

Settimo Cielo



di Sandro Magister

23 set

Let the Amazon Learn From China, Where the Church Flourished With Very Few Missionaries. Celibate



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The mantra with which the proponents of married priests justify their demand is the irreversible shortage of celibate priests in regions with small communities scattered over remote places, like the Amazon or the islands of the Pacific. It must be guaranteed - they say - that the celebration of the Mass is offered to all on a regular basis, and not just a few times a year.

Curiously, the same ones who display such generosity in wanting to bestow the Eucharist are also the stingiest in converting and administering baptism, which they evidently equate with the "proselytism" so abhorred by Pope Francis. "I have never baptized an Indian, nor will I do so in the future," Bishop Erwin Kräutler has said, a key figure in the upcoming Amazonian **synod**.

The biggest contradiction, however, is with two millennia of Church history, which have seen countless cases of a shortage of celibate priests for far-flung communities, but without anyone deriving from this - with purely functional, organizational reasoning - the obligation to recruit married men too as celebrants, referred to as "viri probati."

Not only that. History teaches that the shortage of celibate priests does not necessarily work to the detriment of the "care of souls." On the contrary, in some cases it even coincides with a blossoming of Christian life.

This was the case, for example, with China in the 17th century. An account of this has been given in a source above suspicion, "La Civiltà Cattolica," the magazine of the Rome Jesuits directed by Antonio Spadaro, who is numero uno of Jorge Mario Bergoglio's confidants, in an erudite **article** of three years ago by the Jesuit sinologist Nicolas Standaert, a professor at the Catholic University of Leuven.

In the 17th century in China, the Christians were few and dispersed. Standaert writes:

"When Matteo Ricci died in Peking in 1610, after thirty years of mission, there were about 2,500 Chinese Christians. In 1665, there were probably about 80,000 Chinese Christians, and around 1700 there were about 200,000, which was still a small number compared with the whole population, between 150 and 200 million inhabitants."

And there were also very few priests:

"At the death of Matteo Ricci, there were only 16 Jesuits in all of China: eight Chinese brothers and eight European fathers. With the arrival of the Franciscans and Dominicans, around 1630, and with a slight increase in the Jesuits during the same period, the number of foreign missionaries came to more than 30, and remained constant between 30 and 40 over the span of the next thirty years. Afterward there was an increase, reaching a peak of about 140 between 1701 and 1705. But then because of the controversy over rites, the number of missionaries fell by about half."

As a result, the ordinary Christian met with the priest no more than "once or twice a year." And during the few days over which the visit lasted, the priest "conversed with the leaders and with the faithful, received information from the community, cared for sick persons and catechumens. He heard confessions, celebrated the Eucharist, preached, baptized."

Then the priest disappeared for many months. And yet the communities held together. On top of that, Standaert concludes, "they turned into small but solid centers of transmission of Christian faith and practice."

The following are the details of that fascinating adventure for the Church, as reported in "La Civiltà Cattolica."

Without any reflection on the need to ordain married men.

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"THE MISSIONARY CAME ONCE OR TWICE A YEAR"

by Nicolas Standaert, S.J.

(from "La Civiltà Cattolica" no. 3989 of September 10, 2016)

In the 17th century, Chinese Christians were not organized in parishes, meaning geographical areas around a church building, but rather in "associations," headed by laymen. Some of them were a combination of Chinese-stye associations and of Marian congregations of European inspiration.

It appears that such Christian associations were very widespread. For example, around 1665 there were about 140 congregations in Shanghai, while there were more than 400 congregations of Christians in all of China, in both the big cities and the villages.

The settling in of Christianity at this local level took place under the form of what can be called "communities of efficacious rituals," groups of Christians whose lives were organized around particular rituals (Mass, feasts, confessions etc.). These were "efficacious" both in the sense that they built up a group and in the sense that they were considered by the members of the group as capable of bringing meaning and salvation.

The efficacious rituals were structured on the basis of the Christian liturgical calendar, which included not only the main liturgical feasts (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, etc.), but also celebrations of the saints. The introduction of Sunday and of the Christian feasts made it so that the people lived according to a rhythm different from the liturgical calendar used in the Buddhist or Taoist communities. The most evident rituals were the sacraments, especially the celebration of the Eucharist and confession. But communal prayer - above all the recitation of the rosary and the litanies - and fasting on certain days constituted the most important ritual moments.

These Christian communities also reveal some essential characteristics of Chinese religious devotion: communities that are very oriented toward the laity and have lay leaders; the important role of women as transmitters of rituals and traditions within the family; a conception of the priesthood oriented to service (itinerant priests, present only on the occasion of important feasts and celebrations); a doctrine expressed in a simple way (recited prayers, clear and simple moral principles); a faith in the transforming power of rituals.

Little by little, the communities came to function in an autonomous manner. An itinerant priest (initially a foreigner, but in the 18th century mainly Chinese priests) was accustomed to visit them once or twice a year. Normally the leaders of the communities gathered the various members of the community and presided over prayers, which most of the members of the community knew by heart. They also read sacred texts and organized religious instruction. They often held separate gatherings for the women. Moreover, there were itinerant catechists who instructed the children, the catechumens, and the neophytes. In the absence of a priest, local leaders administered baptism.

During his annual visit of a few days, the missionary conversed with the leaders and with the faithful, received information from the community, cared for sick persons and catechumens, etc. He heard confessions, celebrated the Eucharist, preached, baptized, and prayed with the community. After his departure, the community continued its usual practice of reciting the rosary and the litanies.

The ordinary Christian therefore saw a missionary once or twice a year. The true center of Christian life was not the missionary, but the community itself, with its leaders and catechists as the main connecting link.

Above all in the 18th and at the beginning of the 19th century these communities turned into small but solid centers of transmission of Christian faith and practice. Because of the absence of missionaries and priests, the members of the community - for example, the catechists, the virgins and other lay guides - took control of everything, from financial administration to ritual practices, including the leading of sung prayers and the administration of baptisms.

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