growing number of congregations have a majority of their members performing non-parish-based apostolates as well. In the same congregation, some nuns may serve in a parish, some run an elderly home for laypeople, some offer informal healthcare service, and others preach at retreats for laypeople in search

of spiritual renewal. Most of these relatively new apostolates are done from their convents where an increasing proportion of nuns reside. Consequently, on the one hand Chinese nuns have tended to strengthen conventual life and to increase the devotional and spiritual life of their community. As a congregation, nuns spend more time together and in their chapel. On the other hand, nuns have diversified their interactions with laypeople and non-Catholics, spending more time outside of traditional parishes.

Consequently, China is witnessing the emergence of a distinct type of religious order present within each province of the country as a stable ecclesial entity. These institutions of diocesan right operate at a regional level usually defined by the territory of the diocese they belong to. They are multivalent in their apostolate and perform an increasing number of highly specialized services.¹⁶ Within these orders, various generations of women have different aspirations and sensibilities that they negotiate together. Younger members are often searching for deeper spiritual and communal life while older nuns insist on the importance of insuring the material autonomy of the order and on the necessary religious proximity with the faithful. This intergenerational diversity combined with a rapidly changing society has encouraged Chinese congregations to remain engaged in parishes, increase their conventual life, and diversify their apostolates. These multiple commitments not only secure various sources of financial and social capital but also help nuns to express their many interests and skills.

In terms of power structure and authority, these female corporations stand under the leadership of their local bishop. His personality can greatly impact the ecclesial, financial, and spiritual situation of an order. Yet, Chinese congregations manifest a rather fluid, egalitarian, and democratic approach to authority and obedience. When the bishop does not interfere, nuns stand as an autonomous community that elects a superior and council members every four years. Since those persons can be reelected only once to the same office, Chinese orders tend to frequently rotate who stands as Mother Superior. Unlike elsewhere in the Catholic world, there is therefore no long-lasting matriarchal figure within Chinese religious orders. These institutions rather remain horizontal in their functioning, and responsibilities circulate among members.

Yet, Chinese nuns often face institutional misogyny. Relationships to priests and bishops are often marked by tensions and condescension. In some places, the bishop may try to enforce a certain agenda upon his diocesan congregation

14 Tiedemann, "Chinese Female Propagators of the Faith in Modern China," 71.

15 See *Religions & Christianity in Today's China*, 2018, Vol. VIII, No. 2, pp. 26–51, ISSN: 2192–9289, www.china-zentrum.de. At the same time, the country counts a total of 3,800 priests and 112 bishops.

16 Jaschok and Shui, *Women, Religion, and Space in China*, 223.

without consulting its members. Some abusive and scandalous examples have even made the news.¹⁷ At the same time, many priests tend to position themselves as a hierarchical superior and to ignore the voice of nuns. But institutional misogyny can also come from the state and works in favor of diocesan orders. State officials easily disregard the role played by nuns that are often perceived as naive and uneducated. Compared to the priests who are closely scrutinized by the state, nuns are less monitored and enjoy a higher political autonomy. However, the scope of their action is often limited by their financial resources. The faithful, who are not freed from misogyny either, usually prefer to make donations to their priests and bishops. Nuns often struggle to secure a minimal income.

Finally, we need to bear in mind that the Church in China has almost no national or international religious orders.¹⁸ Due to political constraints, the vast majority of Chinese religious orders and priests are attached to a particular diocese, and exchanges between dioceses are closely monitored by civil authorities. Unlike in other parts of the world where Catholic communities can benefit from transregional religious orders, the Church in China operates under diocesan clergy only. Various circulations within the country and abroad do occur, but they remain informal and do not diminish the preeminent role of the secular clergy.

Chinese nuns, therefore, do not constitute a juxtaposition of individual figures, and their orders are not reducible to a series of local particularities. Even though a variety of situations exists—including cases where a diocesan order is in conflict with its bishop or where financial resources are so limited that nuns are entirely dependent on local priests—the Church in China is generating a distinct type of religious life that needs to be acknowledged. Without that, Chinese nuns vanish behind the diversity of their situations, their ecclesial ministry remains mostly unacknowledged, and foreign observers are left with the preconceptions they already had on Catholic orders. This being said, we also need to underscore how the ecclesial position of Chinese nuns is neither self-defined nor simply predetermined by universal Canon Law. Rather, it emerges within a network of negotiations, expectations, pre-existing ministries, and in relation to socio-ecclesial needs. The status and roles of Chinese nuns result from an

17 See <https://www.ucanews.com/news/chinese-nuns-end-hunger-strike-still-seek-compensation/79597> — accessed on July 1, 2020.

18 There are only a very few exceptions, fewer than five for the entire country.

ongoing conversation sustained by the many actors of Chinese Catholicism. Together, they define a certain consensus on the nature and functions of Chinese religious orders. While most Catholic orders across the globe are trans-regional, shaped around a singularizing charism, and diverse in their organization and identity, Chinese ones tend to be homogeneously regional, multivalent in their apostolates, and quite similar in their organization and identity.

This gap between Chinese and non-Chinese orders has been noticed by numerous ecclesial observers. The fact that Chinese congregations engage with multiple apostolates simultaneously without defining a specific charism seems puzzling to many. Thus, two schools of thought seek to make sense of these Chinese characteristics. Some approach Chinese ecclesial differences as the mere result of political interference, and in other words, as a distortion that should ultimately disappear.¹⁹ This interpretation, however, carries many underlying assumptions, among which are that Catholic institutions should be everywhere the same and the Chinese state is necessarily antagonist to the Church. Other observers argue that Chinese ecclesial particularities come from the cultural distinctiveness of Chinese civilization.²⁰ Thus, they may stand as a gift of the Holy Spirit mediated through the history of this nation.²¹ Again, most ramifications of this approach remain unsatisfactory because their underlying notions of culture are extremely diverse and often arbitrary. Who gets to define “Chineseness”? Nonetheless, these two approaches are questionable because they assume that changes and differences within the Church are primarily coming from outside of ecclesial communities. Variations are likewise initiated outside of the Church (the communist state or the Chinese culture). Is there not a risk in presenting the body of Christ as fundamentally “passive” or even merely “resistant?” How do we consider the generative action of the Holy Spirit within the Chinese ecclesial community itself?

19 Ze-Kiun Joseph Zen, *For Love of My People I Will Not Remain Silent: A Series of Eight Lectures in Defense and Clarification of the 2007 Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Church in the People's Republic of China* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2019).

20 Some may wonder whether those particularities are rooted in or inspired by other Chinese religious traditions (e.g., Daoist and Buddhist monastic traditions). However, the data collected during interviews and participant observations do not suggest such a parallel. I personally consider that historical legacy and socio-political constraints have been much more significant factors in the particularizing involution of the Church in China.

21 Edmond Tang, “The Cosmic Christ—the Search for a Chinese Theology.” *Studies in World Christianity* 1 (2) 1995: 131–42; Lo, Lung-Kwong, “The Nature of the Issue of Ancestral Worship among Chinese Christians.” *Studies in World Christianity* 9 (1) 2003: 30–42.

Consequently, this paper proposes to reassess the theological significance of Chinese religious orders and to elaborate an alternative interpretation of their particularities. How, from a Catholic standpoint, to describe their position in the Church?

Responding from a Situated Standpoint

As a layperson trained in Catholic theology, a cultural anthropologist, and a non-Chinese man, my goal is to reflect on what the Church in China has collectively produced regarding the contribution of religious women to the Church and the world. I intend to theologially characterize the consensual and shared practices of the Church in China. Thus, I do not seek to solely summarize the theological discourse of some Catholic nuns or professional theologians, nor the various statements made by Catholic institutions. The core interest of my theological enterprise is the action of the Church in China, the Body of Christ. In other words, my theological work is built upon ecclesial practices understood as the primary textual corpus—a thick web of meaning—of investigation.

Knowing that the Church is a mother giving life to many practices and institutions, I approach theology as an effort to dialogically question, discern, and designate these actions and structures. While giving birth is one thing, naming is another. It propels a child to a new degree of legitimacy and belonging. Similarly, by helping to name what the Church is actually doing, theologians participate in the collective effort of the Church who seeks to welcome, sustain, and acknowledge the fruits the Holy Spirit is giving to her. Thus, my starting point is the many religious orders that the Church in China is deploying. If social science helps to characterize them, theology seeks to evaluate how they speak of the Church, the Body of Christ, and how they reflect something of the triune God. Furthermore, it goes without saying that this naming enterprise comes in dialogue with the Scriptures, the Magisterium,²² and the Tradition.

Ethnographic investigation suggests that the particularities of Chinese congregations are shaped by various actors such as historical models of religious life, younger and older generations of Chinese women, male bishops and priests, as well as broader socio-political constraints. Thus, the ecclesial service and position of consecrated women is neither self-arrogated nor antagonistic

22 In the Catholic tradition, the Magisterium refers to the teaching capacity of the Church and to her ability to discern the authentic interpretation of the Word of God. It is enacted by the authority of the Church, the college of bishops paired with the bishop of Rome, the pope.

to other ecclesial entities. On the contrary, it emerges through a broad ecclesial discernment involving the many parts of the body of Christ. Their ministry is a multi-vocal reality that emerges through encounter and dialogue, but also through occasional tensions and contradictions. Consequently, I argue that there is a dynamic but rather stable Chinese consensus about how to share responsibilities, services, and duties among the various members of the Church, including the nuns.

To reflect on this consensus that shapes female religious life, I propose to elaborate on the notion of the *sensus fidei fidelium*—the sense of faith. This theological notion of the Tradition claims that the whole people of God have a capacity that unflinchingly adheres to the true faith, penetrates it more deeply with right judgment, and applies it more fully in daily life.²³ Even without verbalizing it or without the explicit approval of the Magisterium, the Body of Christ guided by the Holy Spirit has the capacity to intuitively discern and follow the calling of the only Heavenly Father. Often applied to notions related to dogmatism and morals, I suggest applying the *sensus fidei fidelium* to theology of ministry.²⁴ Which kind of theology of ministry does this Chinese consensus manifest? What does it say about the nuns' ministry?

To acknowledge and articulate how this Chinese consensus participates in the Catholic Tradition, I also suggest elaborating on Pope Francis's reflection on the polyhedron.²⁵ Several times Pope Francis has highlighted that the more we see and talk about the world as a sphere—a globe—the more we risk reinforcing processes of standardization and homogenization. Unquestioned discourses on a "globalized world" threaten to foster a single worldview that denies regional variations and particularities. In contrast, the polyhedron, a multi-sided geometric figure, acknowledges the unity of the human family yet does not erase the particular angles of its many facets, cultures, and socio-political traditions.

Similarly, my present effort to name the emerging theology of ministry that the Church in China is collectively generating seeks to better perceive how Catholicism is not a mere "global Church," an institution made of supposedly homogeneous discourses and practices. Rather, I argue that it might be best apprehended as a polyhedron shaped by many traditions centered on the unique incarnated Christ. For instance, it is common knowledge that multiple personal ordinariates

23 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 92–93.

24 *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

25 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 236; *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), 4.

and autonomous Churches coexist within the same Catholic Church. In this concert of Churches and communities, a sign of ecclesial diversity is that most Catholic priests of Eastern Catholic Churches and ordinariates are usually married. Another example of ecclesial diversity comes through local history. As mentioned earlier, history creates quite different equilibriums between secular and regular clergies. In some regions, the diocesan clergy is the backbone of ecclesial life while in others, religious orders may have a much more significant influence. Finally, variations are also present within the ordained clergy itself. While Vatican II and Pope Paul VI have restored a permanent diaconate, vast regions of the Catholic world do not have such deacons.²⁶

In other words, ecclesial diversity—and different theologies of ministry—are not a specificity of peripheral communities. They are the core identity of the Catholic Church because distinct liturgical traditions, particular ecclesial histories, and cultural differences can together manifest the creative and triune nature of the Christian God. Yet, these variations remain a challenge for the communion and unity of the Church. There is a permanent and dialectical tension between diversity and unity. Thus, theological investigation remains necessary to discern how to articulate the relation of particularities to the whole mission of the Church.

The Catholic Magisterium and the Question of Women's Ministry

To participate in this effort to name what the Church in China is manifesting and to situate it within the larger communion of the worldwide Church, a second background factor involves broader and recent conversations that Catholic entities have developed about women's ministry. Although I do not intend to offer a comprehensive overview of the question, one cannot ignore the vast discussion to rethink the contribution of women to Church ministry underway since Vatican II.²⁷

A first involution occurred in 1970 when Pope Paul VI granted saints Theresa of Avila and Catherine of Siena the title of doctor of the Church. Until then, no women had ever received this formal recognition. A doctor of the Church—an

antique title given to a few figures who have made a significant contribution to theology and doctrine—was implicitly a man. Later, Pope John Paul II did the same with Thérèse de Lisieux, and Pope Benedict XVI with Hildegard of Bingen. Thus, four women are now officially recognized as the highest theological authority of the Catholic Tradition. They are not anymore considered as mere “mystic” figures, a relatively loose term that acknowledges the spiritual influence of a saint, but as significant and normative contributors to the formal and intellectual teaching of the Church. Thus, gender roles within the Catholic Church do involve.

In this effort to revisit the specific contribution of women, Pope John Paul II and his successors have repeatedly talked about “the genius of women.” This expression suggests that women bring something particular to humankind and the Church, something that should be praised and acknowledged. This new formulation aims in particular at not reducing women to an idealized figure of Mary nor at diluting them into broad humankind.²⁸ Yet, the biblical theologian Anne-Marie Pelletier has questioned this growing tendency of the Magisterium to praise women without engaging in a real dialogue with them.²⁹ While an increasing number of laudable statements about women are produced, the clergy remains exclusively masculine, and until recently, most ecclesial responsibilities were given to men. Pelletier points out that in Genesis 2:23, when Adam comes to speak for the very first time, he talks about his new wife. But he does so by referring to himself—“my bones,” “my flesh.” He speaks about her as a third person as if she is not fully present. Meanwhile, Eve remains silent. Clearly, this first encounter between Adam and Eve is not yet a dialogue. The creatures, image of God, still have to complete the work of their creator to let the human couple reflect the dialogical nature of the triune God. In a similar vein, Pelletier argues that the men-shaped Magisterium does not engage yet in a real dialogue with women. More precisely, it does not let them truly participate in the magisterial dialogue of the Church.

In this effort to reconsider the role of women within the ministry of the Church, the ordination of women has been one of the most recurrent and debated questions. While the recent Magisterium has been very clear about the

26 See the decree *Ad Gentes* 16, and the motu proprio published in June 18th 1967, *Sacrum Diaconatus Ordinem*.

27 Mary J. Henold, *The Laywoman Project: Remaking Catholic Womanhood in the Vatican II Era* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

28 See *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church, July 31, 2004.

29 See Anne-Marie Pelletier, “Femmes Dans Une Ecclésiologie Intégrale.” *Transversalités* 133 (2) 2015: 95–115; “Des Femmes Avec Des Hommes, Avenir de l'Église.” *Études Janvier* (1) 2017: 47–56.

impossibility for women to receive priestly ordination, debates about diaconal ordination remain open.³⁰ In August 2016, Pope Francis established a pontifical commission in charge of investigating the historical existence of female deacons. After two years of work, participants agreed that female deacons existed historically until the Gregorian period,³¹ but members of the commission disagreed about the significance of this historical tradition for the Church today. Thus, in April 2020, Pope Francis announced the creation of a new pontifical commission to continue this study of the possibility of women deacons. With this background, let us now return to the Church in China and to the roles that nuns play within it.

How to Name the Ministry of Chinese Nuns?

Since the 1980s—and despite a real variety of situations—the Church in China has nonetheless generated religious congregations that tend to become uniformly diocesan and multivalent. What does that say about the Church in China, the Body of Christ, as it manifests and honors the presence of the Heavenly Father through the action of the Holy Spirit?

Standing within the diocesan clergy

In contrast to international congregations, Chinese religious orders avoid an industrial Taylorism of ministry and religious life. Instead of focusing on one distinctive charism—as if an order should commit itself to a specific task only—enacted across large territories, each Chinese congregation engages with a variety of services within a defined territory. During the 1980s and 1990s, nuns were mostly serving local parishes. But, the more the Church has recovered from the traumatic Maoist era and the more that Chinese society has evolved, the more Chinese nuns are engaging with relatively new forms of apostolates such as elderly care, medical service, social service with disabled persons, and so on. Administrative constraints are still important but nuns find creative ways to respond to socio-political changes without neglecting the importance of the parishes and

30 See John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, May 22, 1994. For an informed introduction to the question of diakonia, see the document published by International Theological Commission, *From the Diakonia of Christ to the Diakonia of the Apostles*, 2002.

31 Phyllis Zagano, Bernard Pottier, Guy Jobin, Bernard Collette-Dučić, and Cory Andrew Labrecque. “Que Savons-Nous Des Femmes Diacones?” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 74 (3) 2018: 437–45.

the prayer of the hours. Depending on the local context, each religious order discerns where to orient its efforts. Thus, Chinese convents—usually located near the cathedral—are becoming a hive for social and pastoral care. Nuns teach, clean, preach, cook, counsel, and provide medical care.³² For them, the service of the Church and society is not limited to a single task or spirituality that would set them apart, even within the parishes. Inspired by the tradition of the *beatas*, their sense of care is highly holistic.

While specific apostolate and charism do not define Chinese religious orders per se, the boundaries of their diocese are gaining more significance. During elaborate liturgies widely publicized, nuns take vows within the hands of their local bishop or his delegate. Through this crucial moment of their religious life, but also throughout the regular functioning of their order, nuns associate with their local Church. They form the religious order of a particular diocese. Even though some nuns may circulate across provinces as priests do, religious orders are not outside the support of the local Church. Under the authority and protection of the bishop, they are a part of the ministry of the diocese, serving in most parishes and diocesan apostolates. In the face of financial adversity or internal crisis, it is the bishop—and the diocese as a whole—who is responsible for the integrity of the order. There is a shared consensus that nuns and their diocese must pray and care for each other.

In view of this diocesan belonging, as well as the multivalence of the services fulfilled by the nuns, one must acknowledge that these women belong to the diocesan clergy. Usually, the Catholic Church keeps the term “clergy” for ordained ministers only—a group of men who stand in a dual relationship with the laity and who receive through the sacrament of Holy Orders a formal and permanent service to fulfill.³³ However, in China, the nuns engage with the wholeness of diocesan pastoral care as well. Their service is obviously different from the priestly ministry, but their commitment is no less multivalent, permanent, and absolute. They take public vows promising perpetual chastity and poverty, but also obedience to their order—and subsequently, to their bishop. Furthermore, the faithful perceive them as being part of the “professional and “consecrated” body of people who take care of the diocese. With the priests, they are the other arm of the bishop.

32 Chambon, “Chinese Catholic Nuns,” 12.

33 (Canons 232–93). Yet, this theoretical approach promoted since the Tridentine period remains at odds with religious orders. Nuns and monks officially belong to the laity and yet, in practice, remain clearly distinguished from lay people.

Unlike in other countries where a rapid decline in religious vocations has led nuns to disappear from the shared life of local Catholic communities, Chinese ones remain remarkably present and visible within the day-to-day activities of local parishes and dioceses. Like priests, nuns are a familiar part of the Church in China. Both under the authority of the bishop, priests and nuns are set apart to serve and nurture local communities. They both wear distinctive clothes³⁴ and commit themselves to celibacy and obedience. Both come from the local community of faithful and compose the group of "religious professionals" who permanently care for the Church. Thus, it is appropriate to say that, in China, nuns belong to the diocesan clergy.

Enacting the diaconia of the Church

In their shared service to the diocese, Chinese priests and nuns are still different, and their differences are not denied. Rather, they continue to be reassessed and institutionalized.

Government cadres, for instance, ask priests to spend a significant part of their time joining various official meetings and training, and the administration itself subsequently reinforces priests' leadership role. Meanwhile, nuns are usually disregarded by local officials and can devote themselves to the pragmatic service of the population. Then, inside parishes, priests continue to stand as the source of authority. Because of their importance for sacramental life, they remain an *alter Christus*, another Christ. When a priest and a few nuns serve within the same parish, a hierarchical relationship exists between them. The priest is the pastor. Yet, at the diocesan level, this relationship is far subtler than a vertical one because the bishop remains the ultimate reference, the only head of the diocesan community. The presbyterium as a whole has no authority over the nuns. Ultimately, female diocesan orders respond to their bishop. In other words, the ecclesial ministry of the nuns is shaped by a whole network of relationships in which the administration, bishops, priests, and faithful take part.

At the diocesan level, Chinese nuns and their orders provide the means to gather the necessary human and material resources to effectively assist those in need. Freed from a leadership role fulfilled by the priests and the bishop, as well as the administration of the sacraments, they pay attention to a humanity that often remains fragile, broken, and poor. In relation to the various figures and resources of their diocese, nuns generate actions to assist those in spiritual,

intellectual, material, and medical needs. Sometimes bold in their approach, often courageous and thoughtful, religious women humbly engage with elderly care, home visits, medical work, and spiritual counseling.

Consequently, it is important to recognize how Chinese nuns dedicate themselves to works of charity and enact the *diaconia* of the local Church. What they do is not merely the Christian charity that every Christian is called to perform. Nuns act within a network of responsibilities and reliability to sustain a collective answer to the difficulties of their society. Their cooperative action, tailored to assist those in need, speaks on behalf of the whole Church. Their charitable action is highly institutionalized and speaks on behalf of their diocese. Thus, Chinese religious orders fulfill a formal ministry that is primarily diaconal.

This Chinese enactment of ministry is not necessarily in contradiction to the Magisterium. In October 2009, Pope Benedict XVI revised several canons concerning the sacraments of holy orders and marriage. In a *motu proprio* named *Omnium in Mentem*, the bishop of Rome provided an alternative understanding of the three ranks of the ordained ministry. While Vatican II and the subsequent 1983 Code of Canon Law have considered them intrinsically linked so that, each according to his grade manifests Christ the Head, Pope Benedict has brought the Canon Law to differentiate the diaconal ministry. "Those who are constituted in the order of episcopate or presbyterate receive the office and faculty of acting in the person of Christ the Head, while deacons receive the power to serve the people of God in the diaconia of liturgy, word and charity" (canon 1009). In this configuration, the diaconate is understood as something quite distinct and autonomous from the rest of the ordained ministry. This allows one to envision diaconal ministry as being something apart from the rest of the Church's institutionalized ministry. Consequently, I argue that the Church in China is following a rather similar theology of ministry that recognizes a distinction between deacons and the paired priests-bishop. In the People's Republic of China, there is already an ecclesial consensus about a formally institutionalized, officially blessed but not ordained, diaconal ministry that stands next to the ministries of ordained priests and bishops. This *diaconia* is fulfilled by consecrated women organized in diocesan religious orders and obedient to their local bishop.

Yet, Chinese nuns do not apply this technical term to define their own religious life. Rather, women I have interviewed prefer to insist on the importance of service. When I asked about their vocational journey, a vast majority of my interviewees explained that, as young women, they wanted "to serve the Church and the society." A nun is a person who takes care of people around her through

34 In some Chinese dioceses, nuns may wear secular clothes but with distinctive "modesty."

her actions and prayers. Nun Shi of Nanping reiterated that “nuns are not here to rule but to serve.”³⁵ Clearly, Chinese nuns prefer to describe themselves as “servants of the Church” who enact a life of service and prayer. They do not call themselves deacons and would not claim this title for themselves. Nonetheless, because of the way they link service and prayer while engaging with a diversity of needs, the ministry of the nuns remains the most institutionalized and visible *diaconia* of Chinese dioceses.

Reflecting the triune nature of the Christian God

To honor the diversity of their apostolates, Chinese nuns usually form small groups of coworkers and take turns to fulfil their missions. While a few nuns are primarily assigned to the elderly home, others take care of the convent and others of the adjacent dispensary. After a few years, groups are redefined and apostolates reassigned. In some cases, nuns may recruit paid lay workers or volunteers. But, either within their convent or outside, teamwork characterizes the way Chinese nuns serve. Religious women do not act alone. Instead, collaboration is a distinctive feature of their diaconal ministry.

By contrast with a parish priest or a bishop who often stands as the only episcopal or priestly minister of the community, nuns are typically encountered as a collective figure. Usually, they work two by two, or more. They all dress the same way and engage in the same work. In China, while a typical Catholic priest would appear as a singular figure, nuns stand as a plural one. In their daily apostolate and life of prayer, they depend on their consecrated colleagues and remain under the authority of their congregation and bishop. For the sacraments, they rely on the willingness of a priest or a bishop to celebrate mass and give them the sacrament of reconciliation. If priests and bishops can appear as independent and self-supporting ministers of the Church—with the risk of being self-referential—nuns are always situated within a network of dependence, authority, and accountability.

Consequently, there is an ecclesial consensus in which Chinese priests and bishops are manifesting one side of the ministry of the Church while nuns incarnate the other. The bishop and his scattered priests, acting in the person of Christ the only Head, are serving unity and authority while groups of nuns are committed to collaboration and institutionalized charity. Throughout this duality, priests and bishops testify that God is only one, nuns testify that God is the

communion of three cooperating persons, one and three, two facets of the same Christian God. Thus, the dynamic equilibrium between bishops, priests, and nuns shows that their two fundamental ministries are not in opposition. Rather, they manifest the two sides of the triune God who is permanently teaching, sanctifying, and ruling, as well as assisting, nourishing, and healing the Church.

Woman and Man, image of God

Although the style of every single bishop, priest, and nun may vary, they each often borrow from contemporary gender norms of Chinese society. In fact, members of the Chinese clergy know how to appear either masculine or feminine in order to fulfill and strengthen their apostolate. Subsequently, one may underscore how the ministry of the Church in China is gendered in a quite distinct way.

During fieldwork, I was surprised to see how the beatas navigate between different appearances. On some occasions, they would not hesitate to wear elegant and feminine outfits combined with a stylish purse and pair of shoes. Whether they walk the streets of a modern city like Fuzhou or circulate through the countryside of northern Fujian, they willingly match with local women of their generation. Similarly, nuns I have encountered in their convents and apostolates take great care of their physical appearance. Wearing a mandatory uniform made of a religious dress and a veil does not prevent them from proudly displaying signs of femininity through their ways of walking, laughing, and behaving. Indeed, Chinese nuns use cultural codes associated with charm, female discretion, and motherhood to support their diaconal ministry and the agenda of their order. In a similar vein, priests and bishops elaborate on Chinese notions of fatherhood and masculinity to strengthen their position. Through their virile body motions, as well as their way of presiding at large meals and speaking with authority, they stand as the patriarch of their Catholic community. Consequently, we need to recognize how Chinese ecclesial ministers borrow from the two main genders of their society, femininity and masculinity, to fulfill their missions. In other words, there is a genderization of the ministry.

The Tradition shows that there are many ways to let gender identities intersect with ecclesiology and theology of ministry. Localized masculinization and feminization are not the only options. For instance, generating a third gender has been a pretty common strategy to overcome tensions that lay between sexual identity, gender roles, and ecclesial ministries. In monastic traditions within which female and male communities each embrace the exact same lifestyle and

³⁵ See Chambon, “Chinese Catholic Nuns,” 7.

rules, and wear rather similar outfits, surrounding gender norms are not only challenged but surpassed. For example, Benedictine communities of male monks and female nuns structure their communal and religious life the exact same way. Yet, the biological sex of their members still matters while their related gender role vanishes before the coming of the Kingdom. Without denying sexual identity, the monastic rule makes a third gender possible. Another example comes from situations where only men represent the clergy and, at the same time, wear distinctive uniforms borrowed from what would be considered as the opposite related gender. The cassock is the most well-known example, a dress-like coverage of the celibate male body. Again, this paradoxical situation brings clergymen to belong to something other than mainstream masculinity. Those ministers collectively create a unique gender proper to their function.

Clearly, consecrated people have long shown how they can belong to something else than the masculinity or femininity of their time. There are many ways to gender ministers of the Church. However, in Chinese dioceses and parishes, the presence of feminine nuns and masculine priests at most levels of ecclesial structures suggests that ministry is made of the two sexes, and at the same time, gendered with Chinese characteristics. Instead of going for a third gender which would merge all clergy members into an alternative and eventually “neutral” category, the binary genderization of their ministries underlines the presence of the two sexes. And this can bear theological significance. The collaboration of men and women to perform an institutionalized service of the Church echoes biblical statements. It is together, in their acknowledged sexual differences, that man and woman are the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Thus, when Chinese ministers, male and female, work and serve together for the wellbeing of the diocesan Church, they are moreover the image of God.

To recap, I would like to offer a metaphor summarizing the ways the Church in China calls its nuns to participate in ministry. Rooted in a long and rich history, Chinese Catholicism has quietly developed a distinct consensus in which bishops act as the head of the diocesan community, the local Church, assisted by two hands, the priests and the nuns. Although those two groups of ministers are equal in dignity, they remain clearly distinct and hierarchized in practice. The dominant and masculine hand participates in the leading role of the bishop. With a single finger pointing to heaven, it gives direction and blessing. Meanwhile, the non-dominant and feminine hand has its five fingers fully opened to embrace, assist, and comfort the people of God. In coordination with the right hand, the feminine hand assists the head in bringing the Gospel to the Chinese nation. Thus,

the subtle—and often unspoken—power relations and collaborations occurring between Chinese bishops, priests, and religious women manifest the pastoral care of the Church. Without overloading this metaphor, I want to highlight how the Chinese approach to ministry is, despite appearances, not specifically unilineal and vertical. Echoing the trinitarian nature of God, it is also circular and dialogical. Ministry in China is made of the two sexes, it is bi-gendered, and it manifests how men and women, both, are called to dialogically served the Church.

Concluding Suggestion

This article has investigated the ecclesial role of Chinese nuns and unveiled its related theology of ministry. Based on ethnographic data, it appears that Chinese Catholicism seeks to both embrace and adapt the norms of the worldwide Catholic Church. On the one hand, it follows the modern, and post-Tridentine, normativity of Catholicism in a sense that ecclesial communities are structured along with a binary relationship between clerics and laypeople. The two are clearly distinguished and the number of ministries is relatively limited. Furthermore, the Chinese clergy is predominantly a secular and diocesan one. All ministers embrace celibacy and promise obedience to their local bishop. This contemporary structuration contrasts with other regional and historical periods of Catholicism where a wide spectrum of institutionalized ministries would blur the boundary between clerics and laypeople, and where actors like abbots, local sovereigns, or universities would have a more prominent role in the leadership of the Church.

On the other hand, the Church in China does not simply replicate contemporary norms of the worldwide Catholic Church. Rooted in a long ecclesial experience marked by its own challenges, history, and cultural expectations, Chinese Catholicism has generated female religious orders that are quite different from the rest of the world. These congregations tend to become homogeneously diocesan and multivalent in their apostolates, standing within the diocesan clergy to perform a diaconal ministry. Consequently, the Chinese clergy is made of the two sexes and informed by the two dominant gender roles of its society.

Sometimes, an excessive emphasis on the homogeneity of the Catholic Church brings certain observers to assume that the specificities of the Church in China are primarily due to political oppression and to a lack of ecclesial maturity. While these explanations are important to consider, one cannot ignore that God is always walking with God's people. By focusing only on what the Church in China is supposedly missing, one risks dismissing what God is doing in China. In

fact, ecclesial specificities may equally come from the *sensus fidei fidelium* reflecting the grace of God given to Christian communities in their particular cultural, economic, and political contexts. Therefore, without idealizing or absolutizing the subtle and moving consensus on ministry that the Church in China has generated, its particularities call for benevolent solidarity and critical attention.

Still, naming what the Church is generating in order to better recognize and strengthen what God does among God's people is not enough. Theology has also the mission to counsel. This is what this conclusion would like to offer. If the Church recognizes the Chinese theology of ministry discussed in this article as faithful to the Tradition, what could the Magisterium do to support it? How can it be even more fruitful for the Church in China and beyond? Knowing that many things have been done for and by the Church in China, I would like to propose just one suggestion. The Tradition has always approached ministry as being intimately related to the discipline of the seven sacraments. The two are mutually dependent, both standing as living realities that involve within an organic relationship. Therefore, to acknowledge and strengthen the particular diaconal ministry that Chinese religious women are effectively doing, the Church in China—in obedient dialogue with the Apostolic See—could explore the possibility, for example, to let them dispense baptism.

In practice, baptism is already deeply related to the actual ministry of Chinese nuns. In their apostolates, they constantly manifest the new life and salvation that God gives to his people. Furthermore, there is no absolute theological obstacle that would prevent such permission. Contemporary examples of Catholic women giving baptism already exist.³⁶ And in the past, Chinese beatas had often baptized children when no priest was available.³⁷ Of course, contemporary circumstances and conditions under which nuns could administer baptism would have to be defined by the Chinese conference of bishops in dialogue with the Holy See. However, an involution of the discipline of the sacraments may not only show how Chinese bishops and the Magisterium value what nuns bring, but more importantly, it may help Chinese Catholics to better acknowledge how God nourishes his people through the action of consecrated men and women. Additionally, this involution may help to manifest how the Catholic Church is not afraid to both stand as a polyhedron and to welcome Chinese characteristics.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Querida Amazonia* (2020), 99.

³⁷ Tiedemann, "Chinese Female Propagators of the Faith in Modern China," 58.

THEOLOGY AND CHURCH-BUILDING IN SHANGHAI

Divine Love Monthly

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In January 2018, a Catholic monthly, *Sheng'ai* (聖愛 *Divine Love*), sponsored by the research and publication center of the Shanghai diocese, Guangqishe 光啟社, circulated its first issue as an "internal" (*neibu* 内部) publication. The present essay takes as its material the first thirty issues of *Divine Love* (January 2018 to June 2020). It aims to show how the monthly magazine participates in an ongoing process that is the crafting of a renewed style of Catholic Chinese thinking and worshiping, a style fostered both by the cultural climate specific to Shanghai and by the appearance of a new generation of intellectuals within the Church.

The first part of this article will focus on the purpose of the publication, its format and its editorial team. The second will study the style progressively elaborated on by the editors. Part three will endeavor to read several contributions found in *Divine Love*, focusing on contrasts that can be found within the publication as a whole. Part four reflects on what the reading of the monthly may suggest as to the theological and pastoral issues faced by the Chinese Church today.

Background: Purpose, Format and Team

The editor-in-chief of *Divine Love*, Father Yuan Wei 袁偉, graduated from She-shan Seminary in Shanghai and has an MA in religious studies from Renmin University in Beijing. Although Fr. Yuan is the editor of the monthly, his mentor, Fr. Tian Yuanxiang 田愿想, a parish priest who is also the Chief Editor at the Guangqi Center, has played a central role in the launch of the magazine, defining its overall mission and recruiting a good part of the team. The vision sponsored by Fr. Tian first came to him through his studies around twenty years ago at the Institut Catholique de Paris. The team conceived of the positioning of this