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**SPIRITUALITY** - Every Chinese family has the typical image of the Sacred Heart, even after the social and political upheavals and the atheistic propaganda of the regime. The first church dedicated to the Sacred Heart dates back to 1863: destroyed in the cultural revolution, it was rebuilt in 1999. Devotion and consecration to the Sacred Heart has sustained the lives of missionaries and their evangelization: among these, Arnold Janssen, Josef Freinademetz, and Daniele Comboni. It would be advisable, however, to revise the iconography, using the calligraphy of the "heart". The Heart of Jesus and the heart of the martyrs united in the canonization of 2000.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in China is a fact of life for the Catholic faithful, just as, and perhaps more so than, in all the regions of the Catholic Church throughout the world. Ask a Chinese Catholic if he is familiar with the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and you'll likely insult him, as if you had doubts about their orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

Even today, an encounter with the spiritual life and traditions of the Chinese faithful is edifying. Especially if one recalls that their life has been subjected to drastic, often sad changes due to mutations in the rhythm of life: internal migration, and especially the propaganda of antireligious ideals and values imposed by so many 'authorities'.

External expressions of devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus are plentiful. In homes and sanctuaries, the icon of the Sacred Heart is ever present, shackled by the Crown of thorns, surrounded by flames of love, sprinkled with drops of blood and the cross planted in the middle. These signs invite one to remember God's eternal love for mankind, a love manifested in the life and death of His Son. They are a remembrance of the unspeakable suffering of Jesus, inflicted upon Love Incarnate, concentrated as it were in the puncturing of his heart after death. The icon, a part of the promised special blessings for every family, remains a strong foundation and proclamation of the center of the Christian faith, an urgent call to the apostolate for every Christian, to give a response of our own faith and love.

The countless churches and chapels dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in China, witness to this widespread devotion. The first church in honor of the sacred heart was consecrated in 1863 in Zhangzhuangcun (now in the Diocese of Xianxian, Hebei), at that time called "the number one church of northern China". It was a historical event, after long years of apparitions of the Heart of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque (1673-1675) and the ecclesiastical imprimatur to celebrate the liturgy publicly (in 1765 for Poland alone, in 1856 for the whole Church).

This first church dedicated to the Sacred Heart in China was destroyed in 1976, at the end of the cultural revolution, but was rebuilt and dedicated on October 10, 1999. Today, according to a booklet on the history of Xianxian, there are 52 churches and chapels in the diocese in honor of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

We do not know how many churches in other dioceses are dedicated to the Sacred Heart. The table of contents of the recent Guida of the Catholic Church in China indicates only the address of many churches, but without the title of dedication.

### **A boost to the mission**

The large number of churches dedicated to the Sacred Heart in the Diocese of Xianxian is perhaps due to this territory, like the majority of the dioceses of Hebei in the past, having been under the missionary and pastoral care of the Jesuits, who were intimately connected with this spirituality from the outset after the apparitions of Jesus to St. Margaret Mary. Yet the missionaries of the classical orders, Franciscans, Dominicans and the more recent congregations, are also fed by the rich spirituality of the Sacred Heart. It is a spirituality that has essentially grown out of the theology of John's gospel, patristic theology and medieval mysticism (especially male and female monasteries in the Teutonic regions). Then, the rich bloom with the impetus of the apparitions of the Sacred Heart to St. Margaret Mary. The personal encounter with the Heart of Jesus became a decisive factor in the foundation of missionary institutes, pushing religious men and women to go into the "missions", devoting themselves to the work of evangelization. Among many other examples, this is shown by the life of St. Arnold Janssen, founder of the Society of the Divine Word: he was so devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, that on this feast in 1875 he consecrated himself to Him. This day was then considered as the date of the founding of his society. The spiritual life of his missionary congregation has also centered on the Sacred Heart of Jesus: in its missionary houses there abounded the icons of Paray-le-Monial; all Community prayers concluded with: "And may the Heart of Jesus live in the hearts of all men".

The Divine Word missionaries who went to China, breathed the devotion to the Sacred Heart. Among these, especially notable is St. Joseph Freinademetz (one of the first Divine Word missionaries in Shandong province) who referred everything to the Sacred Heart. He found it significant that on 1 June 1881, in the month dedicated to the Sacred Heart, he had set out on a journey from Hong Kong to Shandong, and that the 24th of the same month, feast of the Sacred Heart, he arrived.

In 2003, Janssen and Frainademetz were canonized along with Daniele Comboni, founder of the Combonian missionaries; he too was an eminent devotee of the Sacred Heart.

Among the Catholic communities in China, devotional practices to the Sacred Heart of Jesus are widespread. Where the pace of life allows it - more commonly in the countryside than in the cities - the faithful live an almost communitary spiritual life, which initially was a reflection of the monastic or seminary life. Early in the morning, called to prayer by the sound of bells, they gathered, where possible, in the church or village chapel to recite morning prayer together. It is a long prayer, abundant, generous, with many intentions and invocations. At least in June, dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, it contains the Litany of the Sacred Heart, followed by several pages of prayers addressed to the Sacred Heart. After these prayers, which occupy more or less an hour, if there is a priest, Holy Mass is celebrated. The faithful often continue with the meditation of the Via Crucis. In the past, Sunday was entirely dedicated to common prayer and the faithful spent more time in church than at home. The evening prayer, again prayed together, took up again the theme of the Sacred Heart and again the faithful recited the invocations and litanies.

The texts of the prayers, introduced by the missionaries of the past, recited in chant, use a somewhat archaic form of Chinese, not easily comprehensible to young people or the less educated. Several dioceses have books containing all the texts. But what strikes us as Europeans, is the fact that all the prayers are recited from memory. In the past, since they were children, all the prayers used to be memorized. I would like to see who among us could recite by heart, and for over an hour, a barely comprehensible prayer!

The lack of literal comprehension of the texts does not diminish the faithful's faith and fervour: the phenomenon is comparable to the "praying in tongues" of the Catholic charismatic renewal, fervent prayer and song from the abundance of the heart, without being constrained by linguistic forms.

### The Sacred Heart and the martyrs

The iconography of the Heart of Jesus according to the description of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque - the heart chained by the Crown of thorns, surrounded by flames of love, sprinkled with the blood drops, the cross implanted in the center - is also a constant for decor in Catholic churches and homes in China. In this aspect the Church in China has not been innovative. The icon has been accepted as is, though the Chinese sensitivity formed by virtue of "filial piety" could oppose such a representation: the ideal of filial piety requires that after death the body of a man be returned intact to the parents; the dismemberment of a dead body was considered the supreme horror.

From this point of view, in China the Western interest in creating relics from the bodies of saints is not easily understood. The Divine Word missionaries in China protested strongly when, after the unexpected death of their first bishop, Giovanni Battista von Anzer, in Rome, his superiors wanted to send his heart to China as a relic. In Europe this was seen as an expression of his faithful love for the Church in China, but for Chinese Christians the gesture was unacceptable due to their filial feelings. So, the heart of the Bishop remained in the society's seminary in Vienna and gave missionary inspiration to us young seminarians.

In all likelihood, in Chinese art there is no representation of the physical heart, though the concept of "heart" occupies a central place in Chinese thought and sentiment. The heart is the center and source of all mental, cognitive, and spiritual activities. In the characters of Chinese writing all these operations or mental states have as their root or matrix the symbol of the "heart". In dictionaries one finds hundreds of these pictograms and myriad expressions or proverbs that use the symbol of the "heart" as a key to enter into their meaning.

By speaking of the "Heart of Jesus", one speaks of the deepest, most intimate, most real place in God, the source, the vital environment, the purpose of existence. Perhaps artistic expression with its painting of a physical heart does not evoke what the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus would intend. What would help more would be the use of Chinese calligraphy, which is much appreciated by all.

On the occasion of the canonisation of 120 Chinese martyrs in the year 2000, the Holy Father was presented with an impressive work of calligraphy: since in China you could not mention,

and much less represent the martyred saints who were canonized (an event odious to the Communists), the Chinese made a calligraphic work of the character of "love" formed out of 120 symbols, each slightly different, and in the center, an ideogram of "love" the size of four symbols. The pictogram "love" has as its root or key the "heart" symbol. The 120 symbols each stand for a martyr, the great symbol in the center stands for Jesus: thus, 120 symbols of a cordial love for a heart all inflamed with love. One can easily infuse such a calligraphic work with all the richness of the devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, a memorial of all the elements of the faith, encouraging all to a joyful collaboration in the salvific project of Sacred Heart of Jesus.

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