

SEMINARY EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CHINESE SOCIETY

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Introduction

It is my pleasure to have this opportunity to be with you and to share some of my personal thoughts on seminary education in China. I think it is time for all us to pay more attention to seminary education in China. Vatican II refers to the seminary as the heart of the diocese. No doubt, seminary education is a foundation of the Church. Whether seminary education is good or bad, it affects not only the seminary itself, but also the Whole Church. Basically, I would say that seminary training in China has not gotten beyond the typical pre-Vatican II situation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to have highly educated church personnel on the faculties of the seminaries and serving in the dioceses in China. Currently there are more than 1.2 billion people in China with about ten million Catholics in 138 dioceses. Of the 2,200 priests, 75% of them were ordained in the past twelve years. In the twelve major seminaries (the open church's) there are over 1, 000 seminarians. No doubt, seminary education and the Church in China have to depend on native clergy and laity with sound education to teach and form our future clergy and the laity. The future of the Church in China must depend on dedicated Chinese Catholics.

Some main challenges or problems at the seminaries in China.

Indeed, the joys, pains, anxieties, hopes, challenges and opportunities are common to the Church in China and to our seminaries. Seminary education has been challenged by both the Church and society. Talking of Chinese seminary challenges, we need to be aware of changes in society in China. As we know, China is a great country, not only due to its long history, but also because of its rich traditions. However, in the twentieth century, especially after the Cultural Revolution, China sadly lost much of its traditional values. Added to this are the recent economic developments and Chinese entry into the world community, making for rapid social and moral changes. Chinese society finds itself beset with moral and physical problems such as corruption, AIDS, drug addiction, abortion, an unstable family system, a higher incidence of divorce, and youth suicide. These phenomena cannot be adequately addressed by the Chinese legal system alone, but are ethical as well. I think that seminary education must address these phenomena and be ready to take action. Then, how are we to ready ourselves to face these challenges or problems? If seminary education is not aware of them, how can we imagine that the Church in China will be ready for them? Vatican II asks us to read the signs of the times. It is very important. And we should be able to do so in the light of the Gospel.

As a Chinese clergyman, I know that Chinese youth and middle-aged adults are searching for meanings in life that wealth and position are not satisfying. Moreover, these age groups were raised in a society that was completely disconnected from traditional values and now have a radical distrust of communist ideology. Indeed, I would say that this is a lost generation. These people (including young and middle aged clergy) are very much influenced by materialism, money consciousness and hedonism. Are Chinese church members, lay people, sisters, priests, to be readied for these challenges or not? If we are not to be lost, we must stand up as light, salt and city. How we respond to the challenges very much depends on our seminary education.

Seminary education should be able to respond to both the needs of the Church and the challenges of Society.

This is not a “yes” or “no” question; this is not an easy question; this is a complex question we have to try to answer. No matter how we think or what we would like, we have to face those challenges and try our best to respond to them. I think this is the way we have to go forward. In the following, I would like to introduce Shenyang seminary as an example and how it has been struggling and trying to respond to both the needs of the Church and those of contemporary society in China.

In 1996, due to the needs of the seminary in Shenyang, I went back to China as soon as I finished my master-level study in the USA. From my experience, I think it is necessary to go back to own diocese or seminary either to teach or to do some pastoral work after two or three years studies at overseas. It is important to keep a close relationship with one’s own diocese, seminary, bishop and one’s fellow priests. After returning, I realized what I gained and what I lost in the US. In 1998, when I was made Vice-Rector, I began to discuss very openly and honestly the seminary education with faculty members as well as with seminarians. We realized that seminary education should follow the Spirit of Vatican II and be aware of the context of contemporary Chinese Society. We all agreed to set for our goal the training of the “whole person” in the seminary. We focussed on the various aspects of the necessary training, such as spirituality, personality, knowledge and pastoral training. Here I will just briefly introduce some of the focuses of the training at Shenyang seminary. If anybody is interested further in the topic, you can see an article in Tripod (Vol. XXI-No 123, Fall- Winter 2001)

1. Spiritual Formation.

Spiritual life is a life-long task that priests share with other followers of Jesus Christ. Spiritual life is key for the priesthood. The Holy Father in his *Pastores DaboVobis* identifies spiritual formation as learning “to live in holy, familiar and attentive union with the Father, through his Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit” (#8). Furthermore, spiritual formation means drawing close to Jesus Christ as friend in every detail of life (#45). Without a sound spiritual life, no matter how much knowledge we have and how healthy we are, maybe we will be just a scholar or just an athlete, and not much of a priest. In order to have a good spiritual life in the seminary, we need some sound spiritual directors who really can help seminarians to develop their spiritual life. As a matter of fact, this is a big problem in China; it is urgent that we get some well-trained spiritual directors in the seminary.

Now, what we do is to select from among the young priests those who have a good spiritual life and some pastoral experience to be our spiritual directors. Spiritual life is based on faith. Without faith, nobody can be a good spiritual director and nobody can have a sound spiritual life. Besides this, spiritual directors should have sound knowledge of spirituality and psychology. Therefore, seminary training in the spiritual aspect must focus on how to deepen the seminarians’ beliefs in order to have an inner and close relationship with God.

Shenyang seminary tries to encourage seminarians to have a personal prayer life in addition to communal requirements such as daily Mass, Morning prayers and Evening prayers. In May and October, seminarians and faculty members sing Marian songs or say the rosary in front of a statue of Mary. We try to organize the seminarians to participate in special occasions in the Church, such as an ordination, a dedication of a new church or a pilgrimage.

Shenyang seminary tries to focus on training for the “three vows”, introducing the seminarians to the life of poverty, obedience and celibacy. It is important and necessary to have a sound training in those matters. If there is no sound training in the seminary, after ordination priests will have trouble living their priesthood. Experience proves it.

2. Human formation

Human formation ought to have fully development of priests’ humanity so that their humanity can be a bridge for communicating Jesus Christ to men and woman today (PDV #43). Holy Father in his *Pastores Dabo Vobis* speaks of priests’ relational capacities: “Of special importance is the capacity to relate to others. This is truly fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a ‘man of communion’”(#43). Therefore, seminarians should be able to communicate with various people. This is a challenge for a conservative education system in China.

In China, seminarians are not allowed or at least not encouraged to meet people while they are in the seminary. The rules were very strict when I was a seminarian. We were allowed freely to go out (e.g. shopping) only once a month, and the rest of the time, we had to stay in the seminary. When you wanted to meet people, even when your relatives came to visit you; first you had to get permission.

As priests, we are called to serve many people. In order to serve, we have to communicate with others, not only some people, but also all of the people. First of all, we should be in communion with our fellow priests, parishioners and other people as well. I think Jesus is the best example for all of us. We should learn from him, have compassion for those in pain, care for the poor and the sick, forgiveness of the sinner and the ability to communicate with various people.

As a seminarian today and a future priest, I think the human aspect of training is a foundation of seminary education. When they finish seminary training and go out to a parish and into society, they need to have good manners. A good Christian should first be a good person. If you are not a good person, you can not be a good Christian; if you are not a good Christian, you can not be a good priest. Therefore, to have a good spiritual life you must also have a good human life.

In order to do this well, as part of Shenyang seminary training, every Sunday, seminarians go out to serve people such as visiting the sick or bringing communion to the old or the sick, and help in the handicapped people do their work. They do the same during the summer and winter vacations. At the end of a month and a semester, the formators discuss with the seminarians the difficulties they had and let them share with each other their joys and pains by doing those pastoral works. Without human virtues, we cannot be good priests. In the seminary, we need to learn responsibility, sacrifice, care and compassion. The spirit of serving and of sacrifice is necessary for seminary training. Seminarians are called to serve but not to be served. It is essential that seminarians not only have a sense of being a servant but also practice it in the seminary.

3. Intellectual Formation

Intellectual formation seeks to link theological with a practical wisdom, so that priests can serve their people more effectively. Intellectual formation aims to deepen the understanding of faith (PDV #57). Intellectual formation is a tool for evangelization. In China, most seminarians have completed only

high school, some only middle school, when they enter the seminary. Their educational background cannot compare and compete with that of university students. However, in the future, they will have to face various people, including intellectuals. In order to better evangelize those highly educated people, seminarians must not only have theology but also a good general education.

In Shenyang Seminary, besides theology, almost 40% of our studies are focussed on university level subjects such as history, literature, foreign languages, psychology and civil law. Local clergy and some visiting foreign professors teach theology. And professors who are teaching in the public universities teach university level subjects. In order to work and evangelize in modern society, we are required to have a sound education. I think this is very important for the Church in China because many people in China still think that religion is superstitious.

4. Lay people training in the seminary

By now, Shenyang seminary has not yet set up a training program for lay people, but it has been thought about and planned. We just built a new seminary with the help of various people. In the future (soon, I hope) Shenyang seminary will have a training program for lay people. Now what our seminary can do is to send teachers out to help wherever there is a need for training lay people. Shenyang diocese usually holds sessions once or twice a year, to train local parish leaders. And most parishes in Shenyang diocese organize training programs for lay people according to their own schedule once or twice a year. If they need speakers, they may contact the diocese or the seminary, and we will send seminary teachers to help them. Especially during the summer and winter vacations, most of our seminary teachers go out to help with the training of lay people. And all our seminarians are assigned to work in the different parishes. I believe that all seminaries in China, sooner or later, will have training programs for lay people in order to respond to the needs of both the Church and society.

Conclusion

Before I end my presentation, I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere gratitude to all people who have helped the Shenyang seminary and Shenyang diocese. With their great help, we have been trying our best to do well. Also, we should thank Maryknoll and other organizations that have helped all Chinese lay people, Sisters, seminarians, and priests who are studying in the USA. This will be a great gift for seminary education and for the Church in China in the future. I hope and I know you will continue to do this. This is grace for us here at the present. Be assured that with your help, what we learned here will be fruitful in the future in China.

What we need more, besides your prayers, are more teachers, specialized in the spiritual and pastoral area, and referent books of theology and philosophy. I think that anyone who wants to help the Church in China may be able to work for the Church in many different ways.

I think Chinese native clergy, sisters and laity must carry out all missions to which God calls us. With the help of God, trusting in God, with confidence in God, nothing is impossible. I am very optimistic for the future of Chinese seminaries and the Church in China. The Church in China needs native clergy, religious and laity with sound education to teach and to form our future clergy, religious and the faithful. The future of the Church in China must depend on many dedicated Chinese Christians.