

A Visit to Catholic Seminaries in China

by John Tong
translated by Elmer Wurth



For the past fifteen years, I have been working in Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary. This extensive experience has inculcated in me a strong feeling for and interest in all aspects of theological education. So it was only natural that on my most recent visit to China, I would focus on some of the newly opened Catholic seminaries and theological schools on the mainland. Along with Father Peter Barry, our Holy Spirit Study Centre Research Associate, who proved to be not only a stimulating but also a delightful companion, we chose five from the number, beginning with the National Catholic Seminary in Beijing. Sister Goretti Lau, Assistant Editor of Tripod, also happened to be in the capital at the time, so we invited her to join us on our first visit.

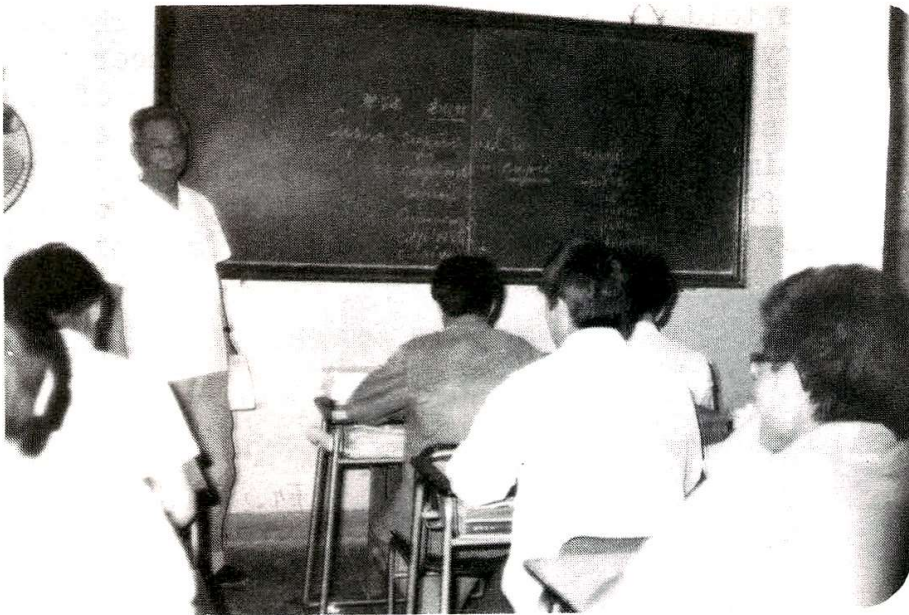
NATIONAL SEMINARY IN BEIJING

We arrived in Beijing on the 28th of June. The next morning, according to plan, we went to the National Catholic Seminary which is located at 14 Liu Yin Street, Xi Cheng Qu, and was formerly the priests' residential quarters of Fu Ren University. We were greeted at the main gate by Bishop Tu Shihua, the rector, his vicar-general and vice-rector, Father Wang Zicheng, and Liu Bainian, the assistant general secretary of the Catholic Patriotic Association. We were acquainted with all of them through former visits.



L to R: Mr. Liu Bainian, Fr. Peter Barry, Fr. Wang Zicheng, vice-rector, Bishop Tu Shihua, rector, Fr. John Tong and Sr. Goretti Lau.

They first took us to the seminary's Chinese-style chapel to offer a prayer. They told us that the chapel remains just as it had formerly been when it was part of Fu Ren University. We then went to the parlour for an informal and friendly chat. Bishop Tu informed us that the school has been in operation for just over a year. At present there are 56 students; two are older men who are being given special tutoring by the bishop himself. All the younger men have been recommended to the seminary by church leaders from throughout China, and all have passed the required examinations to enter the seminary. The entire course encompasses six years. Their first year courses include Christian Doctrine, Latin, Chinese Literature, History, Geography, and Political Science and other selected subjects. The two older men waited many years for the opportunity to begin their preparation for the priesthood. Their perseverance has been a source of encouragement for the younger seminarians. Because the classrooms are small, the students are divided into two groups. This requires that professors teach the same lesson twice. When we raised the question concerning the large number of young men who want to study for the priesthood, Bishop Tu responded that it is because of the sincere piety of the Christian families.



*Latin class at
the Beijing
National Seminary.*

Vicar-general Wang informed us that they recruit lecturers from outside universities to teach cultural-related subjects while priests are responsible for the rest of the curriculum. Besides teaching a double schedule, priests must also prepare their own teaching materials. For this reason they are kept very busy.

Mr. Liu also told us that they are presently searching for a location to construct a new seminary more adequate for their needs. This will include a library large enough to accommodate the many books donated by friends outside China.

After our chat, we were taken to the second floor to look in on the seminarians in class. Some were studying Latin, others Political Science. All seemed to be approaching the task with a great deal of eagerness and earnestness. Afterwards, we visited the students' bedrooms - two or three students to a room, the rooms all neat and tidy with holy pictures on the walls.

SHENYANG CATHOLIC SEMINARY

On the afternoon of July 1st Fr. Barry and I arrived in Shenyang. After checking into a hotel, we went to the Shenyang Catholic Theologate which is located at #2, Hua Guang Lane, 1st Section, Xiao Nan Street. The seminary is right next to the cathedral and is quite spacious. Opened in March of 1983, it is jointly administered by and serves the needs of three provinces of Northeast China. We were graciously received by Father

Du Shicai, the vice-rector. He told us that Bishop Xu Zhenjiang, who also served as rector of the seminary, had, unfortunately, died of cancer the previous week. He has been replaced by Bishop Zhao Youmin, bishop of the neighboring diocese. Fr. Du also told us that the seminary offers a four year course. At the present time there are fifty students enrolled, aged 18-25. Most of them have come from deeply religious families, Catholic for as many as four generations. All of them have graduated from high



Fr. Du Shicai, vice-rector, and seminarians in the student dormitory.

Seminarians receiving Communion at Mass.



school and have successfully passed the entrance examinations before being chosen to begin their studies. He went on to tell us that they wanted to maintain seminary educational formation on a par with the standards of the secular universities. After graduation, students will spend a year gaining pastoral experience in one of the local parishes. After this year of practical experience, they may request ordination. When we asked vice-rector Du what the daily schedule was like, he gave us a copy which we have included in this article.

TIME TABLE

Subject Date Session	Date					
	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
1		Christian Doctrine	English	Ethics	Latin	Latin
2	Chinese	Christian Doctrine	English	Ethics	Chinese Classics	History
3	Chinese			Ethics	Chinese Classics	History
4	Chinese				Chinese Classics	History
5	English	Biblical Studies	Latin		Political Science	English
6	English	Biblical Studies	Latin		Political Science	English
7		Sacred Music	Homiletics		Political Science	Sacred Music
Remark						

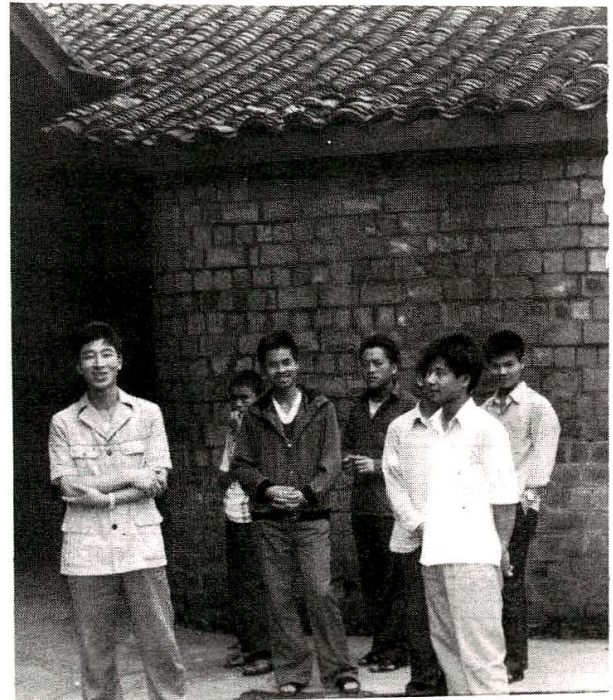
As it was the Feast of the Sacred Heart, we attended the evening High Mass. The church was filled. The seminarians occupied seats on one side near the sanctuary. One of them served as lector and commentator giving an historical explanation of the meaning of the feast before Mass. During the Latin Mass, he read the Gospel in Chinese. Seminarians and the laity alike showed great reverence and respect for the Liturgy.

SICHUAN CATHOLIC SEMINARY

On the 8th of July we arrived at Chengdu, Sichuan. The next day we walked to the Sichuan Catholic Seminary which is located at 29 Peace Bridge Street. The seminary and church occupy the same spacious Chinese-style building. It has a courtyard with a small garden. There we met Li Zhenyu, Ms. Bao Zhiqing and Ms. Zhou Peifang, who are in charge of church affairs, and who happily gave us a tour of the grounds and the seminary facilities. We also met Fr. Hu Daguo, the spiritual director, Fr. Wang Yi, the Christian doctrine teacher, and had a lively exchange with some of the seminarians who had just finished class. The seminary was opened on March 15th of this year, but the formal opening ceremonies took place on April 5th. The seminary's 34 seminarians, aged 18 to 28, come from the three provinces of Sichuan, Guizhou and Yunnan. After a four-year course they are sent out to churches for practical training before they are accepted for ordination. Because part of the church building is still occupied, an open corridor serves as a temporary refectory.

DAILY LIFE

5.30	Rising
6.00 - 7.00	Mass
7.00 - 7.30	Morning Exercise
7.30	Breakfast
8.10 - 9.00	Class
9.10 - 10.00	Class
10.20 - 11.10	Class
11.20 - 12.00	Private Study
12.00	Lunch
2.30 - 3.20	Class
3.30 - 4.20	Class
4.20 - 5.20	Physical Activities
5.20 - 6.00	Private Study
6.00	Supper
7.30	Evening Private Study
10.00	Retire



Students at Sichuan Seminary.

Because we had not informed the seminary of our visit beforehand, the rector, vice-rector and the dean of studies were away attending a meeting. When we explained that we had hoped to see them, we received a phone call the next day inviting us to return to the seminary in the

afternoon. Bishop Li Xiting, the rector, Bishop Fan Daojiang, the vice-rector, and Fr. Chen Shizhong, prefect of studies, Fr. Wang Liangzuo, the latin language instructor, Ms. Li Jiajun, secretary of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and Mr. Zuo Shiqiu, were all on hand to greet us. When we spoke of the present situations of the churches and seminaries in Hong Kong and Sichuan, Bishop Li told us that frequent exchanges with the Church outside are most welcome. Fr. Chen explained that during the first year of the four-year course, the students concentrate on culture, and the latin language, emphasis during the second year is on philosophy, while the third and fourth years are given over to the study of theology. Bishop Fan, Fr. Wang and Ms. Li were most eager to raise questions about the churches and seminary training going on outside of China.

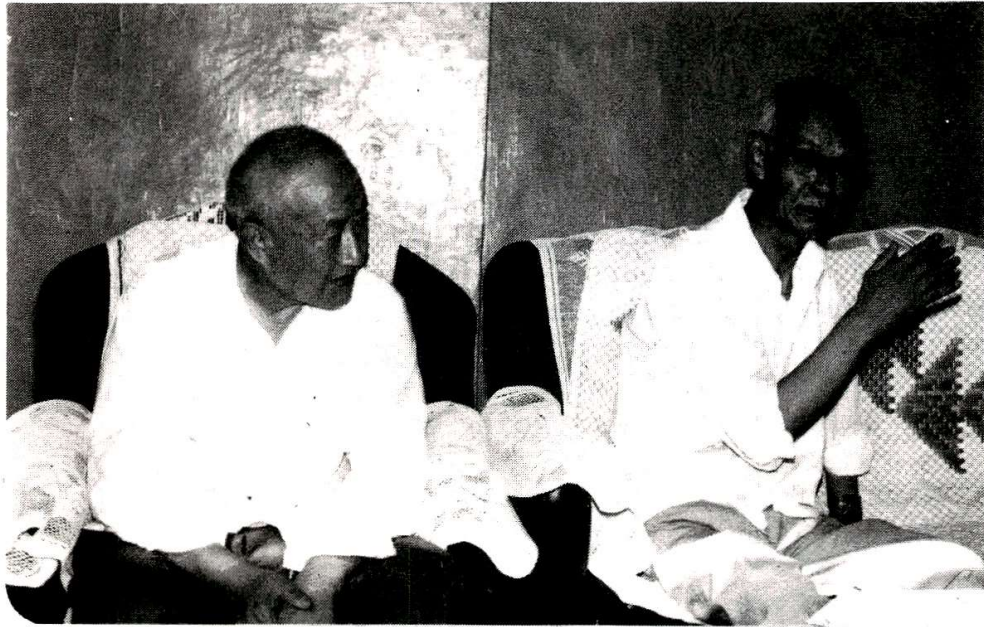
Before we said farewell, Bishop Li presented each of us with locally made religious medals and holy pictures.



*L to R: Bishop Fan
Daojiang, vice-rector,
Bishop Li Xiting,
rector and Fr.
John Tong.*

WUCHANG CATHOLIC SEMINARY

We arrived at Wuhan on the 11th of July. In the afternoon we went to Wuchang Seminary in Huayuan Shan. The present seminary is on the site of the previous minor seminary. Since Bishop Dong Guangqing the rector, was away, we were received by Fr. Zhou Xingyu the vice-rector, Fr. Peng Zesheng an instructor, Fr. Ma Jun pastor of the parish church next to the seminary, Mr. Tong Wencan secretary for the Patriotic Association, Mr. Li the procurator of the seminary, and others.



*L to R: Fr. Ma Jun, pastor of Huayuan Shan Church
and Fr. Zhou Xingyu, vice-rector.*

This seminary is jointly run by the five provinces of Guangdong, Guangxi, Hunan, Hubei and Henan. It was opened on the 18th of October last year. There are presently 40 seminarians ranging in age from 18 to 30. Coming from Catholic families, they have all graduated from high school and passed the entrance examinations.

The vice-rector Fr. Zhou told us that since this is their first year of operation and there is much that needs improvement, they may not accept new students for the coming academic year in order to concentrate on the needs of the present students.

When we asked about the curriculum, Fr. Zhou told us that the present course covers five years. During the first year-and-a-half, they are concentrating on philosophy, while the remaining three and a half years will be given over to theology. He explained that by compressing the contents of the first year of philosophy and the first year of theology into courses of a half-year each, they hope to cover the six-year course in five.

Fr. Zhou further informed us that at present he teaches logic, while Fr. Peng teaches latin. In the future he will lecture in dogmatic theology and Fr. Peng in moral theology.

After our discussion about the curriculum, Mr. Tong and the other members of the staff escorted us to visit the classrooms, bedrooms and other seminary facilities. The seminarians had just finished exams that day, so they were in quite a relaxed mood with groups chatting while they strolled in the garden, others playing chess in the recreation room.

As we were leaving, we saw the seminarians gathering in the chapel for the recitation of the Rosary.



Seminarians praying the Rosary.

SHANGHAI'S SHESHAN SEMINARY

We arrived in Shanghai on the afternoon of July 15th. In the evening of the same day we met Fr. Jin Luxian, rector of She Shan, and Fr. Shen Baozhi, general secretary for the Shanghai Diocese, in the guest room of the Xujiahui Church. We arranged to go to Sheshan Seminary together the next day. Because Fr. Peter Barry had not applied beforehand for an entrance permit to the closed area where the seminary is situated, he was not able to accompany us.

The next morning Frs. Jin and Shen took me in the seminary car to visit Sheshan, a famous pilgrimage site. The hour's travel time passed quickly as we chatted pleasantly along the way. The seminary, situated next to the parish church half way up the mountain, was opened on October 11th, 1982. It is sponsored by the six provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Anhui, Shandong, Fujian and Jiangxi, along with the municipality of Shanghai.

Fr. Jin told me that the seminarians finished exams last week and had returned to their homes for a vacation, except for a few who stayed behind. The teachers had also left for other places, to relax after a strenuous year of teaching.

Fr. Jin's Sheshan Seminary report had already been published in the Catholic Church in China, issue #8, and also in TRIPOD, issue #19, so I limited my questions to recent developments since his report. He said that during the six-year course, the first two years stress Chinese literature, foreign languages (each student can choose either English or French), philosophy (which includes logic, epistemology, the history of Western philosophy and Chinese philosophy). The last four years concentrate on theology. Fr. Jin said further that they plan to enroll thirty new students each year. At present, they have sixty-one students, all except two or three being between 18 and 30 years of age. After the summer holidays the number of students will be increased to more than ninety. Several older men have been waiting for some thirty years and only now have been given the chance to fulfill their lifetime desire of becoming priests. By entering the seminary, these men have made great personal sacrifices, leaving secular positions on the eve of retirement to begin a new career.

Fr. Jin also confided that in the near future they hope to build a new and larger seminary at the base of the hill capable of housing 200 seminarians. The present building will be made available for use as a convent.



*L to R: Frs. Peter Barry, John Tong, Jin Luxian,
Shen Baozhi.*

Two of the older seminarians at Sheshan.



After touring the building, we enjoyed a pleasant lunch with Fr. Xu Yuantang, the 84 year old spiritual adviser for the seminarians and Fr. Gu Pinxian, pastor of Sheshan parish church. After lunch, Frs. Jin, Shen and Gu took me first to the neighboring church and then to China's only basilica, at the top of Sheshan.

I asked Fr. Jin about the recently published article in Bai Xing concerning himself and the seminary. Fr. Jin answered that he had read the article, and that the writer had never even paid a visit to the seminary. "Why would he not first come himself to see what is happening here before writing about us in such an arbitrary manner?"

Fr. Jin spoke freely, openly, and intelligently about modern theological developments. Speaking about the recent death of Karl Rahner, he mentioned how he had hoped to invite the German theologian to lecture at the seminary.

SOME CONCLUDING COMMENTS

After having seen first-hand the situation of five of the six newly opened Catholic seminaries on the China mainland, we came away with many positive impressions. Much progress has been made in a very short time. It was on June 2nd of 1980 that delegates of the Catholic Church, meeting in Beijing, formed a planning committee to set in motion the re-opening and basic organization of Catholic seminaries throughout China. Their achievements are manifestations of the earnest determination of those who serve on the organizing committee. At the same time, as both Bishop Tu and Fr. Jin have already pointed out, the new seminaries are in an experimental stage of development. Outside criticism, while helpful, may also be premature. Our reception by those in responsible authority at each of the seminaries we visited indicated an eagerness to learn as well

as a desire to insure that the future priests of China would be holy and competent servants of the Church. With this in mind, I would like to make a comment or two by way of suggestion to those who are in responsible positions of authority in guiding the seminaries towards their ideal.

First, it seems to me that if there could be an increase of informational exchange between the mainland seminaries and those outside, more sharing of resources and mutual experiences, much time and effort might be saved. The Catholic Church in China (Issue #9, pp. 39-40) reported on a meeting held in Beijing in March of this year. Those participating were the rectors and vice-rectors of all the Catholic seminaries in China. The meeting not only offered an opportunity to share valuable experiences, but also focused on the selection and preparation of educational materials.

I believe that it is precisely in these areas that outside seminaries can be of some service by making available already existing resources. I am reminded of what Fr. Jin told me about a book he had read by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin which he thought valuable enough to be translated into Chinese. Then he learned by chance that the very book had already been translated and published in Taiwan, so he took the initiative of having someone buy a copy for him. With the more open policy in China today, there will be more and more opportunities for a sharing of training experiences between Chinese seminaries and those outside. Moreover, there is in Europe, Asia, and America among many seminary personnel an increased interest in participating in this mutual sharing. So I hope that seminary personnel inside China will give serious consideration to invitations from abroad. Each country or region has its own special needs and character, and for this reason it is necessary for China to devote its attention to local needs in the establishment of its seminaries. It is the only proper approach to take. At the same time, it should also maintain an open and critical attitude towards exchanges with outside seminaries as another valuable resource in helping to deepen and broaden the formation and development of seminaries at home. Such exchanges will also better mutual understanding and increase cooperation within the universal Church.

Secondly, in the "Decree on Priestly Formation" of Vatican II under article 4 we read: "Major seminaries are necessary for priestly formation. In them the whole training of students ought to provide for the development of true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who was Teacher, Priest, and Shepherd."

This section points to new approaches and new trends in the formation of priests today. Previous priestly training emphasized the priest's role

as dispenser of sacraments, especially his role in consecrating the Eucharist and forgiving sins as central elements in defining the special character of priesthood. As a result, the training of the priest often failed to keep pace with secular society. Today's priestly formation makes great efforts to re-adjust this imbalance, returning as it does, to the original concept of the ordained minister as teacher, priest and shepherd. It emphasizes his role as pastor, helping him to cultivate a loving and open attitude of mutual exchange with modern man in order to achieve God's work of salvation in a spirit of Christian service. Due to this change in emphasis, today's priestly formation not only adjusts the curriculum to fit the particular circumstances of each local situation, but it also pays close attention to the psychological maturity of the applicant, discerning through psychological testing a candidate's stability of character, his motives for devoting himself to his vocation and his spiritual and emotional suitability. I believe these new trends and practical methods in priestly education and formation can offer valuable assistance to the seminaries of China just as they already have to seminaries throughout the world.

On the other hand, the emphasis of Chinese seminaries on tradition and the ongoing work of adjusting curriculum to the evolving local situation, can make a great contribution to the learning process of the churches outside. For example, the emphasis of the Chinese seminaries' on Latin can serve to stimulate churches outside which are in danger of almost completely abandoning one of the languages of a great part of their history. Another example is Sheshan's experiment of placing emphasis on the study of languages, both Chinese and foreign, and on the study of Chinese philosophy in its philosophy curriculum, while teaching some impractical sections of scholastic philosophy, as part of western philosophical history. These practical insights can stimulate local initiative in foreign seminaries, not to mention the seminaries of Hong Kong and Taiwan.

In closing, I sincerely hope that this rather simple account of our recent trip to the Chinese seminaries will serve to stimulate others to take up the subject in more detail. We have much to learn from each other and we are only at the beginning.