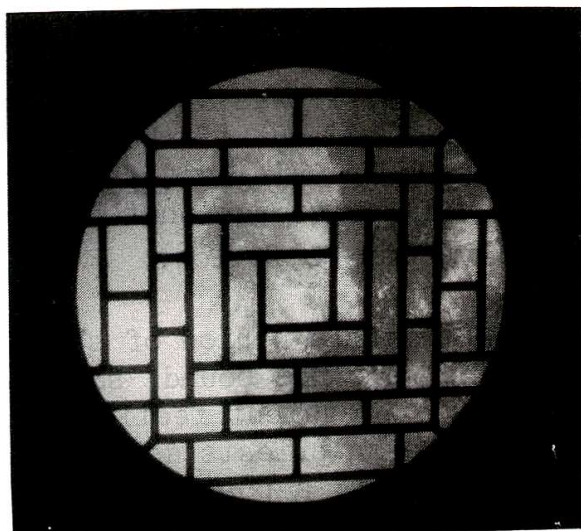


Priestly Formation

in



Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary:

Past, Present and Future

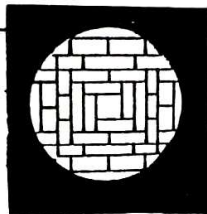
by Thomas Kwan
translated by Peter Barry

*Father Thomas Kwan is the former Rector
and present Professor of Moral Theology
in Holy Spirit Seminary.*

The meaning of formation

The 70's were a time of worldwide unpredictable change. It witnessed the collapse of ideals, widespread calamities, the spread of terrorism and famine. In China, also, these were times of great turbulence, the vicissitudes of which are still painful to recall. In the Church, after the Second Vatican Council, it was a time of tension between time honoured traditions and the new thinking, and a time of experimentation for a faith in search of new expression. These ten years marked a most unusual period in the history and life of the Church, and they were also a time that presented it with its greatest challenges.

It was during this time that Holy Spirit Seminary quietly passed through ten crucial years. To use a common phrase of the decade, it was a time of "searching". Throughout this extended period most of the priests who were responsible for seminary training and formation took great pains to try to forge links between what had gone before and what, of necessity, was to follow.



During this period of searching, some roads taken were not smooth, some plans were not sound, some decisions were not well thought through. There was a prevalent feeling, then that those involved in seminary formation, both priests as well as seminarians, were constantly at odds with each other, a positive spirit of cooperation and humility were noticeably absent. This not only impeded the development of community spirit, but it also fostered a credibility gap between students and their formators. To add to the problem many priests working outside the seminary showed little understanding of the complexities of the situation and offered little sympathy and concern. However, despite all these difficulties, the efforts expended and anxieties patiently borne during this ten year period by the senior staff of the seminary were not wasted. The experience of seeing young men, with perseverance, determination, and courage, step forward to answer the bishop's call to ordination became a primary motivating force in continuing efforts for change and renewal. In the midst of hesitant exploration and growing experience, we gradually perceived a direction, a way of moving forward under continuous observation, testing, and judging. We strove to keep the good and do away with the bad. What had to be abandoned, we abandoned; what had to be kept, we kept; what had to be created anew, we worked to create anew. Out of this, a more exact and clearer plan for the formation and the training of priests began to emerge.

An analysis of formation

All formation asks four basic questions: 1) who are we forming and for what purpose? 2) what methods do we use? 3) how do we guarantee that these methods can be carried out? 4) where are we now in the formation process? Let us enlarge on these questions.

First, what kind of people do we expect to form and for what purpose?

The most important responsibility of a diocesan seminary is to form diocesan priests. In the last analysis, the kind of diocesan priest we hope to form is:

a) a spiritual person, a man of prayer. We strongly believe that one who has a warm, personal and deep friendship with our Lord Jesus Christ,

one who, though exhausted from his labours, can still lift up his mind and heart in prayer with God, will remain stable and steadfast amidst the many difficulties encountered in the life of a priest. Those necessary qualities of humility, obedience, willingness to sacrifice, and show compassion, will also be nurtured through a lively prayer life, just as tendencies toward pride, selfishness, idleness, and lack of concern for others will gradually diminish.



b) a pastoral person. For one to have sufficient knowledge and competence to function in a pastoral role, these requirements seem basic:

1. a healthy and balanced moral character - a faith-life based on strong moral virtue and integrity; a personal life that is weak, unbalanced and not properly integrated will only become an obstacle in preaching the Gospel.
2. an adequate knowledge of theology. It is not necessary that a priest be a professional theologian, but it is necessary that he have a basic understanding and practical grasp of Church teaching and tradition, biblical revelation, contemporary moral questions, the sources of liturgical life, etc.. If his level of theological knowledge is low, it will weaken his self-confidence and negatively influence his work as well as the pastoral mission of his people.
3. an ability to adapt. Faced with rapidly changing developments in the world and in the Church, a priest must cultivate adaptability. The kinetic modern world presents challenges to the Church that demand constant adaptation to new circumstances. Even a priest rooted in Christ and solid christian values, may be unaware that an attitude of intransigence may arise from ignorance rather than faith. On the other hand, a priest who is secure in his own position can also be flexible enough to open himself to the world at large. He has the capability to enter into a genuine dialogue with others, and be accepting of ideas different from his own. Sensitive to the signs of the times, he can make a sensitive response to them. Flexibility is a special quality required by today's seminarian, the priest of tomorrow.

c) a person who knows how to give and receive love, and who at the same time, has the capacity to face the demands of a celibate life. The life of a priest is a healthy person's life. Celibacy does not take away

our power to love and be loved, nor does it destroy the spiritual quality of fatherhood; on the contrary, it is in the process of loving and being loved that the priest learns how to appreciate even more the beautiful joys that a wife and family represent and to freely dedicate himself in this special way to serve the Lord, and others of his community. This is the kind of priest we need to form for today's world and tomorrow's as well. I firmly believe that it is just this kind of priest who is most suited for service to God and to the people in a future full of challenges to the church in the world, and, in particular to the church in China.



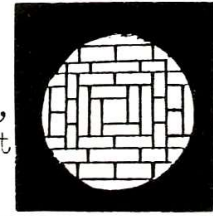
A ten year formation programme

We have taken the knowledge we have learned from a critical analysis of the past, the conclusions reached from extensive interviews with many different kinds of people, and the instructions on priestly formation which the Church has promulgated in the last few years, to fuse them into a ten year formation programme. The programme begins one year before a candidate's entrance into the seminary and only ends after the first few years of priesthood. It is a comprehensive concept, a programme that synchronizes time and content and adapts itself to the different needs of the seminarian for suitable guidance and discipline. The programme may be divided into six stages.

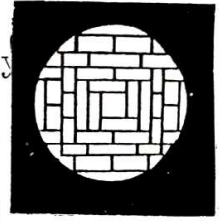


Seminarians and other students attending Mass in the Seminary chapel.

The first stage is the selection process, which takes place before a candidate enters the seminary. Past experience has taught us that the more careful the selection, the greater chance of success and the fewer the problems that are likely to appear during the seminary years. A youth already possessing a healthy, moral character and sound motivation will naturally mature in a healthy formation environment; on the other hand, if a youth is psychologically or morally unbalanced, or has poor or questionable motivation when entering the seminary, no matter how much work the youth or the seminary staff put it, not only will the results achieved be minimal, but also the progress of the whole seminary community will be impeded. To maintain a strict selection process is a serious obligation for seminary authorities. It ranks in importance with seminary formation itself. Many recent Church documents emphasize this point. (Cf. Decree on Priestly Formation, No. 6; Pope Paul II's Priestly Celibacy, Nos. 63, 64, 71, 72; An Instruction on the Formation of Priestly Celibacy, by the Vatican's Education Commission, (April, 1974), Nos. 12, 38; Ratio Fundamentalis, (March, 1970) No. 39; the December, 1974 declaration of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, etc..) Moreover, we also feel that the moral character and the sound motivation of the applicant is more important than his present educational level. This does not mean that we should lower educational standards to admit candidates who are not intellectually equipped to handle graduate level studies, but we do accept into this selection stage candidates who for one reason or another have not completed their secondary schooling. We make every effort to give such candidates, who are often rich in experience, mature in attitude, and sincere in motivation, an opportunity for further study so that, before entering the seminary, they will have reached a sufficient level of education to deal with the basic requirements necessary for the study of philosophy and theology.



The second stage of our programme is our orientation year. This period is similar to the novitiate year found in religious orders. In 1970, diocesan authorities decided to close out the minor seminary and accept for seminary formation only those who had finished middle school. However, candidates now coming from an extended period of work experience in society, need a bridge to facilitate their adjustment to seminary community life before they began their formal study of philosophy. In response, the seminary authorities have instituted an intermediate stage where youth, accustomed to a busy life in the secular world, would be initiated into an environment of internal and external discipline that fosters a more contemplative form of spirituality. Often a priest finds himself so caught up in the active life of a parish ministry that he neglects his own spiritual life, and his need

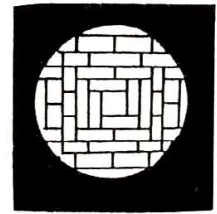


to continue to deepen his communication with God through prayer and meditation. Also, entrance into seminary community life demands adjustments of attitude; a spirit of narrow individualism must give way to a spirit of community if the individual ever expects to become a resource for enriching others. For those who have been away from the academic world for a prolonged period they have to re-oil the intellectual machinery in order to re-apply themselves to serious study. During these last few years, the seminary has continually sought to improve upon the formation programme of the orientation year. Every year has seen some new change. However, formation in the orientation year has consistently revolved around three basic objectives: to lay a firm spiritual formation in an atmosphere of mutual brotherly love; to develop a well-rounded and integrated personality; and to gradually purify the candidate's motives for becoming a priest.

The third stage of the formation programme is the two-year philosophy course. In this stage, emphasis is placed on basic spirituality, personality integration and intellectual training through the study of philosophy. It is hoped that the study of philosophy will become the foundation for developing a world view that is comprehensive, critical and analytical. We have also discovered through our experience that an integrated personality is a basic requirement for a person who is considering a life-long commitment to the service of the Church as a priest. Personality integration is necessary for the kind of self-understanding and self-affirmation needed by a candidate if he is to benefit from the spiritual and intellectual opportunities offered by the community life of the seminary. We have discovered too, that the average Hong Kong school graduate's grasp of languages is quite limited. Therefore, during this period, it is necessary to supplement his previous education with further language study in both Chinese and English. "Good tools are required for the successful completion of a job", and the success of a seminarian's future pastoral work demand that the seminary provide him with the essential instruments. The orientation year and two-years of philosophy emphasize a candidate's interior formation. Efforts are made at this time to build a foundation on which to develop and encourage personality integration, a strong community life, and both spiritual and intellectual progress. For this reason, outside pastoral involvement is kept to a minimum during this period.

The fourth stage of the formation programme is theological education. It comprises the first three years of theological study with emphasis on the integration of theological theory and pastoral practice. Students in this stage emerge from a life stressing personal interior growth to re-enter

a more active life in which they become more aware of the kind of society in which they are to serve. Here they increase the theoretical and practical understanding of their priestly role; and they are encouraged through their relations with classmates and the Christian communities in which they serve, to develop an appropriate spirit of initiative and independence. Theological reflection and pastoral supervision are special characteristics of this stage.

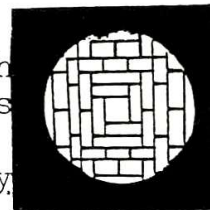


The fifth stage of formation is the diaconate year. Ordinarily at the end of the third year of theology or at the beginning of the fourth year, a seminarian is raised to the order of diaconate. Here the seminarian moves from his comparatively ordered, secure and protective environment into a parish which has been recommended to the seminary, and to which he is assigned by the bishop in consultation with the diocesan personnel committee. Because as a deacon he must still complete his fourth year of theology and take the examination for his theological degree, his pastoral work in the parish is limited. He is still a student who requires the pastoral supervision of an experienced pastor. However, his role in the community is that of a pastor-in-training. Under the guidance of the pastor, he gradually learns to adapt theological theory learned in the classroom to practical situations. Work in the parish brings him into close contact with neighboring pastors and their assistants. This, in turn, encourages cooperation with and respect for older, more experienced priests.

At the present time, the sixth stage of formation takes place during the first years after ordination. This is a period of transition from the academic life of the seminary to full immersion in parish pastoral life. During this period the newly ordained priest must make many adjustments to the parish family environment, to other parish priests, and to the many different responsibilities, practical activities and administrative requests demanded of him. The seminary and diocesan authorities assign a personal supervisor to give support and supervision at regular periods, and help the new priest reflect on his work. The seminary supervisor helps the new priest to gradually assume a pastoral persona. (Due to a lack of trained pastoral supervisors, the sixth step has not yet reached a mature state of development. Moreover, in this writer's opinion, it would be better if the sixth step of formation were extended to include the first three years after ordination. This would be ideal and more in conformity with today's needs).

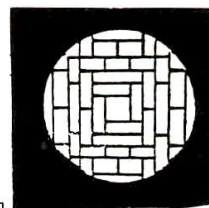
A diocesan priest's ministry is basically pastoral. In his teaching of the doctrine, administering the sacraments, individual or group counseling, pastoral visitations, helping parish leaders to reflect more deeply on their

faith, the priest will nurture many more pastoral agents within his parish. They, working at all levels of the parish along with the priest, will be able to carry out the parish's pastoral mission. At the same time, the priest will be training more Christian missionaries for contemporary society. St. Paul has written that it is these people from their places of work in the front lines of society who will "fight the good fight" for God's kingdom. They will be the salt of the earth and lights to the world. It is, then, the very nature of pastoral mission that has brought about, during these past few years, the renewed emphasis in seminary training on the integration of personality, spiritual life and theological reflection on faith experience. These are now the basic goals of our seminary training.



Finally, a word about the daily schedule of the seminary, which is the framework within which we seek to achieve our goals. Every morning there is an hour-and-fifteen minutes allotted to community prayer, which includes meditation, the recitation of the Divine Office and the Mass; classes begin after breakfast; lunch is at 1 p.m.; from 2 to 4 class or private study; from 4 p.m. to supper communal work or physical recreation are scheduled; after supper there is an hour of community prayer and silent meditation before the Blessed Sacrament, which is followed by time for private study. The seminary staff also encourages the seminarians to spend a half hour each day making a private visit to the Blessed Sacrament, at a time to be determined by themselves. Every Sunday evening the whole community gathers to hear a talk by the spiritual director, who explains the spiritual themes for the coming week. They also gather in small groups to share experiences. Each month one day is set aside for reflection and each year an 8-day retreat. Once a month each seminarian has a session with his spiritual director. Together, they examine the seminarian's growth and development in his spiritual life. During the monthly day of reflection, the rector offers some points on the direction, progress and spirit of the community life together. The seminarians also have their own student association, in which they mutually share experiences and examine problems in the training program, and offer their responses to the formation team of the seminary. The latter meets one afternoon every week to discuss matters of administration and training, and the individual progress of each seminarian. Every Saturday and Sunday, after the seminarians have finished their pastoral assignments, they are free to go home to visit their families. Our seminary rule is quite simple, and rules are kept to a minimum. There are, in fact, only two paragraphs in our rule book: first, in community rule, primary emphasis is placed on the spirit. The seminary desires to assist each member in meeting "the demands of community life" with "sufficient opportunity for individual

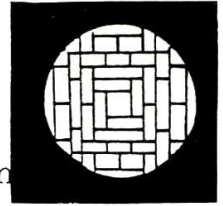
growth", in order to nurture an attitude of life which will be responsible to the Lord and to one's fellow man; second, the only leader in the seminary is Jesus Christ, who we strongly believe is present to our community as guide and friend of each member, as long as we priests and seminarians struggle to understand and forgive one another, to accept and cooperate with each other.



Cardinal Caseroli met the seminarians while they were at manual labour.

Support systems

Even a very detailed plan needs outside supports, which, when lacking, make it difficult for the plan to succeed. Our formation programme demands the support of responsible people in the diocese - the direct concern of the bishop, the assistance of all the priests in the diocese, and cooperation among the members of the formation team. Without these supports, there is little hope of success. Ultimately, the bishop of the diocese is the person



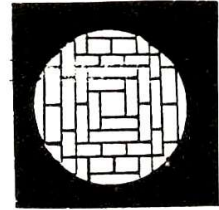
responsible for the seminary; the rector and the formation team represent the bishop in carrying out their work of training. The bishop's support is shown not only by his confidence in assigning personnel to the formation team, but also his frequent and substantial contacts with the formation team and with the seminarians. Bishops are busy people, formation teams have many demands; however, seminary training is a vital part of the life of a diocese, and the bishop is the link that allows the formation team and the seminarians to understand better the whole situation of the diocese and of its future development. Frequent contact with the bishop is a means whereby the content of seminary training can be better coordinated with diocesan planning. At the same time, it offers both the bishop and the seminarians, who will be working together in the future, opportunities to get to know and understand one another better, an ideal condition for the future development of the presbyterate.

The support of the diocesan priests in the formation of seminarians is also vital. Encouraging parish vocations, encouraging the students already in the seminary, offering opinions and criticism to seminary authorities, all demonstrate an active concern. Often priests are too busy with their own work, often they are shy or reluctant to express opinions because they feel they are unfamiliar with the seminary situation; however, if their valuable pastoral experience fails to find expression in the seminary formation programme, this would indeed be a regretful loss.

Finally, the key to a smooth running formation programme is cooperation and mutual acceptance among members of the formation team. Acceptance includes an attitude that seeks to understand and accept differences in personality, aspirations and work styles. Most important is that members feel comfortable with each other and carry out their individual tasks with mutual respect. Cooperation is necessary in maintaining an essential unity in the team's concrete operations, and an honest openness in discussing problems and methods frankly among members. It may be ideal, but it is not essential that the formation team be composed of saints. However, they must be strongly idealistic, farsighted, practical and responsible people, generous enough to accept ideas foreign to their own. To be educators of future pastors, it is important to have common ideals and common aspirations.

Besides the contribution of individuals and groups to the formation, it is also necessary for the diocese to develop an overall plan for preaching the Gospel, a flexible strategy for meeting future challenges, and a plan for the on-going formation of its clergy. The content and direction of seminary formation should be incorporated into the overall diocesan plan. This would not only clarify the training of seminarians

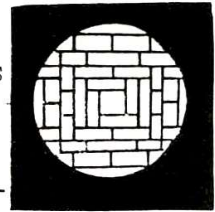
for outsiders, but at the same time, would assist the formation team in deciding on further concrete plans of action, lessening the misunderstandings, which tend to adversely affect the progress of all formation work.



The challenge of the future.

Whether Hong Kong people are willing or unwilling, happy or unhappy, the fact is that China regains sovereignty over Hong Kong after 1997. What effect will political changes have on the company of priests, and necessarily on the formation of seminarians? There is great concern about the future. Some priests have even voiced doubts about how China's guarantee of religious freedom will be implemented in practice. Will our future priests form a united fraternity committed to a spirit of cooperation with and mutual respect for the mainland Church in the task of preaching the Gospel? Or will we be divided by conflicting forces into intransigent positions in favour of or opposed to existing political realities? Will our role and attitude be one of cooperation with or protest against the inevitable modifications of our social system. These are very serious and difficult questions that await answers from a church concerned about the formation of its future church leaders. Do we choose to face the future with optimism or consign ourselves to pessimistic fears? Another challenge of the future is the ever-changing relationship between theological education and pastoral practice. In today's formation program this choice has still not been delineated clearly. It is a question awaiting an answer from the church.

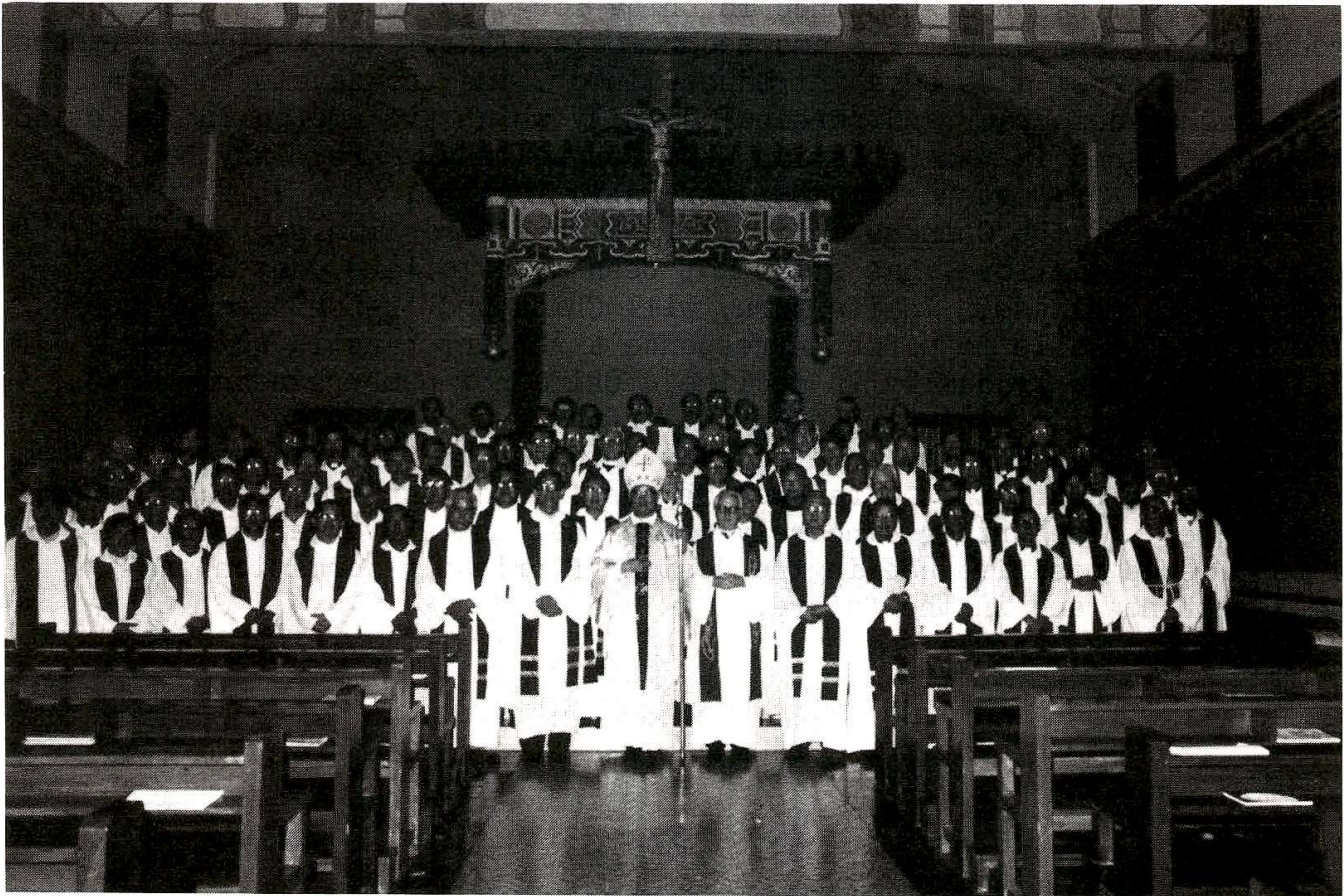
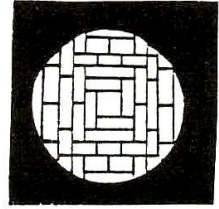
For a long time the relationship between formal theological education and pastoral practice has been experiencing a lot of tension. Some theologians feel that if theology is put entirely at the service of pastoral necessity, this will result in a lowering of theological standards. By the same token, pastoral workers feel that theological reflection on pastoral experience is often too speculative and not practical. However, a theology that gradually becomes more and more a specialized science not immersed in the practical reality of pastoral work, fails in its responsibility to give life and vision to the pastoral mission, reducing it to purely technical or repetitious parish activity. We constantly run into this phenomenon: after ordination, many priests never look at a theology book again. They claim to be too busy. The real culprit, in my opinion, is the notion that students for the priesthood tend to look upon theology as a required course for ordination, a test to be passed in order to graduate. Some feel that after ordination the study of theology is no longer a personal necessity for their work. I feel that the key to making theological reflection of paramount importance to their pastoral



responsibility is not merely to encourage them to continue reading theology books. Rather, during their formative years of theological study in the seminary, let them understand that the life of the people is the locus of theological reflection. Also, the professors of theology should be in constant dialogue with the practical world of people and have extensive pastoral experience. To descend from speculative theology's heights into the practical life of people can often be a painful process. Many students, when confronted by practical realities, are reluctant to surrender their acquired taste for the isolated comforts of academic research. Although the science of theology as taught by most professors is highly reasonable, yet when applied to practical life, it often leaves one with the feeling of not being relevant to the situation at hand. There is hope for the indigenization of theology only where the church has more dedicated theologians with pastoral experience, or pastoral agents with sound theological knowledge.

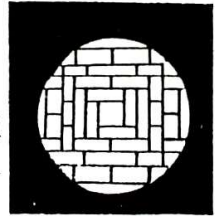
Another challenge to Hong Kong Christian formation lies in the area of national consciousness. For over one hundred years now the Hong Kong colonial education system has turned out Hong Kong citizens who have a low level of national consciousness and national concern. Catholic schools have unconsciously helped to prolong this situation. A national consciousness that also nurtures the desire to impart to one's countrymen the joy of the Gospel, flows from both deep religious and national feeling. Such feeling does not come "ready made" manufactured, but can only mature in a nurturing environment. If a person is lacking in a basic knowledge and an understanding of his country's culture and history for a prolonged period of time, then his national consciousness and the religious desire that his countrymen hear Christ's good news has little chance to develop and mature. In Hong Kong, if a person is a staunch advocate of a renewed study of our nation's history and calls for a heightened awareness of our country's culture, he is often seen as suspect, even in church circles as one somehow lacking a proper public spirit. Our seminarians cannot avoid growing up in such an atmosphere. After entering the seminary they are caught up in their studies, the demands of community life, etc., with little time to devote to the kind of serious study that would evolve into a more mature understanding of our country's culture and national history. They lack guidance in bringing a Chinese view to their examination of God's self-revelation in the world and in particular, in the history of the Chinese people as experienced in the past one hundred or so years. There is little guidance given in their task to understand and interpret as Chinese Christians, the experiences and sufferings of their fellow countrymen these past 100 years, and to search out its meaning in light of Christ's suffering ministry. We still emphasize a Western-flavored incarnational

theology, and thus indirectly put limits on God's word that takes root in all cultures and in all nations. While much time is spent on discussing the threats and dangers to the church by a new change in the political system, little thought is given to exploring how, in a new system, the church's servant mission to God's people can find new expression. Each year new priests are ordained with a sincere concern about being good priests dedicated to the service of the people. But is the special role that God has given to the Hong Kong church in these unique times in danger of being passed over? Perhaps a seminary formation geared to these challenges can help to correct the drift toward rootlessness. A formation programme that concentrates more on the needs of the church of tomorrow will be able to form Chinese priests who are passionately concerned about the world, have a strong cultural identity and a fervent love for Christ - in a word, disciples of the Lord.



The Bishops of Hong Kong and Macao concelebrate Mass with priests of the Hong Kong diocese on the Golden Jubilee of Holy Spirit Seminary.

Conclusion



To live at this time and in these circumstances is not a choice of our own making. But we can choose how to respond to the times. We can ask ourselves, what kind of a spiritual legacy we want to pass on to the next generation? Ordinary people who are so caught up in the practical necessity of providing for the future of their own families will most likely not question themselves in this way. At the same time, their practical response to their children's future will bring not shame but credit to their own generation. But Chinese Christian intellectuals, clergymen who are dedicated servants of God and their fellow man, priests involved in forming the future generation of church leaders, cannot but conscientiously ponder the spiritual legacy that future generations will stand in judgement on.

The Gospel has been preached in China for over 300 years. Besides introducing Western scientific and technological knowledge could missionaries at a later date not also have introduced into China the developing moral perceptions of democracy and personal dignity which are rooted in Christian faith and nurtured in the Christian West for so many years? Why has another product of Western thought, atheistic Marxism, been able to take such firm hold of the Chinese mentality, whereas Christianity, which advocates universal love, has still not been able to take root in the hearts of most Chinese? In its turn, will China and the Chinese church of the future be able to offer in response a helping hand to Western civilizations, now gradually in decline? China now numbers nearly one-fourth of the world's total population. A peaceful and united China will certainly have a large role to play in determining world peace. There can be no doubt that a renewed Chinese church can make the universal church richer! The writer sincerely hopes that the above reflections will be of some positive use in the design of priestly formation programmes both now and in the future.