

## SOME SYMBOLS PROPER TO THE CHINESE CULTURE AND THEIR POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS IN THE LITURGY

The Chinese people, like other people, live in a world of symbols. It is mostly through symbols that people communicate their thoughts and feelings. A symbol is a sign, a kind of password, an exchange between people. In the liturgy, it is also through symbolic signs that we communicate with God. In every culture there exist some proper symbols of its own which are not known universally. So in order to communicate and to make friends with other people, one must know and use the symbols of the other people.

Here are some notes concerning some basic symbols in the Chinese culture. This is not a scholarly research, it is just an enumeration of some ordinary symbols which might be applicable in our liturgy.

**1. Chinese characters:** they are signs or ideograms which we use to communicate in writing. Most of the characters are usually symbolic pictures: by using concrete image or gestures, another reality or abstract idea is signified or realized. Here are some examples:

The Chinese character for friend is 友: originally was a picture of two hands joined together. Ox and horse put together in Chinese characters:牛馬 means slave. The character for faith or to believe is 信: its left part of the character is a picture of a man, while the right side is that of words coming out from the mouth, when the two parts are put together, it means: if somebody speaks to you, you have to believe. The character for bamboo is 竹 which originally was a picture of a bamboo. It also symbolizes the virtue of uprightness. Many of the Chinese characters are often used for decorations in the liturgical vestments and spaces. The character writing using a kind of brush is considered a work of art like that of painting. The so-called 「對聯」(scrolls) are widely used. They are parallel sentences written on scrolls usually hanged at the two sides of the altar or at the church door. Their contents or themes are usually taken from the Bible or Church's teachings.

**2. Chinese names:** In China every name, be it the name of a person or that of a place, has a symbolic meaning. When a child is born, the parent is to give him a meaningful name. Sometimes when a person's name doesn't sound good or suggests bad luck, it can be changed. This custom is similar to that of the Israel people. As a general rule or practice the given name consists of two characters in addition to the family name. When a foreign missionary comes to China, he is to be given a Chinese name that sounds or may not sound similar to his original name. But it is always a meaningful name. If some foreigner wants to live in China, he has to choose and use a Chinese name in order to communicate with the Chinese people. Most names of the foreigners sound strange to the ears of ordinary Chinese people and they are quite often difficult to pronounce for people who do not know any foreign language. That is why all foreigners, including Catholic missionaries, have Chinese name, and not just literal phonetic translations. For example: the name St. Silvester's phonetic rendering in Chinese character was 西爾物斯德肋。 This rendering has no meaning at all, and for the Chinese people it is not easy to pronounce nor to write, except that it sounds like the original name. The names

of the Church's saints who were all foreigners to the Chinese people were rendered in Chinese in that way. That is why the Regional Bishops Conference in Taiwan took the initiative some thirty years ago to re-translate the names of the foreign saints of the Church's calendar, making them sound like real Chinese names which are easy to pronounce and to write. Because they are simple and most of them have meaning, these new names of the saints are now being used in the liturgical celebrations of the Holy Mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours. Could this work be considered as a kind of inculturation? Inculturating the Christian names used in the liturgy?

**3. Symbolic Colors:** In the Roman liturgy colors have symbolic meanings which are evidently secondary. The General Instruction of the Roman Missal says: 'Traditional usage should be retained for the vestment colors'(308). This traditional usage in the Roman Church started only from the sixteenth century. The symbolic meaning of each color varies in different cultural grounds. For the Chinese, red color is traditionally a symbol of happiness. During weddings, for example, the red color is widely used for decorations, for the things used by the new couple, for the vestment of the bride etc., In recent years, the priest who presides over the wedding usually uses vestments in red, while the bride is in white. It seems in a sense somewhat strange and paradoxical. There is in this country a tendency of occidentalizing some customs especially that of weddings. Many people even non-Christians like to get married in a Catholic church. White for the Chinese is a color of mourning, therefore during funerals the children of the dead traditionally wear in white. There is also a tendency to adopt the color black for funeral: Sometimes at funerals, relatives of the dead wear in long black robe. It seems in the modern world that there is a kind of gradual globalization of different cultures. The symbols proper to a particular culture may be changed or inculturated.

**4. Symbolic Gestures:** Ritual gestures are very important for good and beautiful liturgical celebrations. Some gestures in the Roman liturgy are unfamiliar to the customs of the Chinese people. Here are some examples:

- a) ***Gesture for greeting:*** while saying "the Lord be with you" the priest opens and extends his hands according to the Roman liturgy. For the Chinese however the traditional greeting gesture is joining and grasping of one's own hands, at the same time making a low bow. For many years there has been suggestions among the Chinese priests to replace the Roman gesture with the Chinese one.
- b) ***Gesture of prayer:*** the opening prayer, prayer over the gifts, Eucharistic Prayer etc. are to be prayed with hands extended. This kind of gesture, some people say, is again strange to the Chinese people who usually pray with two hands joined together. The Buddhist monks and nuns and people from other local religions also pray this way. It is well known that a certain bishop and one of the Chinese priests say Mass prayers always in such manner. The Chinese people say that this is the way of praying to God.
- c) ***Gestures of Veneration:*** Kissing of the altar and of other sacred objects is not considered by the Chinese people as a gesture of veneration. Therefore the kissing in the liturgy has been omitted by the decision of the Bishops conference. Genuflection is neither a mark of veneration for the Chinese; therefore it is replaced by deep bowing in the liturgy. *Kowtow* (knock head) indicates the most deep veneration or reverence and is usually reserved for parents, in ancient times also for

the emperors. It has been always considered a mark of deep veneration very proper to God, for the Blessed Sacrament, but it is now reduced to kneeling with a bow.

5. **Symbolic Offering:** to venerate their dead or to worship the deities the Chinese people usually offer, aside from incense, many other things such as fruits, flowers even food and drink (wine). For many years already, the Chinese Catholic in Taiwan has been doing this kind of offering for their dead during the funeral and at the tomb. The offering usually consists of flowers, fruits, wine and incense, but not food. It signifies our communion with them in thought and in deed.

The manner of offering incense is different from that of the Roman liturgy. The incense sticks or incense powder put in a censer or a brazier are being used, the ascending smoke of the burning sticks or powder symbolizes our prayer going up to heaven. A Philippine trappist Sister from a monastery in the United States often asks me to send incense sticks for her community. They offer and burn the incense in a censer while celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours. Sometimes and in some places there are also communities in Taiwan that offer incense in this way during Eucharistic celebration and during the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Is it not more meaningful than that of the Roman liturgy? But the Catholic in China are it seems in opposition to it for a simple reason: it is Buddhist. What should we say about it here in this meeting?

---- Andrew Chao