

For religious who study abroad, returning can be a challenge

BEIJING (CNS) — Studying abroad can help Chinese priests and nuns understand the universal church, but it also can cause a culture shock when they return to their country.

Sister Pauline Yu Chunjing was 34 years old and still had one year of study left at New York's Fordham University when the Sisters of Our Lady of All Holy Souls elected her their superior.

Sister Pauline, who already had earned a master's degree in pastoral theology at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., traveled back to China for about 10 days, then returned to Fordham to complete a master's degree in spiritual direction.

She said that when she returned to China again early in 2006 she had to readjust to the culture.

"I did not feel that I changed too much, but other sisters could see immediately that I changed," she said March 5 in Beijing.

Sister Pauline said she became frustrated when members of her order came to her for very small things, and she became impatient with them.

"They think it's obedience, but I think it's not (being) responsible for themselves or their work," she said.

In China, men are seen as more important than women, and Sister Pauline said she sees that attitude in the church, so she asks priests "to treat the sisters with respect."

"Some priests don't like me because I challenge them," she said.

Chinese parents, as head of the family, often force important decisions on their children without listening to them, and the children must obey, she said. Some religious superiors treat their order's candidates like children and do not look at

their talents before assigning them to jobs, she said.

"I try to talk to the sisters" and assess their talents, "then we can see what they can study and what they can do," she said.

Some members of her religious community do not know what to do with the freedom she gives them, she said, and some think that with this new freedom "there's no direction — it looks messier than before."

"It's really hard to be the superior, but I am happy to see some sisters are changing, are growing, actually," she said.

Sister Pauline traveled to the United States as part of the Maryknoll-coordinated Chinese Seminary Teachers and Formators Project. She and dozens of other priests and nuns initially stay at Maryknoll headquarters in New York and study English at Pace University there. Then they pursue degrees at various Catholic universities.

Maryknoll pays for the Chinese religious' airline tickets and health insurance, and sometimes their tuition. Some religious orders, such as the Jesuits or Benedictines, help subsidize tuition or housing at their schools.

At least four Chinese bishops have studied in the program; so have numerous officials of China's seminaries. Some Chinese priests and nuns have studied in Europe or other Asian countries, like South Korea.

One Chinese priest told of his frustration when he first began studying at a Catholic university in the United States. He said he knew the Chinese theological terms, but not their English equivalents, so it would take him hours to read seven or eight pages of homework.

He said he e-mailed another priest who had been through the program and told him, "I am in hell."

He said his friend replied good-naturedly: "Yes, you are in hell. Next year you will be in purgatory. By the third year you will be in heaven, and then you will return to China and be in hell again."

Two priests at the Sheshan regional seminary in Shanghai who studied in the United

States said they believed the program had great benefits, but also put some additional pressure on them.

“I believe the students expect more from me,” said Father Anthony Chen Ruiqi, who studied in the U.S. on two separate occasions and now teaches at Sheshan. He said he tries to broaden the views of his students so they can understand the “hot topics” in the universal church.

Father Francis Fang, dean of studies at the seminary, said it was not just what they teach, “but the way we teach,” as a community.

Sister Pauline said she “learned a lot from the books — yes, it’s true — but also from the people and experiencing different cultures.”

Last November, she sent two sisters from her community to Maryknoll to begin studies.

“I have experienced the result of study abroad,” she said, and it “widened my mind.”