

New Book excerpt: History of the Formation of the Native Catholic Clergy in China¹

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Future perspectives regarding seminary education

According to the official statistics of the Seminary Education Committee of the official Chinese Bishops Conference, up to July 2000, 12 major and 24 minor seminaries were in operation in China.

At present, 10 official Major Seminaries, and 20 minor ones exist in China.

The biggest problem in seminary formation is spiritual formation and spiritual direction.... "We really do not have enough people for spiritual direction," [said the then Auxiliary Bishop Paul Pei Junmin of Shenyang, Liaoning in 2007, who after his studies in the USA, spent the ten years before his 2006 episcopal ordination as a professor, vice rector and dean of studies at the seminary.] "We can teach the courses, but we do not know how to form the seminarians," he said. Recently, the situation has gradually improved but there is still a long way to go in the area of the spiritual formation of seminarians.

The formation provided in the seminary up to now seems mainly based upon religious information, and practical training (as if the priesthood is just a profession). Obviously, the seminary requires the seminarians to perform spiritual exercises and to take spiritual theology courses. Their spiritual commitment is multifaceted: daily prayer, Eucharist, meditation and reflection, the sharing of spiritual life issues with formators and the study of spirituality and the lives of the saints, practicing the love of God and service to people (visiting the sick and the elderly, teaching children, etc.). In the classroom, they follow courses in Sacred Scripture, and of spiritual, dogmatic and moral theology. However,

¹ Sergio Ticozzi, *History of the Formation of the Native Catholic Clergy in China* (Hong Kong, 2017), 194-198. This well researched book can be purchased from the Holy Spirit Study Centre for HK\$100.00.

the problem is how the individual seminarian absorbs and personalizes the content of the courses. The majority of the seminarians seem to take them just as something to undergo, and just as courses to study, and not as something that can shape their personality, and build up their spiritual lives.

The atmosphere in the seminaries at times turns out to be quite difficult due to the control exercised by the civil authorities, the subtle ideological emphasis on becoming loyal 'officials,' and the ambiguous motivations of some of the candidates.

In the past twenty years, all the seminaries at one time or another have invited theologians and professors from foreign countries: the United States, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, the Philippines and South Korea. Recently the number of outside professors has been reduced, or they are asked to give only short-term courses.

From the early 1990s, the Church in China, starting from the unofficial part, has sent seminarians and priests to study abroad ... The total number of ecclesiastical students who at present are studying abroad is about 500, according to official sources. About 200 have returned to China with an academic degree and are now serving as teachers in different seminaries, or as leaders of dioceses.

The future of unofficial seminaries is not very bright due to the decrease in the number of vocations. For a better survival rate, stronger cooperation among them is urgently needed....

The official seminaries also have to deal with the following main issues: a decrease in vocations, the official trend of merging seminaries, the emergence of good teams of administrators and formators, who may be in competition with the official authorities for the guidance of the seminary, and, regarding the contents of formation, the urgent need for deeper human and spiritual content.

The trend of a decrease in vocations is going to continue. The reasons are several: birth control and the promotion of the one child policy (most recently, the government has allowed parents to have two children), especially in the urban areas, widespread materialistic concerns in society, together with secularization and the temptation of modern comforts. The uncertainty and confusion within the Church could also be deterrent factors for young people to consider a priestly vocation, as well as the problematic

conditions and the lack of solid formation being provided in some seminaries.

The policy of the official authorities is to advocate for the merging of seminaries, although they meet some opposition from the seminaries themselves....[T]he National Seminary has absorbed the Inner Mongolia Seminary (2005) and the Jinan Seminary (in 2006). Now since, the Shanxi and Shanghai Seminaries are closed for the time being, fear exists for their definite closure. The reduced number of seminarians in the Chengdu and Wuhan seminaries arouses the same fear for their future.

Since the 1990s, the major seminaries have started to hold courses in pastoral theology, spiritual direction and liturgy for the ongoing education of priests and Sisters. This is aimed at helping priests and Sisters, already working in parishes to keep updated. Recently, due to the decrease in the number of seminarians, seminaries have also organized courses for catechists and lay leaders.

... [As a result of inadequate/problematic seminarian formation] A high percentage of clergy (estimated to be around 30%) leave the priesthood just few years after ordination. [The main reasons are]: young priests are sent to work in isolated country parishes by themselves soon after ordination; due to the large age gap between young and old priests, they do not have any models to imitate; soon difficulties start piling up and disillusion sets in; economic pressures and the worship of money force some priests to take up another job, and they gradually leave the ministry for financial reasons ...; loneliness, alienation and sexual tensions; a lack of human and spiritual maturity, the lack of a proper sexual education and affective formation; differences in apostolic methods or in attitudes to obedience; lack of trust between bishop and priests and among priests themselves; mutual envy and rivalries, which create unavoidable conflicts and misunderstandings; allurements presented by some civil authorities; the conflict between the official and unofficial churches, and a lack of ongoing formation.

These reasons indeed are strong challenges to the formators of all the Chinese seminaries, both official and unofficial, as they strive to provide a proper formation for their seminarians.