

Why Priests Are Leaving the Ministry in Mainland China

by Chen Kaihua

Translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

During the seventies and eighties the entire Catholic Church experienced a huge number of priests and religious, men and women, leaving their ministry or religious life. Most became laicised and got married. By the end of 1990, in the United States alone, the number of departures exceeded 17,000! One reason for this phenomenon can be found in the spirit of openness that followed Vatican II. People discovered that, once windows were opened, the outside world suddenly became attractive. Ways of thinking, aspirations, and value systems that had formerly been enclosed within invisible walls could now be encountered outside of ecclesiastical circles. This presented a big challenge to the kind of Church tradition that had been honored for thousands of years.

In China lately we hear of priests in some dioceses who no longer exercise their ministry or of some priests who get married. This situation is getting increasingly serious. What are the reasons behind this phenomenon? And are they the same for the whole Church everywhere in the world? The Mainland Church must certainly meet this challenge.

In this article, but not without some reluctance, I offer a brief summary of the situation and an analysis of the problem. Unfortunately there are few studies on this issue. My own sense of responsibility urges me to act, and so throwing caution to the winds, I present the following comments with the hope that others will follow with more valuable contributions later.

I. Why Priests in China Leave their Ministry

This matter is very complex. There are many elements involved and we must avoid giving erroneous or facile answers.

1 High position does not preclude failure

In the eyes of Catholics a priest must be a “saint”. Catholics tend in various degrees to confer “holiness” on their priests. This is based on the holiness attached to his dedicated life. There are also pastoral and spiritual reasons for this high esteem. A priest who mediates between God and people must be free of human desires or faults. Such an idealization for all practical purposes sets the priest far above the human condition. However, the fact remains that the imperfect formation in mainland seminaries--such as the time allotted for studies, teacher quality, spiritual training, overall supervision as well as an insufficient personal spirituality--make it difficult for Catholics to acknowledge the education and virtue of their newly ordained priests. (The main reason for this imperfect formation is simply the lack of sufficiently trained formation personnel.) This situation creates unspoken tensions between Catholics and their priests.

Furthermore, most seminarians are ordained right after graduation and are immediately sent out and put in charge of pastoral ministry. They do not have the example of middle age priests to follow. Moreover the large age gap between these younger priests and older priests leaves them no models to follow whatsoever.

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These young priests immediately throw themselves into activities and become absorbed in them, wanting to perform great feats for the Lord. However as time passes, they become used to the situation and to the job. Some lose their early drive. If they meet with difficulties as, for example, a not too understanding bishop or too high demands from some Catholics, they may soon become listless and start to shirk their duties.

There are also some positive aspects to this and these can decide the priest's whole future. Frequent setbacks and periods of reflection offer occasions for continual conversion and openness for

the young priest's journey toward God. Negatively, however, the impetuosity of a young priest facing setbacks and criticisms can disturb him and everything may seem impossible to bear. If these negative tendencies keep piling up, contradictions and spiritual darkness also increase. Then the young priest may begin to question whether he has made a right decision in choosing the priesthood. He may convince himself that he was wrong and now has come to his senses. Furthermore, if he has the bad luck to meet up with a clergyman who holds different views on the unity of the Church, their mutual bickering may bring him to consider another way. He may also be tempted to rationalize that he will incur no blame if he decides to take another way. A person suffering this sort of depression cannot find God rooted in his life.

2. Economic pressures

China's economy has made tremendous progress in recent years. With the change to a market economy, people are no longer limited to one understanding of society and human life. With the breakdown of traditional morality, a new and more complex social model has evolved where all varieties of opinions and ideologies coexist.

With China's reform, a new age Catholic Church with new ways of thinking and acting has emerged. Despite this newness, the Church has kept to its traditional base, in the areas of diocesan management and seminary formation. The doctrines of the faith are indeed changeless, but their application and presentation are adaptable.

Present day society is developing in a way completely different from past generations. New relationships between Church and state can possibly only be established within an economic system. The phrase "adaptation to socialism" is completely meaningless within the economic systems of the past 2000 years. How will such an adaptation ever be realized? How will the Church's prophetic witness manifest itself? What is the proportion between maintaining structures built on self-support and meeting pastoral needs? These are all challenging questions.

In the 1992 Fifth General Catholic Representative Assembly, Fr. Chen Gongbie of Sichuan gave a report. He stated that

his receiving only 10 RMB a day for pocket money made a wealthy high school classmate, who was not a Catholic, wonder why he did not go into business. This was, to be sure, a very tempting offer and one that could be supported by reasonable arguments: a poor diocese, a Church to be built, fund raising to meet expenses, etc. The only thing to do is to raise money. Fortunately this priest was not convinced.

However, some dioceses reported that some priests did go into business, adopting a second profession. The legitimacy of this course of action requires urgent study.

Many dioceses reported that a number of priests had left their ministry and returned to the world for financial reasons. It was not clear whether this was due to the fact that priests were poor and disliked it or because they had too much money under their control?

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Doubtless, a consumer society makes many demands on all levels of society. What norms should a priest who lives in such a society follow? Several years ago Bishop Jin Luxian warned that the worship of money could easily invade the clerical world. It seems very few people paid attention to his warning.

With money one can build beautiful churches, improve church furnishings, borrow money to help raise the living standards of the faithful, etc. Although money in itself is neutral, it can also corrupt. Using it in a proper way remains a challenge to every priest who has to deal with it—a challenge to his faith and to his conscience.

3. Alienation and sexual tensions

A Buddhist monk with shaven head and wearing his Buddhist robe makes his stately way along the streets of any Chinese city. People take it for granted that he is celibate. However a Catholic priest regularly encounters the following question: "Why aren't you married?" or "Do you have a problem?" These two

reactions on the part of people clearly point out cultural differences and expectations. What is more significant is that priests must not only respond to the doubts of those who do not share their faith, but must also face the challenges to their celibacy that grow more insistent with the passage of time.

Church law and pastoral demands are not compatible with the married state. The priest who chooses the celibate life makes a total and lifelong commitment that touches his personal as well as his pastoral being.

This issue involves the heart. A priest is not a block of wood, lacking feelings and emotions. A beautiful young lady can arouse his interest, admiration, and even sexual desires. How he reacts depends upon his spiritual maturity.

The Chinese have a saying: *food, drink and sex*. They see bodily and sexual needs as integral to the human person. Furthermore, modern dress and the mass media are filled with sexual images that tempt and entice. This only makes it more difficult for a celibate living in this society to keep to his commitment. But those that do remain faithful are all the more deserving of praise.

4. The generation gap, obedience and shared ideals

Each diocese has its own particular difficulties, but there is one problem common to them all: younger and older priests often have different views on running the Church. Younger priests are adventurous, older priests are more cautious. Older priests, who have walked a long and difficult road, warn younger priests that they must be more circumspect in their work and should not take chances acting out of the impulse of the moment. Younger priests are zealous and rely upon their own interior resources. They are puzzled by the gradualist approach and evasive tactics of the older generation. The same problem also manifests itself among the Sisters, but I shall limit my analysis to priests only.

1) One aim but two different cultural backgrounds

Older priests, who have endured much suffering, are mostly in their seventies or eighties. Ordinarily people at this age retire. These priests had already retired from the "special work" created for them by the political forces of the fifties and sixties; now in the autumn

days of their lives, they have come out of their "retirement" to take up the work of building the Church once again. This is something of a unique experience in the history of the Church. Their experience has given them a very special place in the annals of distinguished heroes loyal to God and the Church.

The situation of the younger priests is quite different. They are not on the same level as older priests in matters of learning or experience. Today's young priests have witnessed the Church grow from "nothing" to its present situation. They have grown up within a different cultural experience: building a modern day socialist society. They have just recently taken up positions in the Church and want to build a flourishing and thriving community. They want respect as they display their ability to build the Church. The older generation, on the other hand, is always cautioning them saying that haste makes waste. Both groups share the same aim but they work differently. This creates unavoidable conflicts and misunderstandings.

The cause of the generation gap between the two groups lies in their different experiences. Perhaps the only way to resolve the difficulty is for both groups to find in their fidelity to God a way of reconciling and living with their differences, respecting and accepting each other in humility. This is, after all, the meaning of Christ's redeeming act on the cross.

2.) Different understanding of obedience

Disagreements owing to the generation gap occur in the Church in China today not only between younger and older priests but also between priests and their bishops. Conflicts arise in matters pertaining to job assignments, understanding of a priestly life style and pastoral ministry.

The pre-Vatican II mindset of bishops makes them demand strict obedience in matters pertaining to church management. Young priests raised in modern circumstances cannot accept these episcopal demands based on an outmoded pattern of the previous half-century.

Obviously, such a deadlocked situation makes it very difficult to solve problems. It harms everything and everybody concerned. This serious state of affairs creates ever-increasing tensions. To ask who is going to yield is not the best way to resolve the situation. Perhaps a new approach, more open to dialogue and

cooperation, would enable the one who obeys to know that he is respected, and not simply an accessory to a clerical operation, but is in reality part of God's large family. A harmonious relationship built on mutual respect will manifest the wonder of working for God's kingdom: a mission quite different from secular relationships built on one's rank in the power structure.

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3.) Mutual Rivalries

Nothing happens when one is unknown, but once a priest begins to enjoy a reputation for his gifts and capabilities, troubles arise. One must expect to be challenged, but what is more difficult to bear than criticism is the jealousy of contemporaries. This defect exists among priests. A modicum of competitiveness is not bad, but once it gets out of hand there is no end to evils. If a successful priest has no spiritual support, criticism makes him lose his enthusiasm. A priest with no abilities will blame others for his deficiencies. In the long run both will most likely start thinking of leaving their troubles behind and seek for other ways to resolve their problems.

To resolve the age gap, domestic quarrels among priests or differences with the bishop, the bishop, as father of his diocese, holds a very important position as "peacemaker". It will take all his personal charm and abilities, as well as virtues, to sort out and resolve the numerous and complicated personnel problems that exist among his priests on the administrative and pastoral levels. The amount of prestige he enjoys for decisiveness, leadership, and personal virtue will be the guarantee and key to his success. His ability to convince people through reasoning and good sense will be the only way to solve problems. A priest who has already packed his bags and is ready to depart is one who most likely has looked in vain for hope and spiritual guidance from his bishop. This presents an enormous challenge to the bishop.

5. Between a rock and a hard place: relationship between Church and State

In No. 88 (1995) of *Tripod* there is an article written by Mr. Liu Peng. He says that there are four types of Church-State relationships. Church-State relationships in Mainland China fall in the fourth kind—an atheistic political party controls the Church with the Church being just one element of the State. Since there are different political tendencies and different understandings of how the Church should develop, the Church in the Mainland has different ways of expressing its faith. The questions are: how are we to understand the stormy events of the past half-century? How can the Church exercise its social consciousness? How can the Church maintain its relationship with the Vatican? These are crucial questions that face the present day Church in China.

The young priest wants to find the right solutions to these problems, to do the right thing, within today's context and historical situation. One's personal understanding and knowledge do not suffice to guide the individual priest. The various divisions, past and present, within the Church, require lengthy discussions, which fortunately is beginning to take place.

Christians all believe in God and can express their faith clearly. However, when it comes to the question of the official and unofficial, Church there is much raking up of the past, mutual incrimination, and much harm done to the virtue of charity. This creates difficulties for any sort of cooperation between the two groups or for building a new age for the Church.

The first to be affected by this unhappy situation is the young priest who does not have the "past history" of the older generation of priests. Confronted with this contention and with the future not looking any too bright, he finds himself part of a lost generation. Those priests who have left their ministry sound a warning knell for the Church. There should be no more in-fighting. All should unite, walk hand in hand into the future, live the gospel, and allow the prophetic spirit to emerge among the people.

II. Intrinsic Elements behind Priests Leaving the Ministry

In this second part of my article, I wish to delve a little deeper into the reasons why young priests leave the ministry. In other words, besides the extrinsic reasons mentioned above, there are also intrinsic ones. The immediate intrinsic reason is the lack of on-going formation. A related intrinsic reason is the deficiency of seminary training.

1 Identity: intellectual and affective formation in the seminaries

Seminaries in Mainland China are using a pre-Vatican II system of management that creates hidden tensions among the young men who are entering the seminary from a modern society. The closed or semi-closed seminary life forces young, active and creative men to live monastic lives in tune with the bell. Seminary rules are cast in iron; obedience is the basic demand. While the seminary atmosphere is peaceful and without external disturbance, the seminarians themselves are very troubled. Society is forcing the Church to face the fact that she cannot continue avoiding issues by hiding behind walls. What is rationed out in theological textbooks, the quality of teaching, and the shallowness of spiritual direction are insufficient to meet real needs. The seminarians receive no satisfactory answers to the feedback from their summer experiences. This creates tension between the seminary authorities and the seminarians. There are differences in the understanding of faith and culture. There are also differences in the values held by the seminary authorities and their students. The seminary puts great emphasis on the sacred sciences and underestimates secular knowledge. Yet the system of teaching these sacred sciences is such that the students are unable to make head or tail out of what is being taught. The desire of the seminarians to integrate sacred with secular sciences only emphasizes the tension between them and the seminary authorities that opt for a traditional uniformity.

Four to six years is a sufficient period of time to form a youngster of mediocre talents into a person of some ability; the same amount of time can also ruin a youngster graced with natural

abilities. Confucius said that the sage who devotes self to duty discovers that duty fulfilled is a life fulfilled. Doubtless the years of training spent in the seminary are the most important ones for the full human development of the seminarian. There is no denying that the environment and the education that one receives between the ages of 20 and 30 determines the basic direction of one's future life and its values. If the seminary years do not provide a sufficiently complete education, the young priest will take up his pastoral duties confused and insufficiently prepared. He will always suffer from the lack of a foundational formation. If a seminarian's spiritual development has been limited to observing rules and obeying superiors, and he has not received mature spiritual guidance from his elders, then the seeds of later life crises have already been sown.

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Young people who are just reaching adulthood must go through the common human experience of establishing normal relationships with the world and the opposite sex. However since seminarians must lead a celibate life, seminary authorities go to all lengths to inoculate them against normal relationships. The simple solution is to close the gates and not allow them to have any relationships with the outside world whatsoever. Some seminaries strictly stipulate that the authorities must read all letters the seminarians receive. A tiny breeze ends in a full-blown tempest where the guilty party is punished as a warning to others. Such punishments are expulsion from the seminary or delayed advance. The mere mention of sex raises eyebrows. After a few years the seminarian grows up physically, but what about his emotional life? Dust thickens as it piles up. There is an inverse proportion to the seminarian's growth in years and in his emotional life. In other words, a huge gap exists between his physical age and social

relationships. This results in deviant psychological and personality disorders that create a cynical outlook on life. Hemmed in by hallowed rules and regulations, it is unlikely that the seminarian will ever succeed in attaining a holistic development.

Seminarians must develop their God-given potential, their spirituality and personalities within an atmosphere of trust and loving concern that will allow them to grow in self-knowledge and maturity. They must come to discover the meaning of their self-offering. The key to a healthy spirituality is establishing a well-grounded work ethic, distinguishing between rights and obligations, having a sound relationship with the opposite sex, and cooperating with others in a spirit of obedience. But offering oneself to the Lord and making a promise of being faithful to a lifetime commitment without a clear knowledge of self is a very frightening thing.

2. A lonely island: on-going formation

From the time the government relaxed its policy towards religion up to the present moment, the fundamental work of the Church has been to recover Church properties, set up seminary education and to meet the needs of the faithful. One of the most basic and urgent needs in the task of rebuilding the Church is the question of manpower. The Church in Mainland China is facing a shortage of priests.

More than twelve major seminaries have been established in the Open Church alone in China since Sheshan Seminary opened in 1982. At the end of the eighties the Church in China was beginning to supply its own priests. But because of the scarcity of teaching materials and the environment in which they were trained, these priests went "sowing in tears". Times necessitated that these priests go out to help the older priests. There were many things to do: visiting Catholics, administering the sacraments as well as taking on administrative duties, recovering Church properties and maintaining relationships with the government. There were all kinds of matters, big and small, and the work was very complex.

By the early nineties the Church had recovered most of its properties; the number of priests kept on increasing and the basic needs of the faithful seemed assured. The Church's agenda shifted to improving the quality of Christian life, forming catechumens,

undertaking social projects, etc. This should also have been a time for providing priests with a breathing space, but since many problems kept popping up one after the other, this was not seen as important. What had been learned in the seminaries was sufficient for the time being to meet the needs of the faithful.

Pausing to view the present situation and reflecting on past experience, we seem to have reached a dead end. The times have changed. The faithful are no longer satisfied with just hearing about heaven and hell. They want to face the present challenges brought to the Church by catechumens. The wine in the old wineskins is being challenged by new wine. This puts great pressure upon priests to study and continue their formation—to learn new methods of evangelization and absorb the spirit of Vatican II. There is the added urgent reason that priests are overburdened with work and experiencing an interior weariness that must be relieved and empty spirits that must be filled. These needs are easily met overseas, but things are different in China. There is much to be done and the means to meet this on-going formation need are not readily available. Periods of hesitation, exterior and interior difficulties, the bishops' lack of understanding of the situation, the lack of support of fellow priests are all part of the problem. But solutions must be found. Other options are unthinkable.

Perhaps relatives and friends from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao can assist by sending in books and other literature to help China's priests become more knowledgeable of overseas conditions, learn new ways of evangelization and better understand the spirit of Vatican II. This may not be a perfect solution but it can certainly help one's practical work and raise one's standards. Priests, who are too busy and have no time at all to read, will have no opportunity to renew themselves.

Given the formation situation in China's seminaries, it is clear that the priests who leave their ministry in China are different from those outside China who left during the seventies and eighties. The latter had received a systematic and normal formation. They made their decision to leave in relatively free and easy situations. Priests in the Mainland, however, feel alone and at a loss owing to the challenges brought by new situations, interior divisions within the Church, and its seemingly unpromising future. Either one opens

his heart to God, or seeks obvious support from outside the Church. The warmth of sexual relationships, increasing desire for material goods and the luxury offered by modern society can be a remedial support to ease a person's loneliness.

Furthermore, refusing to bring the issue under public scrutiny does not do away with the many pressures and challenges brought about by this new situation in the Church. Even though there are those who want to grasp the bull by the horns, and openly leave their ministry, there are others who cannot bring themselves to take this step. They remain within the priesthood, some living under heavy pressure, others just letting things slide. Many more make a clean break and walk out of an unbearable situation.

Conclusion

The reasons behind this acute problem of priests leaving the ministry are very complex, but much responsibility lies with the bishops and the fellow priests of those who leave.

Although these priests are no longer serving the Church, all the energy and efforts they have made to build up the Church deserve recognition. Obviously, their departure is the Church's loss and a challenge to it. Perhaps, showing them more care and concern will help them to open to God in their troubles, and enable them to witness God's presence in their lives.

We cannot escape the burden of history. Even though five to six years ago it was unthinkable that priests would leave their ministry—seminary training and priestly ordination in those days made this impossible—today this matter is already happening right before our eyes. Evading the problem is not the best solution. We must diagnose the causes and apply the remedy. The old saying of closing the barn door after the horse has escaped cannot apply here. It is worthwhile considering that after twenty years the Church's future will be in the hands of this new generation. I believe that the experience of this particular historical period will allow God's gifts to penetrate more deeply into the lives of God's people. This "special sign of the times" can create a fresh spiritual atmosphere and new cultural perspective for the upcoming generation.

Today's changes are the result of history's past failings, but these very changes will make for a better tomorrow.