

Philosophical Formation in Mainland Seminaries: Status and Prospects

Bai Hong

Translated by Cynthia Pon

An Overview of the Philosophical Curriculum at Wuchang Seminary

Wuchang (also known as South-Central China Major) Seminary was founded in March 1983. Classes began the same year in early October, with 40 admissions. Since then admissions took place every two years, with the enrollment holding steady at about 40 persons. This situation continued until 2009. Since then, the enrollment has dropped. There are currently about 30 seminarians.

When the Seminary first opened, besides theology, courses such as logic, catechesis, Latin, epistemology, cosmology, history of Western philosophy, modern Chinese history were about the only courses related to philosophy that were offered. As academic regulations strengthened, curriculum building also became more normative.

In the 21st century, the philosophy curriculum gradually became complete. Courses are now divided into three categories. The first is introduction to philosophy, and logic; the second is the history of philosophy, divided into the history of Chinese philosophy and the history of Western philosophy; the third category consists of philosophical topics, namely: cosmology, epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of man, philosophy of religion and moral philosophy (or ethics).

Introductory philosophy, cosmology, philosophy and ethics each carry 2 credits; other courses are 4 credits (17 credit-hours equal 1 credit). Later, at the theology level, drawing from the research expertise of adjunct teachers, the seminary also continues to offer such courses as social philosophy, philosophy and

philosophers, ten philosophical questions, and existentialist philosophy.

Facing Difficulties

From the point of view of curriculum design, the course-sequence is reasonable, but this order is often disrupted by a number of factors, the most important of which is the availability of teachers. At Wuchang Seminary, from the beginning, the instruction of philosophy has relied more on external aid. For a long period of time in the past, professors from Taiwan's Fu Jen Catholic University and Hubei University anchored the philosophy faculty at the local seminary. Particularly in the last three years, the seminary appointed Professor Wu Kun-ru, professor emeritus, and former chairperson of the philosophy department at National Taiwan University as resident professor. This has substantially enriched philosophical formation at the seminary. Over the years, whenever these external teachers showed up on schedule, the offering of philosophy courses was relatively secure; but when these teachers, especially those from overseas, encountered obstacles, then philosophy courses would face serious problems. At least, course-offerings and their sequence would be disrupted.

In addition, because some external teachers have restricted schedules, some courses have to be compacted, and taught in an intensive manner. According to seminarians, there is not enough time to digest such materials. Teaching comes in one ear, and goes out the other. That has a negative impact on learning. Regarding pedagogy, owing to the disparity between the rich content and limited course-hours, philosophy courses are almost always taught in lecture-format. Seminarians lack guidance in learning methodologies, after-class reflection, and supplementary reading, etc., that should have buttressed theoretical instruction. Seminarians also lack the chance to master the skills of research writing and oral communication.

In recent years, during exchanges with other seminary administrators and teachers of philosophy, we have found that, although seminaries on the Mainland differ according to their strength in faculty and other resources, the basic conditions are the

same as Wuchang Seminary, and the difficulties they face are similar.

First recommendation to improve philosophical formation: strengthen the study of ancient and modern languages

Based on an understanding of the current situation, and the goal of philosophical education, here are some ideas for further improving philosophical formation at the seminary.

First, in designing introductory courses in philosophy, we should reinforce Latin, modern foreign languages, Chinese and other language courses as well as the teaching of Eastern and Western history. Given the importance of philosophy in seminary formation, the above-mentioned courses that are grouped under the "general curriculum" ought to serve philosophical education. They are prerequisite courses to philosophy, in particular Latin. Currently seminaries offer Latin mainly to fulfil seminarians' future liturgical needs. Seminarians now only learn to recite. This is far from the Vatican Council's demand that they "are to acquire a knowledge of Latin which will enable them to understand and make use of the sources of so many sciences and of the documents of the Church" (*Optatam Totius*, 13, henceforth referred to as OT). Latin documents are the vehicle of the Church's philosophical literature. Almost all the rich resources of Church philosophy were written in Latin. And in Chinese society, more and more scholarly attention is paid to "classics." There is a great demand for people who are proficient in Latin. The Church has had a long tradition of Latin scholarship. Seminaries should attach great importance to Latin instruction. As a way of serving China's academic progress, Latin is an important way the Church could contribute to Chinese society. With reference to the Ecumenical Council's demand that "before beginning specifically ecclesiastical subjects, seminarians should be equipped with that humanistic and scientific training which young men in their own countries are wont to have as a foundation for higher studies" (OT, 13), language studies and history courses are in fact remedial. They make up for what seminarians lack, and also give them the ability to digest philosophical knowledge.

Second recommendation: do not overlook St. Thomas's philosophy

To study philosophy as a professional subject, there should be a deep appreciation of the church's understanding of the philosophy of St. Thomas. Even though the Church views all the different areas of philosophy as "necessary for a knowledge of reality. Indeed, for each area, the proper field of study and the specific method must be respected, in the name of consonance with reality and the variety of human ways of knowing" (Congregation For Catholic Education: "Decree on the Reform of Ecclesiastical Studies of Philosophy" 4, hereafter referred to as "Decree"), the Church still maintains "the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas is important both for the acquisition of intellectual 'habitus' and for the mature assimilation of the philosophical heritage" (Decree, 12). This is the case with philosophical education at Catholic universities, and even more so with philosophical formation in seminaries.

The Ecumenical Council required that seminarians "learn to penetrate [the mysteries of salvation] more deeply with the help of speculation, under the guidance of St. Thomas, and to perceive their interconnections" (OT, 16). Pope John Paul II also pointed out, "the Magisterium has repeatedly acclaimed the merits of Saint Thomas's thought and made him the guide and model for theological studies. This has not been in order to take a position on properly philosophical questions nor to demand adherence to particular theses. The Magisterium's intention has always been to show how Saint Thomas is an authentic model for all who seek the truth" (*Faith and Reason*, 78).

Today, the church emphasizes the acquisition of intellectual "habitus" and the mature assimilation of the philosophical heritage through realizing the philosophy of St. Thomas. What is emphasized here is Scholastic philosophy's method and attitude. For example, in teaching philosophical anthropology or epistemology, if one only discusses related topics in *Summa theologiae*, that in effect gives as "doctrines" to seminarians St. Thomas's conclusions on Man and human understanding. As such, the benefits are limited. Only when we link the reintroduction of Aristotelian philosophy into Europe and the impact of Arab

philosophy as we examine St. Thomas's views about Man and the understanding of Man, do we realize how St. Thomas made use of new philosophical currents to develop reason, and the ways and attitude by which he pursued the truth.

Today's diversifying trends mean that philosophical education should also take "into account the philosophical investigations of later ages. This is especially true of those investigations which exercise a greater influence in their own nations. Account should also be taken of the more recent progress of the sciences. The net result should be that the students, correctly understanding the characteristics of the contemporary mind, will be duly prepared for dialogue with men of their time" (OT, 15). However, the knowledge gained through philosophical education should not be fragmented. It should be holistic. This requires us to unify all philosophical knowledge under the first philosophy of "being qua being", i.e., metaphysics; for "it is the path to be taken in order to move beyond the crisis pervading large sectors of philosophy at the moment, and thus to correct certain mistaken modes of behaviour now widespread in our society" (*Faith and Reason*, 83). That is why the discipline of philosophy must also attach great importance to the teaching of metaphysics.

Third recommendation: encourage debate and reading

Thirdly, regarding the teaching of philosophy, in addition to lectures, we have to improve the training of reading, writing and debate. If we review the history of higher education, debate is probably the church's most distinctive pedagogy. Debate can stir up "in the students a love of rigorously searching for the truth and of maintaining and demonstrating it, together with an honest recognition of the limits of human knowledge," as well as tease out the "necessary connection between philosophy and the true problems of life, as well as the questions which preoccupy the minds of the students" (OT, 15). So this method of teaching philosophy should be maintained in the seminary today.

Philosophical education in secular universities pays special attention to the reading of philosophical texts. This is worth emulating in seminaries. Lectures aside, this means requiring

seminarians to read, and giving them the necessary guidance, so seminarians can improve themselves through reading. As a field that loves wisdom (*philo-sophia*), philosophy enhances the level of thinking of students (and teachers), so, logical expression, whether it is oral or in writing, should become one of the goals of philosophical training. Therefore, philosophical instruction in the classroom has to carry out necessary reforms. Besides lectures, it is important to cultivate students' ability to think independently, and encourage the students—through asking questions and writing—to respond to course content, and to reflect on thinking.

Conclusion

The goal of philosophical formation is to cultivate people who can think rationally, people who understand and discern. The Church has never allowed seminaries to become "anti-intellectual" bastions. The purpose of philosophical formation is to impart to seminarians the ability to distinguish right from wrong, and thus practise charity in the process of seeking the truth. Though it does not aim at producing professional philosophers, philosophical formation in seminaries must enable the future clergy to develop a real understanding of the Church's cultural treasures. Most important of all, philosophy brings us closer to the truth. To "defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity" (Pope Benedict XVI: *Charity in truth*, 1).