

A Response to Lin Ke's "A Preliminary Proposal on Seminary Training"

*by Anthony Lam
translated by Peter Barry, M.M.*

In one of its recent issues, the *Catholic Church in China* featured an article entitled "A Preliminary Proposal on Seminary Training," written by Lin Ke (1991: no. 4).¹ The author is relatively unknown to outsiders, although his name has appeared now and again in the pages of this journal, usually at the end of its news reports. However, the comparative length of this article alone--it runs on to six pages and over



8,000 characters--would seem to indicate that what Lin has to say does carry some weight and his views could have considerable influence on how the Chinese Catholic Church will go about training its priests in the future. While he makes no special claim to represent any particular faction, his frequent use of "we" does identify him as an insider with a certain following, and, therefore, someone whose views merit more than passing attention.

Lin divides his article into three main sections, which come after a rather long introduction, and before a brief concluding summary. His first section discusses seminary education in theory; however, much of it ends up as a criticism of the present system, which he alleges is seriously lacking in political-ideological education. Section two offers suggestions on how to remedy this deficiency, and section three addresses the problem of an aging clergy and the current priest shortage.

In the introduction the author states: "We think that seminary personnel, along with continuing to strengthening spirituality and helping seminarians to offer themselves for service in the

church, should also maintain as a guiding ideology of seminary training the preservation of the independent and autonomous administration of the church." Unfortunately, there is no further mention of how spirituality might be strengthened in the rest of Lin's article. He prefers to focus instead on educating seminarians in political ideology against the background of social change. What becomes more and more evident as the article proceeds is that the "Seminary Training" of the title really means "training in political ideology".

Lin, also in the introduction, identifies four distinctive characteristics of the Chinese Catholic Church. The first three offer nothing new and, in fact are quite commonplace: its minority status; the generally low cultural level of its members; and its aging clergy. The fourth section he describes in this way: "The Chinese Catholic Church has for a long time been subject to the influence of Western ideology which has left it internally flawed and vulnerable to contagion from the outside. At the same time, infiltration by hostile foreign forces is rampant and on the increase. This means that the struggle between those who advocate 'peaceful evolution' and those opposed to it will be of serious concern to the Chinese church for a long time to come." What we have here is perhaps, Lin's clearest expression of the real aim and purpose of his article.

In Lin's discussion of seminary education, which follows his introduction, he tells those charged with seminary education that they "must never relax their vigilance in maintaining 'the five loves' and 'the four attributes' as the heart and soul of political-ideological education." The so-called "five loves" are: "love of motherland, love of its people, love for labor, love for science and love for socialism." And the "four attributes" are: "possession of ideals, virtue, knowledge and physical strength."² Besides socialism, which involves an ideological choice, the rest are common attributes which every person should strive to achieve, and they have little or no relationship to specific political ideology.

Lin goes on to speak of certain obstacles in seminary training: "Concerning ideological political work in the seminaries, we think there are two tendencies which need to be overcome." The first is the "theory of subordination," which holds that "it is enough to ensure the spiritual training of the seminarians only, and everything else is unimportant." The second tendency is the

"theory of substitution," which assumes that "a person with a higher education is, necessarily, also a person of superior virtue." Such biases are not endemic to China. Persons in seminary formation work everywhere are concerned about similar problems. Lin observes that some seminarians "hate to leave the big cities or places where living conditions are good, and after ordination, they are unwilling to go to the countryside, to the mountains or to places where conditions are poor to preach the Gospel. They consider themselves to be an 'elite' within the church; their arrogance knows no bounds and they are lacking in humility." In China the same criticisms are heard in other places, and we can say that Lin here is close to the mark. However, when he suggests using "ideological political work" as a guide to bring "spirituality" back into balance he offers no clue as to its content or direction. Spirituality is an interior disposition that moves outward. Priestly spirituality is directed towards pastoral ministry and is expressed in pastoral activity and social service. This is no closed-in-upon itself asceticism.

In section two of his article, Lin speaks more specifically about the content of seminary education. He says: "For seminarians in the lower grades, education in the law and in the norms of thought and conduct should be emphasized, so that they will understand the basic principles that will enable them to qualify as good citizen." Loving one's country and unquestioning obedience to its laws is given such emphasis that one wonders if Lin has forgotten it is precisely for their patriotism and obedience that Chinese Catholics are praised and held up as models for other. The pages of every issue of the *Catholic Church in China* are filled with such reports.³ Since those who pass the entrance examination for the seminary already qualify as model citizens, why should more time be devoted to helping them "understand the basic principles for being good citizens?"

Lin also points out that the education of seminarians in the lower grades should emphasize social morality, and they should be given opportunities to work "on the grassroots level of society, to have contact with the masses, in order to understand society and to live in the real world. This will help them to acquire a more accurate knowledge of national conditions, of society, of life and of themselves." Lin indicates there what is needed in the training of seminarians for the Chinese church, but it is also something that seminary formators in the rest of the world also

see as an essential part of seminary education. While there may be a difference in the choice of roads to take, all agree on the final destination.⁴

Lin offers five main suggestions for educational reform in seminaries. Some statements I find difficult to understand. For example, his first proposal is that: "In educating seminarians in patriotism, we cannot stop at the level of ordinary patriotism, nor can we lower it to the broadest United Front level. Rather, we should raise simple love of country to the new level of socialism. That is to say, that we should educate our seminarians in racial integrity and the present condition of the nation, to appreciate the motherland's long history, especially that of the last 100 years when the people stood firm in resisting foreign aggression." The history of a nation is basically an objective record of what actually took place in the past, and therefore, capable of being understood by both Chinese and foreigners alike. Why then speak of going up and down a scale, or of high level and low level norms?

Lin's second proposal emphasizes that seminary education should be combined with the study of modern, recent and missionary history. In his third proposal he says: "Our education must be combined with a criticism of bourgeois liberalization. The confusion in ideology and theory created in the last few years by the rampant spread of bourgeois liberalization has been far from eliminated, and the theory of the 'failure' or 'miscarriage' of socialism trumpeted by some people, and other negative influences which sow discord between the Party and the intellectuals, are still very much with us." Let us put aside the argument about whether it exists or not, or if so, in what form. If criticism of bourgeois liberalization were to be taught in school to students would this not be counterproductive and only result in giving free propaganda to and wider dissemination of its ideas?⁵

"Augment education in hard work and struggle," Lin's fourth proposal, has long been a way of life for Chinese seminaries. In the middle 1980's, this writer visited various types of seminaries on the mainland. I found them, with the exception of Sheshan Seminary and the National Academy of Philosophy and Theology in Beijing where conditions are quite good, to be as spartan and devoid of comfort as an ascetic's cell.

Lin goes on to make the appeal that "Seminaries should give

seminarians the kind of ideological guidance conducive to instilling in them the spirit of Yanan, the spirit of Lei Feng, the iron man spirit, and the spirit of Jiao Yulu." However, manifestations of the spirit of sacrifice can be found everywhere in today's Chinese Catholic Church. The daily lives of Christians offer even more heroic examples of self-sacrifice for seminarians than those selected by Lin.⁶

Lin's final section deals with the shortage of priests in mainland China. The figures he quotes seem a bit pessimistic. "Given the annual death rate of 10% and the rate of attrition due to the aging process, by 1997, only about 300 of the older generation of priests will still be actively engaged in ministry. On the other hand, during the same period of time, seminaries will only be able to ordain 400 new priests to take their place. This is far from satisfying the needs of church work." However, in the past few years Chinese seminaries have already trained over 300 new priests. In 1991 alone over 100 new priests were ordained. Seminarians now studying in China's seminaries total over 700,⁷ and many of these will graduate in the next two or three years. Judging from the number of applicants being received by the seminaries, this situation is expected to continue for at least the next few years. But even with the steady increase, the actual number ordained will still not be able to keep up with the needs of the Catholic population. Lin suggests that the education of priests should be shortened. The need to ordain more priests is always a matter of great urgency, but simplifying and telescoping the educational process, as Lin suggests, may result in pulling up the shoots before they have matured, getting less for more, while wasting students' time and the church's hard efforts. As for setting up three-month courses or training programmes of only a few weeks' duration, this might be appropriate for training the laity, but it certainly is no substitute for the extended course of study and formation provided by theological seminaries.

Lin offers many suggestions that are positive and helpful, such as a better division of work among faculty, adding new courses to the curriculum, helping seminarians to acquire habits of self-study, increasing the number of teachers and improving educational materials. Many of his suggestions are already being put into practice. When Lin calls on strengthening four areas in the National Academy of Philosophy and Theology to produce

"clergy of a higher rank", i.e. seminary teachers, researchers, foreign relations workers and church leaders, it does seem to indicate the importance the Chinese church places on foreign relations with the Universal Church. But his phrase "to form clergy of a higher rank" is unfortunate, leading one to ask whether it is not out of place to speak in terms of "higher rank" in these times when the emphasis in priestly spirituality is very much on participation, service and communion in a community of faith.

In the conclusion, Lin affirms the accomplishments of the past, while pointing out some problems that still remain. "The most unsatisfactory aspect is that we were unable to have the red thread of the independent and autonomous administration of the church run through each phase of the seminary system... Some seminarians only half-heartedly participated in ideological political education." To say that after 42 years of Chinese Communist Party rule the Chinese church has not yet been able to implement its policy of an independent and autonomous church seems to denote a certain lack of confidence on Lin's part.

This is also evident in his conclusion when he states: "In the present circumstances of reform and openness we must be clearly aware of the intentions of hostile Western forces to seize the opportunity to infiltrate the economics, political, ideological and cultural spheres." This clearly reflects a lack of confidence in the accomplishments of the last 10 years of reform and openness.

Another point worth noting is Lin's failure to mention the need to instruct the seminarians on their obligation to celibacy, which is a basic requirement for the priesthood in the Universal Church as well as in the Chinese church. Would it not be advisable to include something in the curriculum on the meaning of celibacy in the modern world?

With an exploration of seminary training as its main topic, he spends too much time on political-ideological education. Over two-thirds of his article is devoted to this subject, which cannot help but leave the reader with the impression that his treatment of seminary training lacks proper balance.

Finally, the author makes frequent mention of the need to stress ideological education, but like many of his colleagues on the mainland, he, too, is at a loss to define its content in concrete terms. This problem is not reserved to those involved in

seminarian formation alone but is present throughout all of China. It leaves little doubt that China needs to reflect more on its political ideology and the direction it will take in the future.

Notes

- (1) *Catholic Church in China*, 1990, nos. 2,3,4 and 1991, no. 2 all carried news written by Lin Ke, but the items were short.
- (2) cf. Li Zhenjie, Bai Yukun, et.al., *Zhongguo Baokan Xinciyu*, 1987, Beijing, Huayu Jiaoxue Publishing Company.
- (3) The same issue of *Catholic Church in China* in which "Seminary Training" appears contains many articles praising the Catholics' patriotism and love of church.
- (4) Cf. Report on *Seminar on the Training of Priests* by Claver Perera in this issue of *Tripod*, p.72.
- (5) During the 1986 student movement in Anhui Province a similar phenomenon occurred. When Party Central disseminated a document criticizing Fang Lizhi, the result was to propagate Fang's ideas.
- (6) *Catholic Church in China*, 1991, no. 5, carried an article entitled "Learn From the Holy Men and Women of History." It supplements for what is lacking in "Seminary Training."
- (7) cf. *Catholic Church in China*, 1991, no. 1, "A Speech by Bishop Zong Huaide."



Bishop Dong ordains 13 new priests, Hankow, December 8, 1991.