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BEIJING’S “BENEDICTINE” AGE: A REPORT ON CHINA’S RENEWAL IN CATHOLIC WORSHIP

By Anthony E. Clark, Ph.D.

Confucius’ disciple, Yan Hui, once asked the Master how to become a good person. “Goodness,” the Master said, comes about when “one forms himself according to ritual.” China has never quite lost its Confucian sense of ritual, for ritual is what forms a person in goodness, and in his final exhortation to his inquisitive student, Confucius suggests that ritual forms our vision, our speech, and our actions. Little wonder, then, that when Jesuit missionaries first went to China in the late sixteenth century, one of the aspects of Christianity that attracted Chinese most was the richness of Catholic ritual. Few Roman Catholic adages appeal more to Chinese sensibilities than the axiom, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, or “The law of prayer is the law of belief”; the relationship between worship and belief is apparent in a society, such as China, wherein ritual is understood as the foundation of the human person.

Confucius’ disciples have transmitted this idea until today, just as the notion of *Lex orandi, lex credendi* was transmitted by St. Augustine’s disciple, Prosper of Aquitaine, from whom this formula derives. In the *Patrologia Latina*, we find Prosper’s assertion: “Let us consider the sacraments of priestly prayers, which having been handed down by the Apostles are celebrated uniformly throughout the whole world and in every Catholic church so that the law of praying might establish the law of believing.” China has valued few things more than tradition, continuity with the past, and the transformational value of ritual; and when China’s first converts were taught that the Holy Mass is holy because God had made it, the Mass became for Chinese Catholics the very summit of Christian life.

As I spend another year living and researching in China, I continue to witness China's vibrant Catholic culture; pews are full, young men and women light candles and pray rosaries before and after Mass, and the "Catholic culture war" between "Latin lovers" and "progressives" is less divisive here, in a culture that almost universally appreciates high ritual as a method of spiritual self cultivation 身修. My aim in this article is not to stake a claim in the liturgical debates one so often hears after Masses in America, but rather to offer an objective report on what I observe as a "Benedictine" liturgical renewal in China, where the liturgical writings and ideas of Pope Benedict XVI are enthusiastically taking root. Almost every church in China hosts a small bookstore – typically overrun with visitors after Masses – and next to the ever-popular Marian devotional books, the writings of Benedict XVI are increasingly in vogue; my most recent purchase was a Chinese translation of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (*Liyi zhi jingshen* 禮儀之精神).

Bells, Smells, and the Music of Mass

Bells and incense have defined religious experience in China for perhaps longer than they have in the West, and they are part of the transformational substance of the liturgy. Incense marks sacred places in China and bells mark sacred moments. Acolytes are sometimes so eager to indicate the moment of Consecration that they raise the bells above their head and ring them with an unabashed enthusiasm. In Beijing there are six Catholic churches, and in addition to the popular Extraordinary Rite offered at the cathedral every Sunday, the other churches have begun employ more Latin liturgies. At North Church, the most well-attended church in Beijing, the eight o'clock Sunday Mass features a professional choir, which sings classical Latin hymns during the liturgy: *Pange*

Lingua, Credo, and Ave Verum Corpis. The first announcement after Mass encouraged everyone to attend the church's new Latin classes. Rather than dismiss Latin because "no-one knows it anymore," the churches in China are beginning to teach Latin after Sunday Mass.

One of the commendable marks of Chinese Catholic practice is its successful integration of Chinese and Western cultural sensibilities. During one of my early research trips to the Papal Archives at the Vatican I looked through a seventeenth-century Chinese translation of the Tridentine Rite of Mass by Ludovico Buglio, SJ; China's Catholics have always held that both Latin and local language Masses could be fruitfully offered. The Pope then agreed, but decided to await a later time to permanently allow the Mass in Chinese – four centuries later it is at last in common use.

Surprisingly the bishops and priests of China find time in their busy pastoral lives to keep abreast of the Pope's exhortations, and after he encouraged the renewal of Latin use during his mid-day Angelus in March 2011, China's choirs began collecting Latin hymns and studying pronunciation. As I am used to hearing at Mass in France, I now hear the *Salve Regina* sung by Chinese congregations after the liturgy. In his *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ratzinger wrote that:

... the Council of Trent intervened in the culture war that had broken out. It was made a norm that liturgical music should be at the service of the Word; the use of instruments was substantially reduced; and the difference between secular and sacred music was clearly affirmed (pp. 145-146).

Thus Chinese choirs tend to avoid music that seems too "popular" in favor of more "sacred" tunes. What one notices, however, is that Chinese liturgical music derives both

from the hallowed Latin hymns of the West and from the Buddhist chanting of ancient China. Indeed the Extraordinary Rite of Mass in China commonly uses Buddhist music that has been overlaid with Catholic verse; the Mass in China has been celebrated this way since it first entered the Middle Kingdom. In either case, the music of Mass is always centered on what in China sounds sacred, and helps one become more holy.

Turning Toward the Lord

Another movement in China's "Benedictine" renewal is a response to recent liturgical scholarship, which recommends a renewed and open-minded discussion regarding the historical practice of offering Mass "toward the Lord." In his forward to Uwe Michael Lang's book, *Turning Towards the Lord*, Ratzinger encouraged:

... a new, more relaxed discussion [of liturgical orientation], in which we can search for the best ways of putting into practice the mystery of salvation. The quest is to be achieved, not by condemning one another, but by carefully listening to each other and, even more importantly, listening to the internal guidance of the liturgy itself. The labeling of positions as 'preconciliar,' 'reactionary,' and 'conservative,' or as 'progressive' and 'alien to the faith' achieves nothing; what is needed is a new mutual openness in the search for the best realization of the memorial of Christ.

Questions of *versus* the altar (God) or *versus* the people do not carry the ideological baggage as in the West. While the Church in the West was busily arguing in the 1960s, Catholics in China were wishing they could go to church, as most were closed during that time. China's sense of collectivity encourages the notion of priest and people together

“turning toward the Lord,” and its Confucian sense of hierarchy paradoxically encourages the priest’s principal role in the Mass as mediator between them and God.

There is a celebrated account of a visit Confucius once made to a temple, wherein he asked repeated questions about the objects and rites employed in the sacred space. Knowing that Confucius was already an expert in such things, the temple keeper asked him why he asked questions to which he already knew the answers. The Master’s answer was telling: “I ask questions about ritual because asking is part of the ritual.” This is to say, ritual must be perennially re-remembered and re-questioned. The Chinese understand the tension between continuing to preserve ritual while persistently nuancing it as times change, but they do not forget that forgetting ritual is, simply stated, to forget our most effective way of becoming better Christians. As the Pope’s writings on liturgy and ecclesiology continue to be translated into Chinese, the Chinese Church continues its “Benedictine” renewal. What strikes me most about the liturgical richness of Mass in China, is that Latin, high altars, and altar rails are less the objects of heated argument, than they are the symbols of the Church’s long and organic history, celebrated for their beauty and ritual efficacy.

Beautiful churches make beautiful people, and beautiful liturgies make beautiful souls. In one of the more famous passages from the *Analects*, Confucius unwittingly established the Chinese view of ritual for the next several millennia: “If one does not understand the laws of Heaven it is impossible to be an excellent person. If one does not understand ritual it is impossible to establish one’s character. If one does not understand the power of words it is impossible to understand humanity.” When Western priests begin to study philosophy they first read Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; when Chinese priests

begin to study philosophy they first read Confucius. Pope Benedict XVI has been called “the Pope of ritual,” and it makes good sense, then, why China’s Catholics are responding so enthusiastically to his works.