

When East Meets West

Written by
Mon, 18 Mar 2002



To most Western people, "Tzu" and "Chi" are just two transliterated Chinese words; but to Sister Angela M. Doyle, "Tzu Chi" is a bridge of Great Love that transcends all races and religions.

Despite the onslaught of Typhoon Nari on September 16, 2001, which flooded northern Taiwan and inflicted severe damage to the whole island, Sister Angela Mary Doyle, rsm, former superintendent of the Brisbane Mater Misericordiae Hospitals, still flew to Taiwan from Brisbane, Australia, as planned.

Before the airplane landed, it encountered air turbulence which disquieted the passengers on board. Sister Angela looked out the window over the scenery below, and what she saw broke her heart--northern Taiwan was immersed in muddy, dirty water. Nonetheless, she knew in her heart that Tzu Chi people would be there to help the needy.

Sister Angela had been invited to Taiwan to attend the International Conference on Religious Cooperation held in Taipei. Even though she was a Catholic nun, what she shared during the conference was the Great Love spirit of the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation.

Taking a half-day break from the conference, she visited Master Cheng Yen in Hualien, located in eastern Taiwan. When she entered the Abode of Still Thoughts, where the Master lives, she was warmly welcomed like a family member who had returned home after a long separation. Gently putting her palms together, she closed her eyes and bowed to the statue of the Buddha in the front hall.

When Sister Angela saw the Master, she gave her an envelope containing US\$100 and asked to have the money used to restore the Tzu Chi TV station, which had been seriously flooded by Typhoon Nari. Sister Angela had no personal assets, and that one hundred dollars, given to her by a friend, was all she had on her.



The two nuns left the Abode and went to the Tzu Chi University, where they strolled hand in hand around the campus. In the Still Thoughts Bookstore at the university, the Master showed Sister Angela the environmentally friendly tableware, notebooks, CDs and many other things produced by Tzu Chi, and she gave each of them to her as presents. Sister Angela was touched, but she also felt apologetic--she had only donated a little money to Tzu Chi, and yet the Master was giving her so many presents. The Master smiled and said, "Your donation was intended for Tzu Chi, but these are my personal gifts to you. No comparison can be made between the two."

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Master Cheng Yen and Sister Angela are practitioners of different religions, but they both devote their lives to all living creatures. Despite the language barrier, the two compassionate hearts share the same love.

A cross was pinned to the Sister's left collar, while on her right collar was a pin in the shape of the Tzu Chi "dharma ship," a gift from Master Cheng Yen. [The dharma ship ferries people across the sea of suffering to the shore of peace and joy.] Under Sister Angela's hearty smile is a religious mind full of modesty and liberality.

"I am a Tzu Chi member--I belong to Tzu Chi." Sister Angela thinks of herself as a Tzu Chi member, and she is proud of it.

Grateful for the chance to give

Sister Angela, aged 76, was born in Ireland. At the end of World War II, the 22-year-old nun left her homeland and boarded a troop ship with other members of the Sisters of Mercy. They traveled to remote, unfamiliar Brisbane, Australia.

From then on, with help from the church, she was trained as a teacher, a nurse, and a head nurse. Eventually, after she got her doctorate degree, she was appointed to the position of Sister Administrator of the Mater Misericordiae Hospitals in Brisbane.

Sister Angela said that the aim and process of establishing the Mater Hospitals were similar to those of the Tzu Chi Hospitals, and even the difficulties encountered along the way were quite the same.

The Mater Misericordiae Hospitals were established by Irish Sisters of Mercy in 1906 in a place where medical resources were scarce. When the nuns chose the location for the construction of the first hospital, their decision met with fierce opposition. But as time went by, the love of the nuns gradually turned antagonism and doubt into approval.

The Mater hospital complex, occupying about 97,000 square meters [24 acres], includes an obstetric hospital, a modern children's hospital, a public hospital, an adult private hospital and a children's private hospital. These hospitals have grown to be the largest of their kind in the Southern Hemisphere and, like the Royal Brisbane Hospital run by the state government, are categorized as first-class hospitals in Queensland.

In August 1990, Julia Wang, a [Tzu Chi commissioner](#), immigrated to Brisbane. Keeping Master Cheng Yen's words in mind--"To be loved by others, you must love them first"--she enlisted as a volunteer at one of the Mater hospitals. The administrator of the hospitals at that time happened to be Sister Angela Doyle.

Australia has a very good social welfare system, and people who want to be volunteers need to have certificates to prove they are qualified for the job. It is not enough if one only has the desire, but not the ability, to help others. Eleven years ago, most people in Australia knew practically nothing about Buddhism, not to mention Tzu Chi. Suspicious of Julia's motives, Sister Angela hesitated to accept her donation of AUD\$1,000 [US\$520]. After all, no one had

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been so enthusiastic before.

Still, Sister Angela arranged for Julia to volunteer at the hospital on the following day. Julia brought paper and scissors with her and taught children in the hospital to make cards to thank their parents. After clandestinely observing Julia for several months, Sister Angela finally ascertained that there was no hidden agenda behind her actions. "But why does she always say 'thank you' to those who receive her help? And why does she never complain or turn down any requests?" Sister Angela was really curious about this Taiwanese lady.

"You'll never know us until you come and meet our Master." In 1993, Julia finally arranged for Sister Angela to go visit Master Cheng Yen in Hualien. When she learned more about the various international missions carried out by Tzu Chi and the dedicated, loving spirit of its volunteers, Sister Angela found that this Buddhist charity organization and the Sisters of Mercy actually shared the same altruistic spirit. Both organizations were devoted to serving society.

Sister Angela developed a high regard for the Tzu Chi spirit of Great Love, which transcends all religious and racial borders. "When the poor and the ill are hungry and cold, what we need to do is give them food and warm clothes, not preach."

In May 1996, Sister Angela visited Taiwan for the second time to attend the celebration of Tzu Chi's thirtieth anniversary. In order to prepare a speech to express her blessings to Tzu Chi people, the nun, already in her seventies, spent several months learning Mandarin. The speech was first written in English and then translated into Chinese. She had to practice and memorize the speech word for word with the help of a romanization system.□

A bridge of love

Sister Angela once accompanied Julia Wang to cities such as Sydney and Melbourne to recommend Tzu Chi volunteers to local hospitals. She said gratefully that in the last eleven years, Tzu Chi volunteers in Brisbane had donated US\$1.2 million to the Mater Hospitals, which was used to purchase facilities and equipment, establish the Mater Medical Research Institute, and set up the Mater Tzu Chi Research Scholarship.

Whenever she has the chance to give a speech, Sister Angela never forgets to mention Tzu Chi. Once in response to an Australian politician who attacked Asian immigrants in harsh terms, she immediately came forward on local TV to voice a different opinion. She said that members of a Taiwanese Buddhist organization called "Tzu Chi" not only contributed to their local communities through their philanthropic efforts, but were also actively involved in relief work around the world, regardless of the races or religious beliefs of its aid recipients...

In 1998, Sister Angela even led a TV crew from Australia National Channel Nine to Hualien to film activities held at the Abode of Still Thoughts, hoping to provide Australian viewers with the chance to learn about Tzu Chi. "I love Tzu Chi, and I hope to inspire more people to do good things by introducing the foundation to them."

To the majority of Western people, "Tzu" and "Chi" are just two transliterated Chinese characters; but through Sister Angela's introduction and interpretation, these two words have

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become a bridge of love that connects different races and religions.

A Taiwanese once passed away in one of the Mater hospitals. Feeling sad for the deceased, who lay all alone in the hospital, Sister Angela asked Julia how Buddhists would treat a dead person. Following Julia's explanation, she put her palms together and started chanting "Amitabha Buddha" until other volunteers came to take over the task.

Another time, Sister Angela invited Julia to attend Mass in a church. But when they were about to go up for Holy Communion, someone objected to Julia's receiving it because she had not been baptized.

"You are mistaken," said Sister Angela in a dignified tone. "Wherever there is faith, there is God." It was the same way when she chanted "Amitabha" for the deceased. Chanting the name, she believed in the existence of the Buddha. That the nun did not stand on ceremony or rigid formality convinced Julia that she was an extraordinary religious practitioner.

Mutual respect

Since 1992, members of the Tzu Chi Collegiate Association have held training camps in the Mater Hospitals to provide young members with practical experience. Young people fly from as far as Sydney, Melbourne and Perth to be trained at the Mater. No matter what their educational backgrounds are--medicine, computer science or engineering--the Mater hospitals offer training for them in related departments. Certificates in Social Service Practical Training are conferred on trainees who complete the courses.

On weekdays, Tzu Chi volunteers in Brisbane take turns serving in the hospitals. Their work consists mainly of putting case histories in order, acting as interpreters, and caring for patients.

In recognition of what the Tzu Chi volunteers have done for the Mater Hospitals, a room in a 120-year-old heritage-listed building has been dedicated to the foundation. It is called the "Tzu Chi Room." Inside, one can see a photo of Master Cheng Yen, a picture entitled "The Buddha Cares for the Sick," Tzu Chi publications and posters, etc. This historical building is protected by the government and can never be pulled down.

In order to acknowledge the contributions that its volunteers have made to the hospitals, Tzu Chi was given a seat on the Board of Directors. Tzu Chi people have officially become a part of the Mater Hospitals family and can have a say in its administrative conferences.

Only love can resolve conflicts

Sister Angela left her home at twenty-two years of age and did not return until twenty years later. This was not a rule set by the church; instead, it was simply due to lack of money. Although she served as the administrator of the Mater Hospitals for nearly twenty-three years, she devoted herself as an unsalaried worker. It was not until someone donated some money that the sisters could finally go home to Ireland. Even though they have more chances to return to Ireland now, they still rarely do so. After all, home is where the heart lies.

Sister Angela admitted that since the path of self-cultivation is difficult and lonely, it was

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inevitable for her faith to fluctuate. However, as the joy of helping others kept welling up, all her doubts were replaced by her faith in God.

She observes that the world has been beset by poverty and illness. It is unavoidable for people to quarrel and for conflicts to arise among the followers of different religions. She expressed her admiration for Tzu Chi's efforts to resolve these differences with loving actions, rather than useless talk. She found that doing good deeds had become a way of life for Tzu Chi volunteers.

She thinks that Master Cheng Yen has reminded people in Taiwan that the pursuit of material wealth is not the most important thing in life. What is more significant is to have a compassionate heart that knows how to give. Like the Master, she believes that only love can resolve all injustices and conflicts, including wars.

"Tzu Chi has strengthened my commitment to help the needy." Sister Angela said modestly that the spirit of the Master and the dedication of Tzu Chi volunteers had encouraged her to continue serving God and all living beings.

The Master once said, "Although Angela is a Catholic nun and I a Buddhist one, we are of one mind and share the same goal on the path of life."

As Sister Angela walked hand in hand with Master Cheng Yen, as she and the Tzu Chi people in Australia gave support to each other, we came to realize that the love of Jesus and the compassion of the Buddha are actually one and the same.

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