

Formation for Young Chinese Priests

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The number of priests being ordained in China is steadily on the increase. The formation program begun in the early eighties is now beginning to bear fruit. The number and quality of priests, however, cannot yet satisfy all the needs of the faithful, especially since one priest must serve several churches. Still, as young priests take up basic pastoral responsibilities, the severe shortage of priests prevalent at the end of the Cultural Revolution has been somewhat alleviated. As the number of these priests enter the ministry, however, a number of problems also surface. There are, no doubt, various reasons for this, but priestly formation is certainly the chief among them. This is not meant to write off the contributions young priests have made and are still making to the Church, but it does call for solutions to be presented to the Church leadership to help improve the situation.

Young priests need additional formation

Pre-Vatican II formation

Most of the seminary training young priests have received has been based on vintage pre-Vatican II theology. The council was already into its second year (1966) when the Cultural Revolution began in China. All church activities ceased completely. Young priests, who came after the revolution, received the first elements of the faith from their parents within the bosom of their families. Their fervent faith was formed by a pre-Vatican II theology. After the Cultural Revolution, older priests came home from prison or labor camps and took up the heavy burden of training the next generation of priests. These older priests unstintingly gave what they themselves had received. Everyone acknowledged their sufferings, and their sacrifices were obvious to all. Nevertheless, their entire formation was also pre-Vatican II. Many older priests perhaps knew something of Vatican II and tried their best to introduce its theology and methods, but this was a case of good intentions lacking means of

implementation. After 1986 or 1987, some newly ordained priests began to work as formators. These new teachers handed on to their students what they themselves had received from their teachers. Naturally, their theology and pedagogical methods were also pre-Vatican II. After 1986 and 1987 some seminary lecturers from Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas were able to come to Mainland China to give some courses, but they stayed only a short time. Although they did instill a post-Vatican II spirit as well as theology and formation methods, systematic clerical training and overall formation was still pre-Vatican II.

The laity have taken on a very important role in today's Church, and the clergy is but one element in the church, yet its function is irreplaceable. The Council of Trent, by its reformation of the clergy, changed the face of the Church. To implement its desire to reform the church, its spirit and its teaching, Vatican II relies greatly on the clergy to play an important role. The formation of young priests in China in the spirit of Vatican II and according to its teaching is, therefore, crucial.

The urgent need for formation

After the Cultural Revolution, old priests released from prison or labor camps returned to their pastoral stations. Because of the restrictions the Cultural Revolution had placed on Church activities over a period of twenty years, these priests had no successors. Furthermore, the number of these older priests was insufficient to meet the pastoral needs of the faithful in the years following the Cultural Revolution. Many realized the seriousness of the situation and the formation of successors gradually began to take shape. However this formation was often cut short by the urgent needs, the demands of the times and the limited available resources. For some, training lasted only for two years, for others three or four years. Still others were able to complete the six year training course required by Church law.

Church law grants local bishops the right to reduce six years of training to four when urgent need calls for such action, but the situation in China seems to require something more. First, most of the young people who want to become priests were born either shortly before or during the Cultural Revolution. Since all church

activities were curtailed during that time, one can readily conjecture that Catholic education or the understanding of the faith imparted during those days was woefully inadequate. Of course, this does not deny the fervor or intensity of the faith of these young men. Their constancy is evident. However, fervor or firmness in the faith cannot substitute for the knowledge and understanding of theology and the Sacred Sciences a priest must have to be a leader in today's Church. Therefore, a four year formation course for these young men, firm in the faith but insufficient in knowledge, is not at all enough. This is even truer of those young men who received fewer than four years of training. The number of teachers and their abilities are also limited, and books on the formation of priests and other theological texts are scarce. Although some urgent formation needs are now beginning to be met, overall clerical formation is still deficient and there is an obvious need of additional improvement.

Church requirements

The Church requires clerical formation to be on going. This is a mandate even where basic formation takes place under ideal conditions. Every priest must be aware that on-going formation is an integral part of his life regardless of age, circumstances, or work conditions. In addition, this formation must be many sided and include theology and other sciences. On-going formation meets the priest's personal needs while at the same time it responds to Church requirements.

The future of the Chinese Church

A serious generation gap exists between priests in China. Since no clerical formation was possible during the Cultural Revolution, there are hardly any priests between the ages of forty and sixty. In other words, there is no group of middle aged priests whatsoever. This factor can produce many problems for the future of the Chinese Church. It also speaks for the need of a better system of priestly training.

This dearth of middle aged priests places a very heavy burden on young priests. These men will become the moving force to renew the Church in the spirit of Vatican II. It is imperative,

therefore, that their formation be in line with the teachings of the Council.



A group of young priests from the Jilin Seminary.

Seminarians from Pixian Seminary, Sichuan Province, enjoy a meal together.



Important Aspects of Priestly Formation

Identity

As for all Christians, priestly identity is Trinitarian. Through priestly ordination the Father sends the priest to live and work in union with Jesus Christ Mediator relying on the Spirit to serve the church in its salvific mission to the world. In speaking of the identity of the priest, our Holy Father John Paul II said, “Our identity ultimately comes from the Father’s love. The Father sent the Son to be high priest and shepherd. Directed by the Spirit and through sacramental means we are united to His common priesthood. Our priestly life and office are the continuation of Christ’s life and

actions. This is our identity and our true dignity, the source of our joy and the true foundation of our lives.”¹

Formation of the person

The formation of the person is at the heart of a sound priestly formation. Pope John Paul II has pointed out that if there is no adequate personal formation, the entire program of priestly formation lacks its basic foundation.² Only mature persons of sound mind should be prepared for the priesthood. Immature persons cannot become a bridge by which others will reach Christ; they will become stumbling blocks instead.

Priests must be in tune with the human heart, able to dialogue, build trust and perceive difficulties and questions that others experience. Priests must also be steadfast in their duties, able to deal objectively and fairly with various persons and situations. They must be open-minded, patient, kind, loyal, dedicated to justice and service, balanced in judgment, consistent, courteous and respectful towards others. They must avoid arrogance and pride, callousness, boorishness, and any kind of self-seeking that prevent them from understanding and sympathizing with others.

The priest must know himself, be the master of his interior life, aware of his feelings, emotions, qualities and defects and strive to curb his weaknesses.

The formation of a moral consciousness is of utmost importance. He must develop an informed and sensitive conscience enabling him to listen to God’s voice speaking within him. It is only with that kind of conscience that the priest will be able to guide and form the consciences of the faithful.

Spiritual formation

Spiritual formation is of utmost importance in priestly formation. Although the spiritual life is necessary for every Catholic, for the priest it is the core of his life. Without it his pastoral ministry loses its basis.

Spirituality is a person’s relationship with God. This relationship is a basic religious need of every man and woman. Obviously, the priest, acting in Christ’s behalf, must constantly

develop his relationship with God. Despite his weak human nature, he must seek perfection. This is to fulfill what the Lord says: "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Matthew 5:48)

Spirituality is also a person's relationship with Christ. The priest must always seek to imitate Christ. It is through Christ that he will live intimately with the Father in the Spirit. His important spiritual food will be meditation on the Scriptures and the Divine Office, his Mass and union with Christ through the Holy Eucharist. In addition, he must find Christ in men and women, especially in the poor, children, the sick, sinners and even in those without faith.

A priest's spirituality consists of various elements: prayer, retreats, daily meditation on God's word, visits to the Blessed Sacrament, devotion to Mary, the study of the lives of saints, humble service, receiving the sacrament of reconciliation, and sufficient time for rest and relaxation.

Intellectual formation

Intellectual formation is also basic to priestly formation. This is especially true today where humanistic and theological studies are constantly developing. If the priest wishes to fulfill his ministry well, he must make every effort to keep abreast of the new developments in ecclesiastical studies, as well as those in the fields of social ethics, bio-ethics and psychology. It is only by doing this that he will be able to carry on an effective dialogue with modern men and women.

Pastoral formation

The importance of pastoral formation is evident. According to the teaching of Vatican II, priestly formation "should have as its object to make of priests true shepherds of souls after the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd."³ Although priestly formation is multifaceted, the pastoral element must be present in all aspects of formation: personal, spiritual and intellectual.

There are several aspects to priestly pastoral formation, for example, the study of catechetics, problems pertaining to the family, to youth, to the aged, to the sick, liturgical study, pastoral guidance

skills, pastoral theology, charitable works, etc. Pedagogical, psychological and sociological studies can all be helpful in dealing with any or all pastoral aspects.

Conclusion

Priestly formation must be carefully planned. This plan must include the various aspects of a holistic formation. Priestly formation, therefore, must be systematic, making use of proven methods, rich in content and implemented in stages. This implementation of the various steps in the formation process requires proper timing. Furthermore, every aspect of priestly formation must be in line with Vatican II and later church teachings on the priesthood. Last, but by no means the least, the formation must meet the needs of China's young priests.

Endnotes

¹ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 19. Cf. *Final Message of the Synod Fathers to the People of God* (28 Oct. 1990), III, "L'Osservatore Romano," 29-30 Oct. 1990.

² John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, 43.

³ Vatican II *Decree on the Training of Priests*, no. 4.

Reference Books

Vatican II Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests.

Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

Vatican II Decree on the Training of Priests.

Canon Law Canons 250, 781, 235, §1.

John Paul II Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*.

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Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, *A Vade Mecum for Priests*.