

The Formation of New Church Leaders in China

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In China, religion is deeply affected by politics. The religious policy of the country often changes with the political climate. It is the general belief that the Chinese communists are basically opposed to religion, particularly to Christianity in view of its foreign origin. Since 1949 when the government of Red China was established in Beijing, the Catholic Church in China has suffered from external pressures and internal conflicts, that is, political pressures from the government and inner division between the so-called patriotic Catholics and loyalist Catholics.



The root causes for the division within the Chinese Church are very complicated; various factors have combined to bring about such a division. Among these factors, the political pressure from the Chinese government has been a key element. For various reasons which cannot be explained in this short paper, the Catholic Church in China has been subjected to uncommon pressure. Some China-observers consider that allegiance to the pope in Rome is one of the main reasons why the Catholic Church in China has suffered more than other religions in the country.

During the 50's, all foreign missionaries were expelled, and Chinese Catholics were forced to establish an independent Chinese Church according to the Three-Self principle; namely, self-support, self-propagation, and self-management. Although there has been some relaxation of control during the past decade, the Chinese government at best only tolerates a limited freedom in religious practice. Actually, the government closely monitors all the religious activities in the country. According to Thomas Gahan, the religious policies and activities of the government were and still are mainly responsible for the internal conflict and division within the Catholic Church in China¹. Some Catholics stood firm and refused to cooperate with the government. They considered

such cooperation implied a compromise of their Christian faith. Some chose to cooperate with the government in its policies, believing that this would serve the best pastoral interests of the Chinese Catholics. As a result, since the 50's, the Chinese Church has been split into two camps, neither group accepting the other. The Church in China is now divided, and the wound has yet to be healed. Reconciliation has become one of its most urgent tasks as the division continues to affect not only pastoral work but also the formation of new Church leaders for the Chinese Church. This formation of new Church leaders in a divided Church is the focus of my presentation today. First, I shall address the present situation of priestly formation, then comment briefly on the formation of young sisters; and finally, offer some personal reflections.

I. Formation of Young Seminarians

Since 1950, the Chinese Church has suffered from a severe shortage of bishops and priests. Before then, there were more than 5,000 priests in China, nearly half of whom were Chinese. But after 1950, the foreign priests were expelled, and many native priests have since died. The seminaries were also closed down in the 50's. By 1982, it was estimated that there were only 1,300 Chinese priests left in China. Among them, some were married and were not involved in priestly ministry; others had retired due to poor health or for other reasons; and still others worked in schools or in factories. Most of those still actively engaged in priestly ministry were over sixty years of age. Only a few were between fifty and sixty years old. This meant that the pastoral care of more than three million Catholics scattered throughout China was provided by a small number of elderly priests. Obviously, the training of new church leaders has become a most urgent priority for the Catholic Church in China. Since 1982, the Chinese Church has concentrated its efforts on restoring seminaries to form new candidates for priesthood. At the present time in China, there are, generally speaking, two kinds of seminaries: those officially recognized by the Chinese government, and those called clandestine or "underground" seminaries, which do not have government approval. Let us first take a look at the formation of seminarians in the officially recognized seminaries.

A. Formation of Seminarians in the Officially Recognized Seminaries:

According to recent reports, there are now about 12 seminaries in China. The situation of these seminaries varies from place to place. For instance, the Sheshan seminary in Shanghai is perhaps the best organized. It now has 136 students, who come from 13 provinces and 33 dioceses, and at present is the only one to be given permission to invite professors from abroad to teach there. Professors from America, Canada, Europe, Hong Kong and Taiwan have all given various theological and philosophical courses there. The seminary also has an excellent library. However, since most of the students are not proficient in English or French, the library's foreign language section is closed to them because of language difficulties. Unfortunately, the

Chinese language section is very poor. Theology and philosophy textbooks in Chinese are very much needed.

Usually, the students attend six classes a day, and half a day on Saturday. The schedule is very heavy. As for the seminarians, most of them are in their early 20's. A few older men from pre-liberation days, are also present among them.

Sheshan seminary is the first seminary in China to initiate post Vatican II liturgical reforms. According to our knowledge, all public liturgies in the Chinese Catholic Church are conducted in Latin, following the traditional Tridentine ritual. Last year, the director of the Liturgical Commission of the Hong Kong diocese, Fr. Thomas Law, was invited to teach a course on liturgy at Sheshan. He introduced step by step the liturgical reforms of Vatican II to the seminary. When I was in Shanghai last Easter, I attended the solemn liturgies of the Holy Week at Sheshan seminary, and found no difference between the liturgical practice there and that in Hong Kong. The seminarians also prayed openly for the pope and the universal Church.

However, not every seminary in China is as fortunate as Sheshan. In Guiyang, Guizhou province, 29 seminarians are currently being housed in the church compound. Of these 29 seminarians 25 are for the diocese of Guiyang, the rest are from Guangxi and Yunnan Provinces. Apart from these, Guiyang has 4 other seminarians being trained at Sheshan seminary in Shanghai. There are more students who want to enroll, but there is nowhere to put them at present. The 29 seminarians are living and studying in over-crowded quarters in the church office building. They sleep 8 to a room. They are junior middle school graduates, which is unlike the case at Sheshan where only senior middle school graduates are admitted. They have no library and don't even have enough Bibles to go around. Even if Bibles and religious books were sent to them from outside China, the government authorities in that area would confiscate them. This also happens at the Chengdu seminary in Sichuan.

B. Difficulties:

One can see that the future of these young seminarians now studying for the priesthood in China will be no less difficult than that of their predecessors. After they finish their priestly formation at the seminary, they will be sent to work in a society which has been formed by materialistic atheism, is hostile to religion, and which is disillusioned by the present national situation. The present society gives little thought to any spiritual values at all, let alone religious values. They will, for the most part, be economically poor and socially powerless.

Also, since they come from government recognized seminaries, they will be, in many places, objects of suspicion and rejection among many of their own Catholics. I

have received letters from some seminarians that reveal the painful struggle taking place in their hearts. They consider themselves victims of the cold war between the patriotic Catholics and the underground Catholics.

A foreign missionary who had visited Tianshui Diocese in Gansu recently told me this story. A young priest who had just finished his theological formation in Beijing was sent to Tianshui Diocese. The majority of Catholics there were simple farmers. They were very hostile towards the Patriotic Association. The young priest was full of missionary zeal, wanting very much to serve the Catholics there. But, when they realized that he had been educated in Beijing seminary, they violently rejected him. They did not allow him to minister the sacraments to them and treated him with great hostility. Since he could not function as a priest among the Catholics there, he finally returned to Beijing, hurt and frustrated. Rejected by the Catholics in Tianshui, he also incurred the displeasure of the Chinese government in Beijing because he participated in the democratic demonstration in Beijing during May and June of last year. Feeling downcast and depressed, he wrote to my friend, asking him to help him leave the country. He hoped that perhaps he could best fulfill his priestly vocation abroad.

This sad story reveals the very real and very difficult situation seminarians now studying at the officially recognized seminaries may have to face in the near future. The internal division of the Chinese Catholic Church is deeply affecting the formation of the younger generation. These young priests will have to be true apostles, living a life of faith in which the Lord will be their only recompense. Let us turn now to the underground seminaries, those operating without official approval.

C. Clandestine Seminaries:

Frankly speaking, we know little about these underground seminaries and their formation programs. However, from the reports of visitors to China and letters from inside China itself, we know that the number of underground seminarians is much larger than we had originally thought. A rough estimate would put the number of underground seminarians scattered over different provinces in China at over one thousand. According to a confidential report from Hebei, the number of new underground priests in that province is increasing rapidly. Usually, these underground seminaries follow a Master-Disciple pattern in the forming of new candidates. Formation, for the most part, is not institutionalized. When circumstances allow, seminarians gather in groups to study and to share their faith and life experience. Since such gatherings are considered illegal by the government, seminarians, if discovered, are punished. Therefore, they meet only sporadically.

These underground seminarians do not have a well-planned curriculum, nor do they have textbooks of theology and philosophy. The aging priests or bishops who are

responsible for forming new priests transmit their faith and knowledge to the new candidates, just as Catholic parents hand down their faith to the younger generation in a family. The period of formation is not fixed. It ranges from one or two to seven years. It depends entirely on the background and progress of the individual candidates, and on the concrete situation in which they live.

D. Difficulties:

The training of new priests in these circumstances is fraught with difficulties. Underground seminarians are also objects of suspicion and rejection. They are often seen as unqualified, without adequate theological and philosophical training. After ordination, their pastoral activities are by and large limited to rural areas where the majority are underground Catholics. They are closely watched by government officials, and are always in danger of being arrested on charges of subversion. They are suspect in the eyes of the Chinese government and are rejected by the Patriotic Association.

To conclude, let me emphasize again that the internal division of the Catholic Church in China has deeply affected the formation of new church leaders for the future. How to help facilitate a reconciliation between these two groups of Chinese Catholics is a problem to which we must all give serious attention. Let us turn now to the question of formation of Sisters in China.

II. Formation of Young Sisters

A. Present Situation:

According to a recent report given by Fr. John Tong on the "Formation of Sisters in China"², in 1948 there were more than 7,000 religious Sisters in China, two out of three were Chinese. After the communists came to power, the foreign sisters either left voluntarily or were expelled from the country. While some of the Chinese Sisters also left the country to go to such places as Hong Kong, Macau, Taiwan or overseas, more than half remained in China.³

During the 50's and 60's, the fate of religious Sisters in China was no less terrible than that of the Chinese priests and seminarians: some were sent to prison or labour camps; others got married due to difficult circumstances or under pressure; still, a great number of religious Sisters managed to continue to live out their religious vows in private.

In the 80's, following upon the reopening of seminaries, many convents were also re-established in many places. A general estimate is that there are now about 40 formal and informal convents operating in China. The living situation and formation of young

Chinese Sisters vary from place to place. For instance, in Xujiahui, Shanghai, 36 young novices are living together with about 50 elderly Sisters in one convent building. The older Sisters originally belonged to different religious congregations, but now, young and old form one Sisters' community under the care of the diocesan bishop of Shanghai. One Sister from among the older Sisters acts as formator, responsible for training the young novices. An elderly priest who was formerly the spiritual director for seminarians at Sheshan is now serving as the spiritual director of the convent at Xujiahui.

The situation of the Sisters living in Guangzhou in Guangdong province is similar to that of Xujiahui in Shanghai. This convent was opened in 1987 and its 14 novices are under the supervision of a Sister who is now in her early 70's.

In XianXian, Hebei province, there are 80 Sisters. Of these, 40 are novices and 30 are junior Sisters. Ten of the Sisters there are now studying medicine to prepare themselves for an active role in society.

In the diocese of Guiyang, Guizhou province, two novices have been sent to the novitiate in Shanghai for training.⁴ The other novices are at present receiving training at the church compound at Guiyang. It is reported that at least 30 to 40 more young girls have applied to enter, but there is no room for them. At present, the community's 16 novices are lodged in different parts of the church compound. A new novitiate will be completed by the end of 1991. It is hoped that more candidates will be admitted in the future.

The education of these young girls has not advanced beyond junior middle school. Some have attended only primary school. Four novices help out at a small nursery school, directed by an older Sister who is a retired teacher. While these novices earn a little towards their keep, the nursery itself is run primarily as a non-profit neighbourhood service.

Vocations to the religious life are flourishing in China. The minimum requirements for admission into religious life are: first, the candidate must be an unmarried female Catholic of at least 18 years of age; second, her parents' permission and her parish priest's recommendation are required; and third, she must be of good character and in good health.⁵

Finally, we must mention that just like seminaries, there are also underground Sisters' convents in China. However, we have little information about these. We can conjecture that they also follow the same pattern of formation as the underground seminaries do.

B. Difficulties:

The new convents are not without their difficulties. Many of these convents are not well-equipped; nor do they have a well-planned program and curriculum. Almost none of them have a complete constitution and rule for religious life. In Shanghai, Bishop Jin told me that while the young Sisters take the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the vow of obedience is to God and their superior general, but since they don't have a superior general, they make their vow to the diocesan bishop. The bishop hopes that in the near future, a complete constitution will be worked out for the local and diocesan congregation of Sisters in Shanghai.

Resources used for the formation of Sisters are more inadequate than those for seminarians. When I met some young novices in Suzhou, they seemed eager to learn, but their official formator is an elderly bishop who is very occupied with his own pastoral work. Classes are given to the novices only when the bishop is free. In the parish of Kunshan, I talked to a young Sister of 19, who told me that reading material is desperately needed. She is longing for spiritual books that might nourish her religious life.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you some brief theological and pastoral reflections.

III. A Theological and Pastoral Reflection

A. A Reflection:

It seems to me that the present situation of formation of new church leaders in China challenges us to give some thought to the larger question of the universal mission of the Church and the role of each local church must play in this mission.

"Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). This is the command of our Lord Jesus Christ given to the whole Church. As the Dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II on the Church indicates, the universal Church is a sibling communion of local churches, with every local church in the world sharing in this missionary responsibility of the whole Church. In the case of the Chinese Church, missionaries are no longer allowed to preach the Gospel there as in former times. The work of evangelization relies now completely upon local church leaders. In the particular context of the existing political system of China, the Chinese Church must present itself to the government as an autonomous local church which runs its own ecclesiastical affairs without any "foreign interference". The two conditions for establishing relations with foreign churches are "mutual respect" and "equality". The Chinese government insists that the Catholic Church in China should never become a colonial

Church again. With very limited resources and personnel, the Catholic Church in China tries to carry out its mission of evangelization to the Chinese nation. However, the internal conflicts and divisions of the Chinese Church not only have weakened the strength of its witness to the Gospel, but also have affected the formation of new church leaders.

For nearly four decades the Chinese Church has been isolated from the universal Church. The Chinese Church has not experienced the recent changes in the theological understanding of the mission of the Church. In the past, "mission" was a unilateral rather than a bilateral action. It was understood as a giving process from the affluent and superior churches to the poor and inferior ones. Nevertheless, since Vatican II, the notion of mission has undergone a remarkable transformation. It has changed from a unilateral giving action to a mutual exchange process. Now missionaries understand themselves as equal partners, serving the local church in the mission field by invitation. They come to share their faith with the local people and, at the same time, to learn from them so that their experience of the faith may also be enriched. It seems to me that the missionary enterprise which the Chinese Church rejects is not the new but the old unilateral concept of mission. I believe that the Chinese Church will not object to the new bilateral concept of mission which respects the dignity and legitimate autonomy of the local church by treating it as an equal partner.

On many occasions, the Chinese Church has declined help from foreign missionaries, and is determined to solve its own problems by itself. Nevertheless, reconciliation with Rome and restoration of relations with the universal Church certainly need assistance from other local churches within the Catholic communion. In my view, other churches can play a very important role in the reconciliation of the Chinese Church with the universal Church, and of the two camps of Chinese Catholics as well. This is a mission of "bridge-building". This mission requires patience, understanding and respect on the part of the bridge-builder. To become a bridge-builder is a difficult task. It demands that the churches which are involved in this mission constantly transform themselves in conformity with the Gospel of reconciliation. Only those churches and Christians who are working hard for unity and reconciliation within themselves can be real and effective instruments for bridging the gap between these conflicting groups of Catholics in China. Therefore, the new mission of bridge-building can be seen as both a challenge and a call for a constant renewal of these missionary churches in the Gospel of peace and reconciliation. St. John says, "...unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, and if it dies, it bears fruit". The mission of bridge-building requires one to give not merely material assistance but also the person himself or herself. A bridge-builder is a true missionary because, following the Lord's example, he is always ready to sacrifice self that others may have new life, as well as for the reconciliation of the whole world.

B. Practical Suggestions:

Practically speaking, what contribution can the other local churches, particularly the Asian churches, make to the Church in China? I would like to offer three suggestions:

First, I think that overseas churches must try to keep themselves informed as much as possible about the complexity of the situation in China and what realistic options the church there might take.

Second, we should refrain from anything which might cause a deepening of the internal division within the Chinese Church. This demands a rather sophisticated understanding of the political situation, an understanding of to what degree freedom of religious practice is allowed and what are the limitations within which we, as outsiders, can help.

Third, material assistance as well as spiritual support is needed in the work of forming new church leaders in the Chinese Church. Written material is especially needed.

Finally, we share the belief that God is the God of history, always present to us and to the Chinese Church, which He will never abandon. Let us continue to face the future together with faith and hope in the one God Who unites us all as brothers and sisters.

NOTES

1. Thomas Gahan, "In China, Approaches Can Be Different", in America 162 (June 9, 1990) pp. 580-583, p. 581
2. A personal report by Fr. John Tong, Director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, Hong Kong. This report is published in this issued of TRIPOD.
3. Ibid.
4. A personal report of an European who visited China from 27 February to 4 March, 1990
5. See John Tong's report on Sisters' Formation.