

## *Row Out into the Deep*

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It has been ten years now since the Sheshan Regional Seminary of Shanghai has been allowed to reopen. Already 60 priests have completed their training and are now engaged in pastoral work and evangelization. Even more gratifying to us who make up the staff is that candidates presently enrolled in the seminary number over 100. The Chinese Church shares the Universal Church's concern about the shortage of priestly vocations. But vocations in China are very much on the increase, a situation for which we thank God and acknowledge the prayers and sacrifices of millions of zealous Catholics who firmly believe that God will not allow the Church to lack priests. Sheshan seminary itself follows the Church's ancient traditions in its style of priestly formation. Its spirituality is centred in the Holy Spirit as its source and guide, but it has also been helped along by the advice and concern of people from within and outside the Church, all of which gives Sheshan its own special character.



### **Leadership**

The seminary's Board of Directors is composed of bishops from various provinces and of government representatives. It meets at fixed times throughout the year to review past and define new policy, to establish new directives and abolish old ones to bring them into line with social changes and contemporary Church needs. The Board sets the direction and tone of the seminary, seeks to nurture seminarians in their commitment, and educate them to respond to the concrete pastoral needs of the

diocese in which they are to serve. Of paramount concern to the Board is to turn out as quickly as possible pastors well aware of the Church in China's actual situation, its liturgical, spiritual and social needs, and with the ability to meet them positively and creatively. Programmes that emphasize priestly formation are at the very heart of the seminary's curriculum.

The current chairman of Sheshan's Board of Directors is Bishop Jin Luxian. He is also the seminary rector and has been since its inception a decade ago. The seminary owes much to his leadership and wisdom. He is much admired by staff and seminarians alike as he projects an image not only of the able administrator but also one of fatherly concern. He has worked tirelessly throughout his years as rector to bring the seminary up to the highest scholastic standards without neglecting its responsibility to provide its students with the best opportunities for furthering their spiritual formation.

Of the priests assigned to the seminary, a number have administrative roles such as assistant to the rector, dean of studies, one in charge of finances, a procurator, two librarians, and two who work exclusively as lecturers. The actual teaching load is shared by seven priest-lecturers, each of whom is responsible for his own expertise. While there may be a shortage of priests in the diocese, all recognize that top priority must be given to seminary formation and no one complains about the assignment of a newly ordained priest who has shown extraordinary spiritual and intellectual promise during his seminary years.

## **Prerequisites for Priestly Vocations**

While China's Catholics constitute less than one percent of the general population, the actual number is in the millions, and clergymen needed to care for them are in short supply. With China's opening and economic reform came the restoration of old churches and the building of new ones. The government's policy of religious freedom has encouraged greater numbers of young men to opt for the celibate life and follow the example of Christ in proclaiming the Gospel. The seminary receives such candidates that are recommended by both the diocese and their parish priest, are secondary school graduates of sound mind and body, and are emotionally mature and of good character. They

must pass both an oral and written entrance examination which demands a basic knowledge of religious doctrine, literature, history and Latin.

In recent years most of the candidates now entering Sheshan are graduates of one of the minor seminaries which have been set up to give aspirants to the priesthood a groundwork in those subjects, both secular and religious, that will serve as a foundation for later study. Such minor seminaries in Qingpu, Jiangsu, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Fujian provinces also serve to introduce the young men into religious community life. Experience shows that those who have two or three years of minor seminary education do much better at the major seminary level. They are more stable and industrious, and are better prepared to adjust to the six years of philosophy and theology still ahead of them before ordination.

## Formation Programme

Knowledge and discipline are essential factors in formation. Christ as Servant is the model and the seminarian is expected to acquire the virtues of a disciplined intellect, hard work and self-sacrifice. He is to become a man of prayer, a responsive instrument of Christ for good in society, and to integrate the virtues of faith, hope and charity in a balanced personality.

In forming pastors, the intellectual life is not to be neglected, nor is the development of a candidate's special individual talents. Acquiring knowledge is not to be an end in itself, but knowledge is to be a tool for evangelical and pastoral work. It is important that the diligent pursuit of knowledge be integrated into a spiritual life that is based on an attitude of self-sacrificing service for others.

The traditional adage of *a sound mind in a sound body* is taken seriously. The seminarians have adequate time and opportunity to exercise and use the sports facilities available at the seminary grounds. Along with an emphasis on the physical life there is a parallel emphasis on the spiritual life. Each seminarian is assigned a spiritual director who acts as his helper and guide. The seminary spiritual directors are there to encourage the seminarians to come to grips with their personal problems and make steady progress in their personal growth in the spirit. The

rector, Bishop Jin, also is actively involved in this work, which is in itself further indication of the central importance of spiritual formation at the seminary.

By way of summary, let it be said that the staff of the seminary seeks to provide an educational and formative environment for its young candidates for the priesthood that emphasizes the intellectual, spiritual, emotional and physical development of the whole person. It offers an experience of community without neglecting the needs of the individual. It seeks to prepare men for the world at large, cultivating attitudes and talents conducive to contributing to society, while at the same time reinforcing those Christian ideals and virtues that will serve them well in a life of pastoral service in the church.

## **The Daily Schedule**

A glance of the seminarians' daily schedule will serve to underline the goals mentioned above. It is in the context of the proper and balanced use of time that formation takes place.

Seminary life follows the following organized pattern:

- 5:30 Rising
- 6:00 Morning Prayers and Meditation
- 6:15 Eucharistic Celebration
- 7:15 Breakfast and Morning Duties
- 8:00 Private Study
- 8:30 to 11:45 Classes
- 11:50 Prayer in Chapel
- 12:00 Lunch
- 13:00 to 15:50 Classes
- 15:50 to 17:00 Recreation
- 17:00 Recitation of the Rosary
- 18:00 Dinner
- 18:30 to 20:00 Private Study
- 20:00 to 21:00 Evening Prayer

The above schedule will be familiar to those who remember the seminaries of the past. They represent a monastic pattern wherein the ideal of a balanced intellectual, spiritual and physical life is integrated into a community rule.

Those aspects of the daily schedule that include prayer, worship and meditation are under the administration of the two

seminary spiritual directors. As part of their programme they invite outside priests and religious to speak on personal spiritual development. Many of the elderly priests of the diocese are invited to share their life stories with the young aspirants.

Emphasis is placed on the liturgy as the centre of community life. Seminarians are encouraged to immerse themselves in the Word of God. Not only daily meditation and Mass but all other forms of seminary worship and prayer are centred on the Word. Once a week we break up into small groups in order to share insights and experiences that have come to us in prayer. In this way we strive to grow in community cohesion and in an appreciation of the goodness of our community life.

The daily recitation of the Rosary, the weekly Way of the Cross and Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament, special novenas in preparation for Christmas and in honour of the Sacred Heart, and solemn prayer vigils are all traditional devotions that have found a place in the prayer and worship life of the seminary community. In this way the seminarians enter into an experience of popular forms of liturgy that they will be called to organize for the people after ordination.

The three cardinal rules of the seminary are: silence, punctuality and cleanliness. Strict observance of such rules goes a long way in helping to maintain an atmosphere of peace, order and quietude which can foster not only an exterior calm but an inner spirit of tranquility.

As seminarians are expected to lead a celibate life in keeping with the ancient tradition of the Roman Catholic priesthood, special care is given to this aspect of priestly life. We provide them with the necessary intellectual, psychological, and spiritual tools on which to base their decision to chose to live the celibate life within the context of the Christian community. Every effort is made to help them develop self-understanding, an appreciation of the sacredness of Christian marriage, and emotional maturity that sees celibacy as a positive commitment to service in the kingdom of God. They are taught to see celibacy as a life lived in intimacy with Jesus, sharing in the life of love for the Father and one with the Holy Spirit.

## The Educational System

Seminary education has many components. Perhaps the one unique area of study that strikes the outsider is the Latin language which is still a necessity for Chinese aspirants to the priesthood. Only recently has the liturgy begun the gradual change from the Latin to the vernacular. In many places, especially in the countryside among the older people, Latin is still the language of choice for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. It goes without saying that the study of Mandarin Chinese in both its written and spoken form is central to any educational curriculum including those of the minor and major seminaries.

The Board of Directors of Sheshan Seminary has had to confront the situation, "the harvest is indeed great, but the labourers are few." There is an immediate need for priests, especially since the disparity of vocations between the north and south is so large. There is immense pressure on the seminary to shorten the preparation period, and ordain men after 4 years. The Board is resisting this pressure and has made it a matter of policy that only after completing 6 years of philosophy and theology will a candidate be considered for ordination. Every effort is being made to raise the standards of the minor seminaries as well.

Instead of reducing the curriculum, Sheshan is now seeking to provide its students with the greatest possible body of knowledge in the shortest possible time. It has multiplied its courses, brought in specialists from abroad to teach mini-courses that offer more scope and variety to the curriculum, and it has even shortened student summer and winter holiday schedules to accommodate. It has also sent seminarians and young priests to pursue advanced studies in America, Australia and Europe. Surprisingly, these changes have met with the full support and enthusiasm of the students themselves.

To list all the courses now available to seminarians at Sheshan would demand too much space. Suffice it to say that traditional courses in philosophy, the various theology disciplines, biblical studies and church history have been supplemented with courses in psychology, foreign languages, social and political sciences, management, counseling, and others.

With donations obtained from friends in China and abroad, and especially with the help of the American Jesuit and Doctor of Theology, Father Edward Malatesta, the Seminary has built up a library of more than 30,000 books.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the Seminary has set up some special courses on pastoral praxis. The aim is to give the seminarians some practical help in adapting their theological studies to the real pastoral needs of the people. To this end students are sent out to help parish priests on some of the most important liturgical feast days, e.g., Christmas and Easter. The month of May, when Catholics in large throngs come to Sheshan on pilgrimage, the students are encouraged to serve the needs of the pilgrims, by organizing activities for them, leading them in prayer, in reading the Bible and even doing simple preaching.

To help the seminarians develop a caring spirit for society, they are encouraged to visit the sick and the elderly and to take an active part in public activities. During times of emergency or disasters, the students are expected to show their concern. In the recent flood the students organized their own collection in support of the victims, organized Masses, and conducted prayers for them. This kind of concern helps to foster a spirit of self-sacrifice, of caring for the community and of service to society.

During the summer and winter holidays the seminarians return to their home parishes. There, they are expected to help the parish priest with a variety of tasks. For his part the parish priest is expected to furnish the Seminary with an honest report and analysis of the student's work. The seminary takes this appraisal very seriously. By pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of the student's performance, the seminary can set up the courses needed to upgrade both the knowledge and performance of the future priest.

## **Formation for Holy Orders**

As we contemplate the fast rate of change in our society, especially in the fields of science and technology as well as in the arts, we realize the challenge that awaits newly ordained priests when they leave the seminary. To meet this challenge the young priests must grow continuously in knowledge, wisdom, and spirituality. Bishops are asked to provide young

priests with opportunities to help achieve this end. Seminars on theology and philosophy as well as lectures given by invited specialists help familiarize priests with new trends in theology and pastoral praxis and to keep them in touch with societal developments and needs. Also younger priests with a few years in pastoral ministry are asked to share their pastoral experiences with the seminarians.

In May 1993, a very successful seminar in Liturgy was held in Beijing. Newly ordained priests from every major seminary in China participated. The aim of the seminar was to implement the bishops' plan for liturgical renewal and to fire young priests with a desire to spread the liturgical spirit in their own churches and dioceses. Fr. Thomas Law, director of Hong Kong's Liturgical Commission, was invited as coordinator and adviser.

## Conclusion

The nurturing of priestly vocations, so dear to God, is one of the Church's most important works. In this endeavour all local churches have a special role to play and the Church in China is no exception. Many people of good will, who seek truth, justice and unity, understand this well and offer us their help. This help enables us to experience God's love and the Church's concern. It encourages us to continue the work of God, to serve the Church with peaceful hearts and to continue to nurture vocations to the priesthood.

I am old and sentimental so how can I not be moved by the enthusiasm and hope of so many Catholics in China, by the diligent and untiring work of the younger generation and by the dynamic spirit of renewal? I live in the Church in China; I love my country and I love my Church and I am willing to give all I have, even my life, to foster vocations in China.

Before finishing this article, I wish to ask all who read this to pray for vocations in China and especially for vocations to the priesthood. Formation for the priesthood is a complex work requiring a great deal of cooperation. As St. Paul says, "I did the planting; Apollos did the watering, but God gave the increase" (1Cor 3:6). Let us together thank God for his abundant grace and pray the Holy Spirit to fill the hearts of the faithful, to give us more priests, and to give us more virtuous priests.