

## *Seminarians Speak of Their Experience*

---

*Compiled by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.*

Three young men about to be admitted to the priesthood, who have just completed four and one-half years of study in two seminaries in the United States, came to visit our Centre recently. We thought it would be interesting to have them tell us something of their experience. Since there are differing opinions among church people about the merit and wisdom of sending Chinese seminarians and young Chinese priests to study abroad, especially in the United States, we wanted to ascertain from the seminarians personally how they felt about having received a major part of their seminary education in the West.

The questions below were asked the young men by a group of men and women religious who have an on-going interest in the Church in China and who happened to be present at the Centre at the time of their visit.

Stephen Chen, John Li, and John Chen went to the United States to study in 1994. These young men were on their way back to China where they will be ordained to the priesthood on August 14, 1999, in their Diocese of Xian in Shaanxi Province, Central China.

Stephen studied at the Josephinum Pontifical Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. The Josephinum is the only pontifical seminary outside of Italy. Stephen graduated with a degree in theology and a specialty in Scripture.

John Li and John Chen studied at St. Charles Seminary in Philadelphia. Both also attained theology degrees. Li's specialty is Systematic Theology and Chen's is Moral Theology.

There is a general assumption among people acquainted with the Church in China that most vocations to the priesthood and sisterhood in China come from old Catholic families, families that have been Catholic for over 200 years. We wanted to test that assumption.

Question: Can you tell us something about your family background? Are your parents new or old members of the Catholic community?

- Stephen: We are all from old Catholic families. In fact my family has been Catholic for over two centuries. I also have an uncle who is a priest in the seminary in Shanghai and a sister who is a nun in Shaanxi.
- John Li: I have an aunt who is a nun at the cathedral convent in Xian.
- Question: What would be the average number of children in your families?
- John Chen: In my immediate family there are three girls and three boys.
- John Li: We were five children in my family: three boys and two girls.
- Stephen: Counting my half brothers and sisters, there are seven siblings in mine.
- Question: You have just completed more than four years studying abroad, and most specifically in the United States. How would you describe your experience?
- Stephen: I feel very good about the experience and am extremely grateful for having had the opportunity to study abroad. I feel I have gotten a very good education, and on the whole I am personally comfortable with the exposure the experience has given me.
- John/John: We would agree with Stephen. We are very grateful for having been given this opportunity to study abroad.
- Question: All of you, young men, were born at the outset of the Cultural Revolution. What motivated you within that atmosphere, to become priests? Did anyone have a special influence over you or encourage you to pursue this vocation?
- John Li: I think my aunt, who is a nun, had a great deal of influence on me. She taught me how to pray. I also had a cousin interested in the seminary. I was also influenced and encouraged by an elderly priest.
- John Chen: I think my mother had a great deal of influence on me. She had gone through the Cultural Revolution when there were no priests and no churches. "We need priests," she said, and encouraged and fostered my vocation to the priesthood.

- Stephen: My uncle was a priest. He influenced me, but my own home atmosphere was also a very favorable. We had a chapel in our house. Our house was a center for religious activities. I also had many opportunities denied other young people my age. I was able to go to high school, to pass the examinations, to work in a college teaching English. I also taught in the Xian Seminary for Bishop Li Duan. The bishop encouraged me to study theology.
- Question: It is not easy to come into a new and different culture and have to learn a new language and study in that unfamiliar language. Certainly, there must have been some difficult moments during your four years in the United States. Would you mind naming some of these as your experience could be very helpful for other young men going abroad to do part of the seminary studies.
- John/ John: We found it very hard to try to explain the situation of the Church in China. Most people in the States are not that familiar with the Chinese Church situation. Even when we tried to explain, many did not seem to understand the complexity of the situation in which we Catholics in China find ourselves.
- Question: Were you ever asked whether you were from the open or underground church?
- John and John: Our rector was very helpful. He gave a seminar on the Church in China and tried as best as he could to explain the situation. Sometimes we felt that we were never quite accepted on the same faith level as the other seminarians. We were considered by some as not being real Catholic seminarians. Some priests, especially, seemed to find it very difficult to be really friendly. It was a bit like experiencing a certain rejection from our own brothers. In spite of this, we are still most grateful for the experience.
- Question: Were there other areas of difficulty?
- Stephen: Language is often a difficulty for seminarians from China going to study abroad. Language was not such a problem for me as I had been an English teacher in China, but what was difficult to get used to was the

style of teaching, which is very different from the usual lecture method used in China, and also having to write so many papers and having to do such a lot of reading. Americans take all this for granted and furthermore, they are much freer about expressing themselves than we are.

Question: You went to the United States as seminarians. Many people think that it would be better to send only priests to study abroad, that those who have done four or five years of pastoral work in China might profit more from the experience. What would you say about this?

Stephen: I think it's fine for seminarians to go abroad to study. I am very happy with my education, my seminary and what I have learned about the Church in America, and Europe.

John and John: I think that depends very much on the seminary where the students are assigned. [These two seminarians studied in a seminary noted for its discipline.] Chinese or foreign seminarians can be quite confined since they have no friends in America and must spend most of their weekends in the seminary. The discipline is quite strict for them. Obviously, a priest would enjoy more freedom and privileges. It's good for seminarians to go abroad to study, but it might be better to send those already ordained..

Question: What will you be doing when you return to Xi'an?

Stephen: After our ordination we will be teaching. I will be teaching Scripture at the Xi'an Seminary.

John Li: I will be teaching Systematic Theology.

John Chen: I will be teaching Moral Theology. This is certainly a challenge for me since the things I have to teach may come into conflict with government policy. I think this will be quite difficult.

Question: Do you think it is better for seminaries in China to have only professors from the Mainland as teachers, that it is better not to invite outsiders or foreigners to teach in China's seminaries?

All Three: We think it should be both.

- Question: Do you think that your experience in the States will set you apart from the other men teaching at the seminary who did not have the same opportunity and experience?
- Stephen: We hope not. If this does happen, we will certainly work hard to narrow the gap.
- Final Remark: Thank you so much. We are very happy that you agreed to talk with us. We know that God will bless you and your future work.

**The young men, who gave the interview above, are among the people below who made the retreat with Bishop John Tong while they were studying in the United States.**

