

ARTICLE

The Sisters of Shanghai

A Congregation of Nuns Flourishes in China

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By 10:15 a.m. the pews in Shanghai's immense Xujiahui Cathedral are nearly full for the 10:30 Feast of Ascension Mass. The few remaining seats are reserved for the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary. Today eight young women of the congregation will take their final vows. It is a special moment for the community, which suffered for years at the hands of the Communist government of China. Twenty years ago, only a handful of elderly sisters belonged to the congregation. Now there are more than ninety sisters, most under the age of forty. As they file in and take their seats, Sister Mary Pan, thirty-seven, one of the leaders of the community, watches from the front of the church. "We are young," Pan says proudly. "That is different than when I took vows."

The Sisters of the Presentation of Mary are not the largest group of women religious in China, nor are they the oldest. Yet in many ways they may be the most influential. Founded in 1855 by a French bishop, they were one of the first religious congregations created exclusively for Chinese women. Today they hold a prominent position in the Chinese church: they are located in Shanghai, the intellectual heart of Chinese Catholicism, and they have the support of a highly respected bishop. This provides them with remarkable visibility and influence. They, like other sisters in China, are also beginning to take a more active role in the church. While vocations among priests are down in China, vocations among women are growing. Sisters now have more responsibility for daily church activities. No longer charged with menial jobs like mending vestments, women religious are working in schools, social-service agencies, even managing real estate in booming Shanghai.

It is an exciting time for the Presentation community. Since the government's ban on religious orders was lifted twenty years ago, the Presentation sisters have been allowed to recruit actively. Though they haven't had much success in China's large cities, they have many aspiring postulants from the countryside. The sisters also have more power to chart their own course. No longer beholden to colonial French bishops, they are defining themselves in ways that their predecessors never dreamed of. And though the sisters avoid discussing church politics, they may be uniquely suited to deal with the most serious problem facing the Chinese church: the gap between the "official" or "registered" church and the unregistered "underground" church.

It is a schism that dates to the 1950s, when Communist leaders began requiring Catholics to register with the Catholic Patriotic Association [CPA], a government agency charged with oversight of all church activities in China, including the appointment of bishops. Today, the Vatican recognizes both churches and publicly advocates reconciliation, but the division remains bitter (see [sidebar](#)). Nevertheless, over the last twenty years the differences between the two churches have become less and less clear. For example, though China's registered bishops are officially appointed by the CPA, the Vatican has quietly recognized the legitimacy of approximately two-thirds of them. Equally significant, priests and sisters associated with the registered church are no longer required to be members of the CPA. Many of the Presentation sisters grew up in the underground church and only later chose to belong to a registered community of sisters. Thus, if and when the Vatican and Beijing restore

diplomatic relations, the sisters will be in an excellent position to heal the rifts that have developed in China's Catholic community.

Qibao Convent--the Presentations' largest--is located behind an iron gate on a narrow and crowded market street in Shanghai's suburban Minghang district. Inside is a small courtyard where a portable basketball hoop stands next to a shrine of Mary. The convent's back wall is formed by the old parish church, and on two sides loom whitewashed four-story concrete buildings that house most of the convent's dormitories, offices, and classrooms. There are forty sisters and novices currently living at Qibao. As Sister Mary Pan walks alongside the convent's colonnades, she passes screened windows behind which silhouetted novices study; she points to a building where three sisters work in the diocese's printing offices; and she stops to display the machines used by the sisters to manufacture Communion wafers for the diocese's 121 churches and chapels.

"It is a busy place," she says, stepping into a small room where an elderly Chinese woman is waiting.

"Sister Mary Zhu," she says by way of introduction. "My novice mistress." Zhu stands tentatively, but her eyes dispel any sense of fragility. At ninety, she is the senior member of the Qibao community by nearly fifty years. In truth, she would prefer to reside with the diocese's small community of retired sisters, but by order of her eighty-nine-year-old bishop, she remains at Qibao to be a role model for Qibao's young sisters, most of whom are in their twenties. "He says that when he retires, I can retire," she sighs. Pan sits next to Zhu and takes her left hand, encouraging the older woman to explain how the order has changed in her lifetime. "What is the difference between today's sisters and my generation?" Zhu asks with a chuckle. "The world is different."

Foreign missionary orders of women began arriving in China in the mid-nineteenth century, and soon they had established a number of communities. The approach to accepting Chinese members varied: some groups accepted indigenous women in their ranks as full members; more commonly, the foreign orders started separate local congregations for them. In 1855, a French Jesuit bishop of Shanghai established the diocesan Presentation of Mary community specifically and exclusively for Chinese. For nearly a century, the Presentation sisters served the diocese and its priests.

When the Communists expelled foreign missionaries in the early 1950s, the Chinese Presentation sisters took full control of their order for the first time. Sister Zhu was one of three sisters selected to oversee the community, and, as a result, she received a university education, as well as intense scrutiny by the government. "I always spoke my mind," she says with a proud smile. The period of self-rule did not last long: in 1958, one year after the establishment of the CPA, parishes and religious communities were closed. For the next ten years, religious practice moved underground and into the private sphere. Then, in 1966, at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, even private religious practice was persecuted. In Shanghai, nearly two hundred priests and sisters spent the following decade manufacturing umbrella handles and pillow cases while living at the Xujiahui Convent. Sister Zhu was one of them. "We no longer looked like priests and sisters," Zhu recalls. "We looked like working people."

As the Cultural Revolution ended, sisters who had lived as virtual prisoners in Xujiahui were free to leave, and many did. But some stayed and resumed their traditional role of serving priests, thus

providing vital support in helping the churches reopen in the late 1970s. At the time, Xujiahui housed not only members of the Presentation community, but sisters from a variety of international congregations who had been forced to relocate from Shanghai. (International religious groups are still prohibited in China.) The Presentation community was officially allowed to reconstitute itself in 1985.

Sister Mary Pan usually maintains a determined demeanor, but when discussing criticism implying that the registered church lacks legitimacy, she assumes a weary smile. "People from the church outside of China don't really understand," she says. "They haven't had to go through..." Her voice trails off and her hands part into a wide space meant to suggest the repression that China's Catholics have experienced since the Communist upheavals of the mid-twentieth century. She begins to speak again, but then shrugs, the gesture sufficing.

Though members of a government-registered convent and congregation, many Presentation nuns were baptized in rural, unregistered churches. In choosing a communal life in the registered church, they are, in certain cases, seen as turning their back on family and community members. Yet the simple fact is that it is exceedingly difficult for groups of religious women to live together without government notice in China. As a result, sisters in the unregistered church often live alone or with only a few other women. "I didn't want to spend my life on the run-I wanted to have time to pray," explains one Presentation sister. "I wanted a real formation. And I wanted to live in a community. That's impossible in the underground. You're always running away."

After reconstitution, the Presentation sisters began to seek new members. Zhu was novice mistress for the first classes, and Sister Pan was one of her novices. She smiles as she recalls the challenges: "Many sisters wanted us to be as they had been, but...the world had changed." Likewise, the elderly Sister Zhu recalls a range of problems with the first classes of novices: "They didn't know what sisters do, what the life is like, and the education level was not very good." Indeed, even today most women entering the order have a substandard high school education obtained in rural school systems. Similarly, their knowledge of the catechism is limited. "The girls from the city are not attracted to the life of a sister," says Pan, who grew up in a small fishing village. "They have opportunities for different kinds of lives."

Sister Mary Zhang, the order's formation director, is thirty-three, a slight woman, maybe five feet tall. She has a wry, occasionally mischievous smile. Sitting in a spartan Qibao meeting room, she wears a khaki skirt, sandals, and a white T-shirt with black lettering that reads "Sorority Pledge Master." She is a gentle, warm presence, prone to thoughtful pauses and measured answers. "I felt called," says Zhang, a native of Shanghai's rural Songjiang district, of her vocation. "My parents used to turn away matchmakers saying, 'She's going to be a sister.'" After finishing school Zhang worked in an ice-cream factory for six months before beginning her postulancy in 1990. In 2000, after establishing herself as a rising star in the young community, she was sent to Scotland for intensive English classes. Afterward, she traveled to Ireland and enrolled in a Jesuit program on religious formation.

Within Chinese culture, generally, female leadership is not taken as seriously as male leadership. So the sisters receive little attention, from either the church hierarchy or the CPA. As a result, the nuns are able to engage the laity in a far more direct manner than members of the hierarchy. In the Shanghai diocese, for example, women religious work closely with laypeople in schools and social services

agencies. “When the priests are busy with the sacraments,” Zhang explains with a smile, “the sisters are busy working with the people.” Over the past fifteen years, the role of religious women in Shanghai’s diocese has expanded significantly. “Some of the jobs we are doing were done by priests before us,” explains Sister Pan. “But our bishop is more Western in his thinking, and he is more open to women. So he gives us the chance to try.”

For Zhang, a top priority remains expanding the role of women in the liturgy. At Qibao’s parish church, for example, she has raised hackles by placing novices in positions and roles ordinarily assumed by priests. “I have worked so hard to have novices give Holy Communion,” she explains. “But I’ve had parishioners and even priests tell me that ‘women’s hands are dirty for Communion.’” Nevertheless, novices handle the sacraments at Qibao, a change that met with resistance. “At first the parishioners lined up to receive Communion from the priests,” recalls Zhang. “So I told the priests to sit.”

In addition to her work as Qibao’s superior and formation director, Zhang was a primary architect of the order’s new constitution. Adopted in April, the document has renewed and sharpened the sense of purpose among the order’s young leadership. “We are not like the Benedictines, spending our days in prayer,” Zhang says. “What is different about the way we reach God...” She pauses for nearly a minute of contemplation. “A long time ago the sisters said, ‘For us, the kitchen is like the altar.’ So, as the priest makes his offering to God from the altar, we make our offering through work, ideas, and simple acts.” As Zhang describes it, the Presentation institute’s spirituality is quite broad and encompasses a variety of activities. “We should be in the kindergartens, retirement homes, helping the disabled. That is our role. We should be missionaries within this diocese. Where we are needed, we should go.”

After the Mass for the Ascension is finished, the Presentation sisters host a large banquet in an airy hall attached to Xujiahui Cathedral. The tables are jammed with more than two hundred guests, including sisters, priests, family, and honored laity. The Presentation novices are enlisted as servers, and they struggle to maneuver between the tables with a nearly endless procession of dishes. Meanwhile, Pan leads a parade of sisters through the room with wine glasses—some filled with wine, some with orange juice—stopping occasionally to toast the guests and one another. There is much reason for optimism: last year Qibao had a class of eighteen postulants and novices; last fall, four sisters took first vows in Qibao’s parish church. Such numbers will further strengthen the role of the sisters in the diocese.

This year, the Presentation sisters begin their third decade following reconstitution. Though they lack the maturity of older orders in the West, they are confident in their ability to grow and develop as a specifically Chinese order in the rapidly evolving social environment that is contemporary China. At the same time, they are aware that as diocesan sisters lacking a connection with an international order, they are subject to the judgments of the local bishop. Sister Mary Zhu, the cagy elderly sister who has lived half of the history of the Presentation congregation, smiles and says, “Do I worry about the future? I am not worried. Of course, many things happen in the community that I don’t want.” Sister Mary Pan sits beside her and takes her hands. “We are still learning who we are,” admits the younger sister. “But, you know, we are learning.”

ABOUT THE WRITER

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