

INTERVIEWS WITH SEMINARIANS FROM SHESHAN REGIONAL SEMINARY, SHANGHAI, NOVEMBER 13, 1987



by Donald MacInnis

On November 13, 1987 I interviewed five fifth and sixth-year students at the Sheshan Regional Seminary, which is located an hour's drive from Shanghai on a low mountain near the restored Basilica of Our Lady. In a year or two these men will complete their theological studies and be assigned to parishes in the East China Region of the Catholic Church in China. Sheshan Seminary, with 127 students, is one of the seven major seminaries in China. In addition there are four minor seminaries and several one-year preparatory courses, actually tutorials, taught by local priests.

The first student interviewed in the main classroom of the seminary was Ni Guoxiang, 23, a sixth-year student. When asked about his ordination, he explained that the priest of the parish where he will serve as curate will decide on the time, but it would probably take place within two or three years.

Q. When did you decide to study for the priesthood?

A. In 1981 our government reinstated the policy of freedom of religious belief. The church in our town, Nantung in Jiangsu Province, was reopened and I began to attend church each Sunday. I also began to study the church's doctrine. One day our priest gave a talk on the situation of the church in China today, pointing out the shortage of priests. I reflected on this for a time and came to realize that our church is in a time of crisis; there is an urgent need for young men to replace the elderly priests. I saw



my generation's responsibility to carry on God's work as something which we cannot neglect. The best way to do this is to become one of his representatives, to minister to his people. So I decided to enter the seminary.

Q. Are any members of your family Christian?

A. All of them are. My family has been Catholic for many generations. I am a fifth generation Catholic.

Q. After ordination, how would you most like to serve the church?

A. I would like to serve in the parish. Many of our priests are old and do not have the time or physical strength to teach our people. They simply do not have the strength to do all the pastoral tasks that face them. Many of the Christians, especially the young, lack proper religious instruction. I also wish to help people outside the church to become believers. So in order that the church may grow, I want to be in the parish and do God's work there. That is how I am thinking about the future now.

Q. What do you think are the greatest problems facing the church in China in the near future?

A. As I see it, our greatest problem is how to reach out and help those outside the church, especially the many young people who want to know more about the Christian faith. They know a little bit about our church and are interested in learning more. But we still lack sufficient avenues of approach in presenting the church to them. They want us to talk with them about our faith, but our biggest problem is that we do not know how to help them understand and accept the church's teaching. They don't think of religion in the same way as we do. How can we convey to them the understanding of the faith which we have?

Q. Are people antagonistic to religion? Or are they merely indifferent?

A. Most people are not hostile towards religion, Many of them have studied secular philosophy and are in fact searching for the truth, especially young people. They see us, like themselves, as fellow searchers, but as those who have found the truth. They say to us, "Ah, you have found the truth, we would like to find it also." So they come to us in their search. Of course, we ourselves are not the source of truth; we are merely bearers of the truth of Jesus to people. Most people are not opposed to Christianity. If they were hostile to religion, they wouldn't be talking with us in the first place. Those who really want to know more about our faith talk with

us. Then there are people who talk with us about religion simply out of idle curiosity. But others are sincerely searching for some kind of faith and meaning in their lives. These are the ones who will eventually come into the church.

Q. Marxism teaches that all religions are superstition. How do most people feel about this?

A. Most people feel that Marxism cannot answer the basic questions of our human lives. Marxism is taught in all the schools of China today. We began studying Marxist philosophy in senior middle school. But even after attending these classes we still felt that Marxist explanations are inadequate. Others outside our circle felt the same way. They say, "Ai-ya, this ever-changing world is full of questions that we still cannot understand." As Christians we are able to talk with them and help them to understand that this is God's world, and since the world is His creation then all human concerns come under His care.

Yuan Guozhan comes from Fuan diocese in northern Fujian Province and is 24 years old.



Q. When did you feel in your heart that God wanted you to study for the priesthood?

A. I felt God's call to the priesthood when I was in middle school.

Q. Did this happen as a result of praying about it, or due to other influences?

A. It was due to my family training and environment. My family has been Catholic for over 300 years. My two elder brothers also studied for the priesthood.

Q. When was your parish church reopened after the "cultural revolution"?

A. In 1982.

Q. Did you have a priest in residence at that time?

A. Yes we did. There are several priests in our diocese, all of them elderly. They were allowed to come back to us at that time. Our diocese once had 30 to 40 churches, but now there are just a few old priests left.

Q. What foreign missionaries served your area in the past?

A. The Spanish Dominicans. Of course, they had to leave in the early 1950s.

Q. How old are your priests now?

A. Mostly in their 70's, one or two in their 60's.

Q. Were you influenced by these priests in making your decision?

A. I was mainly influenced by my family. I first thought about it back in middle school, right after the "cultural revolution" when the situation for Christians was still very tense. There was no priest to say Mass at that time. In our family we continued to read the Bible, to say the rosary and pray together. My father and mother led the prayers. Also, I have two aunts who never married, but remained at home and lead a religious life. While they never had any formal religious training, they remained celibate and served the church. Our church calls these women who devote their lives to the church "virgins".

Q. Did they serve the church before the "cultural revolution"?

A. Yes, they taught us the catechism. Even though we were not allowed to have public worship during those years, we did have catechism classes in our homes, and preaching was done by lay men and women. We had no priests then. Later an old priest came to our village and once again we had Mass and received Holy Communion.

Q. Do you live in a town or village?

A. We live in a village of 300 people of whom about two-thirds are Catholic.

Q. Did you have any difficulties during the "cultural revolution"?

A. Yes, our church was taken over and used by the village government. We could not use it for religious services. All our prayer books, missals and Bibles were burned. But our parents and the older Christians carried on religious activities in our homes. They would recite from memory whole sections of the Bible and the catechism books.

Q. Does your village have a church now?

A. Yes, our church has been returned to us.

Q. How do you hope to serve the church in the future?

A. We should be like servants in the church, preaching the gospel in the spirit of Christ so that it enters the hearts of those who hear it. I can't simply rely on my own strength, that's not enough. I

must rely on God for his help and guidance - that is the most important thing.

Fu Jianrung is 24 and he is from Hangzhou diocese, Zhejiang Province.

Q. In what year are you here at the seminary?

A. I am in my sixth and last year. I hope to be ordained in about two more years.

Q. How did you come to your decision to study for the priesthood?

A. I was fortunate to be brought up in a Christian environment. My whole family is Catholic and even though our church was closed, we had prayers and doctrine classes in my home. My aunt taught me about the Bible. We had no Bibles. They had all been burned during the "cultural revolution". But I did have a copy of the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles which our parish priest had copied by hand. This was when I was in junior middle school. From that time I began to understand the teachings of the church and to develop my own faith and understanding of the Bible. Of course, my understanding was not very deep. Given this kind of background when I heard that our diocese would open a seminary, I made the decision to begin to study for the priesthood.



I came here to study for two reasons. First, I felt my own faith was too superficial. I wanted to study theology in order to deepen my faith and my understanding of it. The second reason was that I wanted to become a priest. From an early age, I admired priests and was deeply moved by the example of their lives.

Q. How do you hope to serve the church after finishing theological studies?

A. I wish to preach the Gospel. There are still comparatively few Christians in China, very few. When I return home for vacations many of my former classmates and friends whom I know, and others whom I do not, look me up. They want to learn about our Christian faith and its teachings. I enjoy these opportunities to talk with them.

Q. Are you saying that the Chinese people, especially the young people, are not antagonistic toward religion?

A. That's right. They are not hostile to religion. There are some people who are prejudiced. This was especially evident during the "cultural revolution", and was directed mainly towards older

Christians and the priests, not towards us younger believers. Yes, I hope to be able to preach and teach our faith to those outside the church . . . I also like the study of theology very much.

Q. What do you believe is the biggest problem facing the church in the future?

A. I believe that the biggest and most immediate problem for our church is to make up for the "ten lost years" of the "cultural revolution". All activities of the Chinese church were suppressed for over a decade and now the church has to catch up. Just catching up is not enough, however. The church also has to move ahead if it is to grow. This means that my generation must make great efforts to help the church go forward.

We also have a generation gap. For example, in the matter of rites and liturgy. There are differences of opinion between older and younger church members. The younger Catholics are outnumbered by the older ones, who prefer the old rites and liturgy, while the young people want the newer ones. We still use Latin in the Mass, even though none of us young people understand it. But the older Catholics still cling to the old forms. These contradictions are still to be worked out.

Q. Can these questions be resolved?

A. I can't really answer that. We are only students, and we only now are becoming conscious of these difficulties. I think it will take time. I also believe that indigenization is very important for our church. We must develop our own theology and our own liturgies.

Q. What are your feelings about relations between the Catholic Church in China and the Vatican?

A. As I see it, this is basically a political matter, related to the Taiwan question. We hope that the church in China can have friendly relations with every country. We are all the same in our faith.

Q. Tell me something about your family.

A. We are all Christians. My mother and father, four brothers and a sister are all living. I also have two sisters-in-law and a brother-in-law who also are believers. During the years when we did not have freedom of religion, we carried on regularly with worship in the family at home.

Q. You had no Bible or other religious books at that time?

A. No, we had nothing. They had all been taken from us and burned.

Dou Xuexiao is 24 years old and comes from Shandong Province

Q. When did you begin studying for the priesthood?

A. I came here to begin my studies in 1983. Before that I spent a year studying basic doctrine and Latin with a priest in Jinan in our province. This is part of a preparatory course we have there.



Q. Please tell me about your family.

A. I am from an old Catholic family. I am a fifth generation Catholic. Each generation has had a priest. If I succeed, I will be the fifth generation to become a priest in our family.

Q. Are there any nuns in your family?

A. No, but two of my aunts were "virgins". They never married and gave their lives to serving the church.

Q. Did you have any difficulties during the "cultural revolution"?

A. I was too young then to remember much about it. I was only three years old when it began. But I do remember our family had prayers at home when the churches were closed. I just followed along with the prayers they were saying but I was too young to understand their significance.

Q. When did you begin to understand?

A. After graduation from senior middle school.

Q. How did you come to your decision to study for the priesthood?

A. I saw how overworked our two priests were. Both are quite old and I realized the need for young priests in our diocese. As a consequence I applied to enter the seminary.

Q. How do you hope to serve the church in the future?

A. The standard of living of our church members, both in material and cultural areas, has been raised. But they still need help in their spiritual lives and this is where I hope to assist our people.

Q. Today over half the population of China, about 60 percent, are young people under 30. What is their attitude toward religion?

A. Many of China's young people are interested in religion, but they have had few opportunities to learn much about it. They have studied atheism in school, but haven't had a chance to learn about

theism. They are really searching for this kind of knowledge.

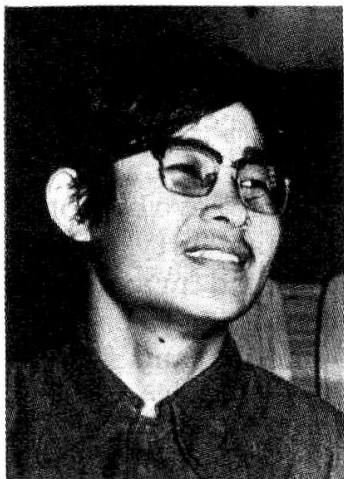
Q. How do they feel about atheism? You had to study it in school, didn't you?

A. Yes, I did. I'm a Christian. I believe in God. Studying atheism was just another required course for me.

Q. What do you believe is the biggest problem facing the church in China?

A. The biggest problem for our church is the shortage of clergy. We younger men must be ready to take over the work of the older priests. We need to raise up a new generation of young priests.

Dou Xueshen is 22 years old and comes from Shandong Province.



Q. Is your home in a city or in the countryside?

A. I come from a village of 300 persons, the same village as Dou Xuexiao.

Q. How many generations of Catholics are there in your family?

A. I am the fifth generation.

Q. How old were you when your church reopened after the "cultural revolution"?

A. I was ten years old.

Q. What religious activities do you remember from those years before the Church reopened?

A. In our family we met together to say morning and evening prayers.

Q. Did your family have a Bible?

A. No, we had no religious books. They had all been taken away.

Q. Tell me about your family.

A. My parents are living, and I have two older sisters and two younger brothers.

Q. How did you come to decide to study for the priesthood?

A. When I was in senior middle school, I joined a preparatory class our priest had opened for pre-seminarians. The classes were held in the homes of older church members.

Q. Did your parish priest influence your decision?

A. Yes, he did. We were fortunate to have a priest who came to our village from time to time, and we were able to have Mass in our homes. Prior to my graduation from senior middle school, he talked with me about the priesthood.

Q. How old is your priest?

A. 73

Q. Is your church now repaired and open again?

A. Yes, it reopened in 1983.

Q. Before then did the Christians meet together?

A. Yes, they met in Christian homes. Sometimes the priest was able to come but he had to visit other villages as well as ours. There were no churches in our diocese at that time. The main church now is in Yidu, not in our village.

Q. What do you believe is the greatest need facing the church in China?

A. I believe that our church's greatest need is for priests. Without trained clergy the level of Christian faith and understanding of the Christians cannot be raised. We can't rely on lay members alone to do the preaching and teaching. We need more clergy. We must train more priests. This is our church's greatest need.

Q. Seminarian Dou Xuexiao told us about two aunts whom he called "virgins" who never married, but served the church all their lives while living at home. Is this one way to ease the shortage of clergy, to recruit lay men and women to help the priests?

A. Lay leadership is important, but they would need more religious training. We still need priests to raise the level of faith and understanding of the people.

Q. About the problem of relations between the Catholic Church in China and the Vatican, what are your views?

A. There are certain political factors causing this problem. We all are one in the faith; we all believe in one Christ; we all worship in the same way. If the political factors could be resolved, everything would be all right.

Q. Do you think that it is an urgent matter?

A. I suppose it will take time to work out.

Q. How do you feel about the Catholic Church in China and the Universal Church?

A. We hope there can be unity, to be one in the faith.

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