

# Seminarians, nuns need formation directors

BEIJING (CNS) — As Chinese Catholic seminaries and religious communities work to train a new generation of priests and nuns, many religious leaders say their greatest need is for people to learn religious formation — how to accompany a candidate in religious life.

“We still have a great need for formation work,” said Auxiliary Bishop Paul Pei Junmin of Shenyang, in northeastern China’s Liaoning province. “We really do not have enough people for spiritual direction.”

Sister Mary Pan Xiufang, a member of the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary who works in the Shanghai Diocese, said that when priests and nuns do not have good training it becomes a big circle — the new people, in turn, do not train the others well.

“The formation part is very important,” because all the priests and sisters are so young, she said.

Sister Mary entered her order in 1986 and did not receive much formation on “how to live properly a religious life,” although, she added quickly, the older sisters did the best they could. As a novice, she said, she did not even have her own Bible, and the old nuns who had lived through the Cultural Revolution “taught us what they remembered.”

From 1995 to 1997, Sister Mary lived with the Daughters of St. Paul in Boston and did some formation work with them in the novitiate. She said when she returned to China she redid her own formation and helped with her community.

In September 2001 she returned to the United States, where she studied international religious formation and leadership at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. She said there were 38 students from 22 countries in the international religious formation program, and all the cross-cultural exposure “also helped to kind of increase the knowledge of formation of myself.” In addition, she said, she got

some background in psychology, which was not readily available to her in China.

Bishop Pei spent the 10 years before his 2006 ordination as a bishop teaching at Liaoning regional seminary in Shenyang, where he also served as vice rector and dean of studies.

He said that when the Chinese government began loosening its religious restrictions in the 1980s seminarians' formation directors were elderly priests educated before the Second Vatican Council. As the church began re-emerging, he said, young priests — including himself, who as a priest earned degrees from St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pa. — initially studied the Bible or theology.

"We could teach the courses, but we (did) not know how to train the seminarians," especially spiritually, he said.

Formation directors from places like Hong Kong or Macau "may not know how to train those seminarians," because of the special circumstances in China, he said, referring to government restrictions under which Chinese Catholics operate.

"We really need some real China church experts coming in to help us," he said, or seminarians might not mature spiritually or psychologically.

Father Joseph Xia Qingtian, the current dean of studies at Liaoning regional seminary, earned a master's degree in liturgical studies at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and a master's in pastoral counseling and spiritual direction at Fordham University in New York.

He said Chinese priests who went to the seminary when he did thought "pious is the best thing." He remembered that the main message for seminarians was "you have to obey, obey, obey," without learning about different types of spirituality.

Father Anthony Chen Ruiqi studied at St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie, N.Y., then returned to the Diocese of Shanghai to run the minor seminary. Later, he received a master's degree and a licentiate at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Mass. He returned to China in January and now teaches at the Sheshan regional seminary.

Father Chen said the church needs to train Chinese priests on “how to make the church alive, make church attractive.”

He noted that the church in China does not have schools or retreat houses like other countries.

“If we could open schools, that would be a different picture,” he said.

At Sheshan, some of the teachers are only one or two years older than the students. The oldest seminary teacher is 42; the youngest, at age 27, is not yet ordained and teaches New Testament.

In some cases, seminaries invite guest lecturers. For instance, last year Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony gave a series of lectures on priestly spirituality at China’s national seminary, just outside Beijing. Sometimes novices from local orders of women religious are allowed to sit in on guest lectures.

In Shenyang, 14 nuns live across the street from the seminary. They attend their own classes in the seminary and may choose two years of studies from five years of courses to earn a certificate, not a degree, in subjects such as Scripture, theology and pastoral counseling, said Father Xia. He said things were slowly changing to make religious formation better.

“Before, that’s very impossible — (imagine) sisters studying in the seminary 10 years ago!” he said.