

Shanghai Church Responds to Spiritual Needs of Foreigners

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In open competition with Hong Kong, Shanghai is a city relentlessly on the move. It now has two subway lines, with a third about to open. Elevated highways surround the city and effortlessly merge with one another. Even the suburbs are being brought closer to the city. A private car driving on a recently opened highway can reach the Catholic pilgrimage place of Sheshan, about 40 kilometers from the city center, in about half an hour. High-rise apartment and office buildings now dwarf the Catholic Cathedral in the Xujiahui District, which previously dominated the whole area. Shopping malls, displaying the latest fashions, now occupy the main crossroads in Xujiahui, only a short walk from the church. Like waves splashing up on a beach, crowds of smart looking young shoppers continually surge in and out of the stores.

China's entrance into the World Trade Organization in 2001 has brought a lot of foreign investment to Shanghai. It is said that 10 percent of the over 50 billion U.S. dollars invested in China in 2002 went to Shanghai. The General Motors plant, which opened in Pudong in 1998, hopes to produce 60,000 Buicks this year, mainly for local consumption. Other multinational companies are not lagging behind. With the foreign companies, of course, comes foreign staff. It is reported that the foreign population of Shanghai has increased from a several thousand a few years ago to over 30,000 now. This is where the Catholic Church comes in. According to a local government official, one of the first questions the foreign guests ask upon their arrival in Shanghai is: "Where can I worship in English on Sunday?"

To address this question, the Catholic Diocese of Shanghai quickly swung into action. Bishop Aloysius Jin organized a four-month intensive course in English at Sheshan, which was held from mid-September 2002 to mid-January 2003. Thirteen priests, ten deacons and two Sisters attended the course. In mid-August last

year, an urgent call for teachers went to friends abroad. In spite of the short notice, I, along with another teacher, responded. The course was held at the Rehabilitation Center, located behind the mid-mountain church, in Sheshan. The purpose of the course was to prepare a corps of English speaking priests able to meet the spiritual needs of the many foreign Catholics continually arriving to Shanghai. This past May the venue of the one English Mass in Shanghai was changed from Christ the King Church to St. Peter's Church to accommodate the larger crowds of attendees. After the course, it is hoped that some of the trainees will be able to celebrate an English Mass at other parishes, besides St. Peter's.

There were 19 hours of class per week, with as much English spoken at meals and free time as possible. The priests went to help out in parishes (not their own) on weekends. While grammar



Young priests in Shanghai take intensive English course to meet the spiritual needs of Catholic foreigners

could be improved, by course's end, most of the students were at least not afraid to open their mouths and express themselves, if somewhat haltingly, in English. The teachers were generally satisfied with this result. With on-going study, recommended, of course, by the teachers, improvement and fluency will gradually come.

While the English course was supposed to be intensive for four months, there were several interruptions, most of which could be categorized as pleasant. One of these was the celebration on November 4, 2002 of the 20th anniversary of the founding of Sheshan Seminary. Opening at first in the hostel next to the mid-mountain church in October 1982, with an initial student body of 36, the seminary soon moved into new buildings erected for it at the bottom of Sheshan Mountain. Drawing students from the six provinces of Shandong, Jiangsu, Anhui, Zhejiang, Jiangxi and Fujian, plus Shanghai, Sheshan Seminary is considered a regional seminary. Up to 2001, 587 students passed through its halls. Over 300 of these students successfully completed the seminary course of studies and graduated. As of 2001, 278 graduates have been ordained priests.

In his welcoming speech, Bishop Jin stated that the establishment of the seminary came none too soon. The seminary graduates could now replace the old priests, who at an advanced age had shouldered responsibility for pastoral work after the churches began to reopen in 1979. Bishop Jin pointed out



A seminarian shares his experience at the 20th Anniversary of Sheshan Seminary.

that when the Sheshan Seminary opened in 1982, the average age of the clergy of Shanghai was 66. They were still working at an age when most people in society retire! Now the younger clergy could provide new blood for the apostolate in the six provinces and Shanghai Diocese. In the meantime, they have even taken up positions of responsibility in their home dioceses, serving as bishops, diocesan administrators, vicars-general, and rectors of seminaries, seminary staff, as well as pastors of parishes. All are working conscientiously to build up the Christian community, as St. Paul advocated for Christian apostles.

The 20th anniversary celebration was low-key, in the sense that all 300 Sheshan graduates were not invited back for the celebration. However, one young priest from the Ningbo Diocese (Zhejiang Province) was invited, as a representative of the graduates, to share his experience as a parish priest. He told about organizing bible study groups, in which Catholics come together once a week to read and discuss passages from the Bible. He said that this activity has greatly strengthened the faith of the Catholics, and shows the power of the Word of God. A seminarian, representing



The ordination of a young priest is a source of joy for relatives and friends.

the present student body, described how his seminary studies have helped nourish his personal faith.

Branch (minor) seminaries have also been set up in Suzhou in Jiangsu Province, Nanchang in Jiangxi Province, and Tailaiqiao in the Shanghai Diocese. The present enrollment of Sheshan Seminary is 86. This is down from the figure of over 130 seminarians enrolled in the 1990's.

Another pleasant interruption during the course was the ordination as priests of the ten deacon-English students on December 5, 2002. Bishop Jin ordained the ten for the Shanghai Diocese, as well as two new priests for the Wenzhou Diocese in Zhejiang Province. Over 80 priests concelebrated the ordination Mass at the Xujiahui Cathedral before a standing-room only crowd of several thousand. The thought occurred to this observer that a European or American bishop would definitely be envious at the ordination of such a large number of priests for one diocese. It should be pointed out, however, that of the ten new priests for the Shanghai Diocese, only one is from Shanghai itself. The other nine are from Shanxi or Shaanxi, where vocations to the priesthood and religious life are more abundant. The bishops in the western provinces have agreed to let their young priests serve in the large city diocese, where there is a greater need for their ministry. There are now over 60 young priests working in the Shanghai Diocese. The names of the ten new priests of the Shanghai Diocese are Peter Wu Gaosen, Paul Yu Jiaxuan, John Wang Chunyong, Peter Niu Shuqing, Joseph Ma Dachao, Paul Li Xiaoqiang, John Zhao Shijie, Peter Li Hu, Joseph Hou Wenhui, and Joseph Tian Minggang.

The four-month intensive English course was a great success. The program should be beneficial to all segments of society involved. It is a win-win situation all around. If the foreign Christians are able to worship in their own language, they will feel more at home in Shanghai. If they are happy and feel at home, they will most likely be more agreeable in doing business. The young priests and Sisters demonstrate their desire to participate in China's modernization drive by taking care of the spiritual needs of the foreign Christians. And maybe the witness of believers from abroad seeking solace and support from their religious faith will arouse the curiosity and interest of some of the citizens of the host country in the Good News of Jesus Christ.