

Human Formation in the Training to Priesthood in Mainland China

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Introduction

Besides the decreasing number of vocations to the priesthood in the Catholic Church and the reduction of the number of faithful attending the Sunday Mass, it is evident that one fundamental issue is the caliber of priests. The reports and empirical studies regarding the scandal of sexual abuse of children by Catholic clergy in Western countries (among them: Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse 2017; Dressing *et al.* 2021; French Independent Commission on Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church, CIIASE 2021) confirmed the presence of serious problems among the priests and stressed the urgent necessity to have a radical reform of Human Formation in the training to priesthood. Similarly, during the 76th General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference (Vitale 2022), besides the Christian education of youth, four areas emerged as extremely urgent: ongoing formation of priests, formation of seminary formators, the preparation of the new document regarding the seminary formation (*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*), and the protection of minors and vulnerable persons. Previous studies on seminarians and priests (i.e., Parappully 2006; FABC 2010; John Jay College of Criminal Justice & Catholic Church 2011; Rosamma – Thomas 2012; De Pieri 2015) showed weak self-identity, low self-esteem, lack of commitment, severe depressive and anxious traits, affective and psychological immaturity, including psychological addictions (i.e., sex, alcohol, gambling). Seminarians and priests are youth and men living in this society, sharing the same psychological fragmentation typical of post-modernity (Baumann 2007; Raush 2021). Every seminarian and priest carries his psychological background and personality, being influenced by his own family of origin, childhood experiences, and environmental factors (i.e., cultural, social, and political situation). Hence, when investigating the seminary formation for the priesthood it is important to consider and respect the complexity of the issue. My doctoral research at the Institute of Psychology at the Pontifical Gregorian

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University (Rome, Italy) was part of a project of the Centre for Child Protection (CCP)² which aimed at investigating the status of the Human Formation Programs in the Catholic seminaries around the world, to improve them and contribute to the prevention of sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by clergy. Specifically, my research was conducted between 2019–2023 and explored the current status of the Human Formation (HF) in the priestly formation in Mainland China. In this paper, I will just present and discuss some of the main findings, together with their limitations and possible implications for the formation in the seminaries in the future.

Theoretical Background

The four dimensions of seminary formation (spiritual, pastoral, intellectual, and human) identified by *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (John Paul II 1992, PDV 42) are all vital for the integral development of the vocation to the priesthood. However, Human Formation is the “necessary foundation” (PDV 43) of the whole priestly formation and its central importance was confirmed by several documents of the Catholic Church (i.e., *Optatam Totius*, OT; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, PO; *Ratio Fundamentalis*, RF; Congregation for the Clergy 2016) and specialists in the field of formation. Despite these clear indications, the reality shows that in the past years, the seminary formation was not able to adequately address the human dimension of seminarians. Only seminarians and priests with integrated and mature personalities could easily develop a well-balanced spiritual development (i.e., avoiding distorted projection of personal traumas/wounds on the image of God) and be fruitful evangelizers in their vocation. Unfortunately, the seminary formation often focused on the intellectual formation (philosophical and theological studies), not paying enough attention to candidates’ self-awareness, affective and sexual maturity, and relational difficulties (Barbeau – Mahfood 2012; Kenel 2002; Farthing 2007). If the formators only base their judgment regarding the seminarians on their external observance of the rules and their academic performances, they can overlook the presence of psychological issues or immaturities. The problem is that these symptoms usually emerge after the priestly ordination, when priests face personal crises and/or relational difficulties in the ministry. It was noted (Farthing 2007) that seminarians’ and priests’ external rigidity (i.e., put too much or exclusive attention on liturgical vestments, liturgical norms, or morality) frequently covers emotional turmoil, sexual immaturity, and lack of personal identity integration. For this reason, the point is not to screen or to form candidates with perfect humanity or morality, but to help them to become aware of their fragilities and weaknesses and work on them. The first one responsible of the seminary formation is the candidate himself, who should be open and honest with the formators, without hiding severe problems from the formators for the mere purpose of being ordained.

1 The Centre for Child Protection (CCP) was established in 2012 as part of the Gregorian University’s Institute of Psychology. However, beginning on September 1, 2021, the CCP became the Institute of Anthropology: Interdisciplinary Studies on Human Dignity and Care (IADC), with its own faculty and offering licentiates and doctorates (cf. <https://www.unigre.it/en/anthropology>).

In recent years the urgency of reforming the training to the priesthood in the seminaries, especially in the screening of candidates and the area of Human Formation, mainly came as a response to the scandal of sexual abuse of minors perpetrated by Catholic priests. In fact, improvements in the area of Human Formation in the seminaries indirectly brought a dramatic decrease in sexual abuse incidents (Applewhite 2012). The vast majority of reports regarding the dramatic problem of child sexual abuses in the Catholic Church were produced in Western countries (Europe, USA, Canada, Australia) and rapidly spread with the help of media. However, little is known (at least at the official level) about the severity of this issue in other countries (i.e., Africa, Asia) and the situation of their seminary formation. For instance, analyzing some of the official statements of the Federation of the Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC 2006, 2010) it was evident that a considerable number of priests in Asia present several serious psychological problems: unresolved childhood traumas, conflicts, unhealthy crossing of boundaries (i.e., sexual misconduct with both men and women), addictive behaviors (in particular drinking, cybersex, gambling). For this reason, the Asian bishops, following the same indication offered by the *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: Ecclesia in Asia* (John Paul II 1999), declared the urgency of reforming the seminary formation. Similarly to other countries, their seminaries are usually overcrowded, over-protective (life in the seminary could be too distant and too comfortable compared to the outside world), and too rigid (focus on the discipline, but few opportunities for seminarians to express themselves and their ideas), with formators that are scarce in number and, usually, not adequately prepared. Hence, it would be important to explore the current situation of the seminaries, to see if these clear suggestions were followed by a radical reform in the area of Human Formation.

Sinologists and experts of the Catholic Church in China have already thoroughly investigated its specific historical background, as well as the surrounding political and social environment. These challenges surely impact the life of priests and the seminary formation: for instance, the Sino-Vatican relationships (i.e. the appointment of bishops; the different number of the dioceses), the government policies on religious activities, the huge age and cultural gaps between young and elderly priests (i.e., as a consequence of the Cultural Revolution). However, to the best of my knowledge, the current situation of Chinese candidates and their seminary formation (especially in the area of Human Formation) has not been explored systematically and scientifically.

Human Formation in the Catholic Church in Mainland China

Before reporting some of the results of my on-field research, I would like to briefly present some relevant information regarding the Chinese youth and the Chinese Catholic Church in China.

The Chinese Youth Today

My study involved Chinese seminarians, whose distinctive feature is to be part of the youth population, sharing the same social and cultural background and similar characteristics of the other Chinese youth (feelings, thinking, desires, values, and daily challenges). For

instance, many young Chinese live in a conflictual state, breathing traditional values (social, cultural, religious), but at the same time rejecting them, especially when these are not understood, imposed, or, according to them, not meaningful for their life. Furthermore, from the questionnaire prepared for the 2018 Synod of Bishops on Youth (HSSC 2021b), it emerged that Catholic Chinese youths became strong leaders of the local dioceses, being involved in a variety of services (i.e., marriage and family ministry, youth ministry, charity work, Sunday school teachers), however, they wish to see some changes in the Church that will help their faith to grow: more opportunities to receive qualified spiritual and pastoral training, personal spiritual accompaniment, being heard by and collaborating with local clergy. Compared to the past, these young Catholics are well-educated and very mature, both as persons and as Christians, and, despite their deep desire to consecrate their life to Christ and the Church, they do not see themselves fitting into a strict and traditional seminary training or a rigid convent.

Chinese Catholic Church's Current Situation

In recent years, the continuous dialogue between the Vatican and the Chinese government has brought some fruits (i.e. the agreement regarding the appointment of bishops in China). However, some sinologists and Church experts (i.e., Chen 2020; Rogers 2020; Cook 2020; Kenton 2016; Union of Catholic Asian News 2017; Zhou 2019) remained very cautious, pointing out the concrete challenges faced by Catholics in China. For instance, the prohibition for minors (below 18 years) from attending religious events could weaken the religious education of children, and, as observed (Union of Catholic Asian News 2019), negatively impact the number of vocations to the priesthood (i.e., fewer altar servers, no minor seminaries), which in the last decades have already diminished (HSSC 2018, 2021c; 2024). For many reasons, obtaining precise estimates of the local Catholic Church in China is very complicated. Official reports often do not reflect the real situation. However, the Holy Spirit Study Centre (HSSC), a Catholic organization based in the Hong Kong Diocese, regularly publishes updated and reliable statistics every year, collecting data from trustworthy local sources. Table 1 and Table 2 (see next page) offer a presentation of recent statistics regarding the Catholic Church in China.

In the last two decades, the drastic reduction in the number of priestly and religious vocations included both the official and unofficial communities. For instance, candidates in the seminaries in China passed from 2,400 in the year 2000 to 420 seminarians in the year 2020; for women's vocations, the situation appears even more serious: while in the year 2000 there were 2,500 sisters in formation, after 20 years this number dropped down to less than 150 candidates (Lam 2016; HSSC 2021c; HSSC 2021d). Numerous factors could have impacted this phenomenon and the abandonment of priestly life after ordination: secularism, the "One-Child policy," the huge cultural and age gap among priests (see Cultural Revolution), financial problems, family issues, psychological difficulties (see Fang 2014; Zhang 2017; Chen 1999, 2002; Kam 2002). However, besides these environmental factors, Chen (2002) pointed out the "interior emptiness" of the clergy, mostly originating from an inadequate seminary formation.

Table 1: Statistics on the Catholic Church in China (adapted from Wenzel-Teuber 2020)

	Holy Spirit Study Centre (2019)	State Council (2018) & NARCCC (2016)
Chinese Catholics	ca. 10 million	6 million
Adult baptisms (annually)	40,000–50,000	/
Dioceses* (Catholic Church as of 1950)	146 (115 + 31 admin. reg.)	/
Dioceses (Chinese government)	96	98
Official Bishops**	69 (62 in office)	/
Unofficial Bishops	31 (16 in office)	/
Priests ***	4,950	/
Official Major seminaries	6 (with 370 seminarians)	9
Unofficial formation communities	6 (with 100 seminarians)	/
Number of Sisters	4,630	/
Official Sisters	3,270 (87 congregations)	/
Unofficial Sisters	1,360 (40 congregations)	/

NARCCC National Assembly of Representatives of the Chinese Catholic Church

* Regarding the intricate issue of the diocesan territories' map in China, which presents substantial differences according to the Chinese government or the Holy See, refer to Zhu 2017.

** Since 2018 all Chinese bishops have been recognized by the Pope.

*** The number of unofficial clergy or not registered clergy is not available.

Table 2: HSSC 2024, p. 143.

**Year 2023:
Statistics of the Catholic Church in China**

Number of Catholics

About 10 million
(6 million, estimated by the Chinese Government)

Number Dioceses

Catholic Church: 147 dioceses
Official Church in China: 98 dioceses

Number of Bishops

Catholic Church: 93 bishops in China
(67 official; 26 unofficial)
Official Church (2022): 66 bishops

Number of Priests

About 4,000
At least 65 priests ordained in 2023

Number of Sisters

About 5,000

In an official forum regarding the seminary formation in the Catholic Church, organized by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA, 中国天主教爱国会) and the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC, 中國天主教主教團), formators reflected on the poor quality of the actual seminary education and the crisis of priestly and religious vocations, while government officials insisted on the urgency of training the formation team and the seminarians in the direction of Sinicization (HSSC 2021d, p. 268).

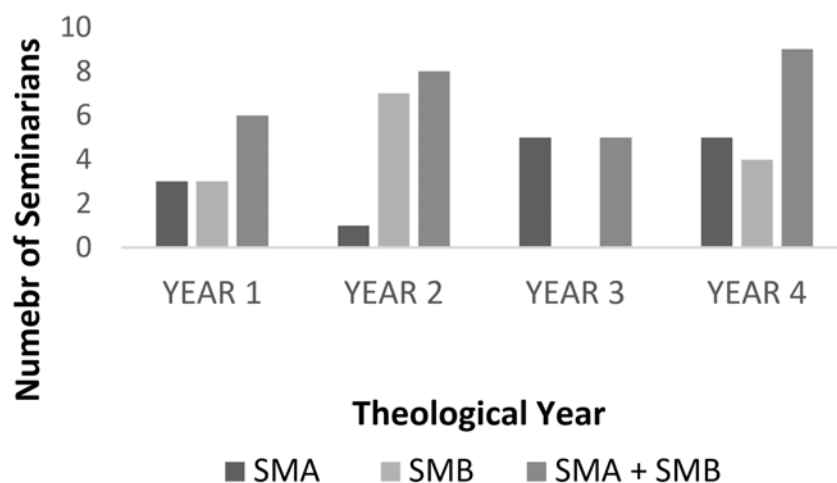
About the serious issue of Chinese seminarians dropping out of the seminaries formators themselves singled out several elements: the inadequate initial motivation of the seminarians (i.e. obtaining a proper

education or higher social status), personal or familial problems, pressure from the government, but above all the poor quality of seminary formation (Lam 1997; Tong 2003). Experts in the field (Li 1999; Tong 2003; Simon 2010; Chiu 2011) reported specific problems in the current training to the priesthood in China: seminarians/priests sent abroad to study were able to obtain degrees from prestigious universities, exploring different cultures and other ways of managing seminaries and parishes, but they had problems

re-adjusting to the Chinese context and the academic improvement was not followed by a better spiritual and human formation; seminaries are often over-crowded (some of them with more than a hundred seminarians); formators (especially spiritual directors) are few and their preparation inadequate (in particular in the field of Human Formation).

Analyses of Some Research Findings from My Doctoral Research on Human Formation in Chinese Seminaries (Favata 2023)

The sample group consisted in a group of 28 seminarians (pursuing their theological studies) and 7 formators (rectors or spiritual directors) from two official Catholic seminaries in Mainland China. Participation in the present study was voluntary and the treatment of data remained strictly confidential.



Seminarians' age ranged from 23 to 30 years old. Regarding their education level, the majority ($N = 22$; 85.8%) held a high school diploma, three of them a middle school certificate (also called junior high school diploma in China), and the other three a bachelor's degree. Only a few of them ($N = 7$) were able to master the English language, while most of them (75%) only spoke Chinese (Mandarin), their mother tongue. Regarding the family origin, the largest number of participants (60.7%) in the two seminaries came from the countryside, seven (25%) from small cities, and four of them (25%) from megalopolis in China (over ten million people).

Formators' age ranged from 30 to 60 years old and they were all trained abroad: the majority ($N = 5$) specialized in philosophical, biblical, and theological studies, and two of them were specifically trained in seminary formation or pastoral counseling. Formators' overall experience in the seminary formation ranged from one to 20 years, and they were serving as formators from a minimum of one to a maximum of 25 years. The results from the quantitative tests were compared with those from a control group, composed of 30 young graduate and post-graduate students in Northern China, who are not seminarians.

Because of the complexity and sensitivity of the topic (human formation; psychosexual and mental health) the research adopted a Mixed Method approach, combining quanti-

tative tests and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative tests included the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-II (MMPI-2, Chinese Version: Song 1991; Cheung *et al.* 1996; Butcher *et al.* 2003), that aimed to identify the personality structure of the candidates and possible psychopathological issues, and the Sexual Addiction Screening Test-Revised (SAST-R; Carnes *et al.* 2010), which was found able to identify addictive behaviors related to sexuality (i.e., loss of control, relationship disturbance, emotional instability, Internet sex addiction, gender confusion).

The interviews touched different areas: for the seminarians the interview investigated six variables (significant life experiences, self-image, vocational values, formation, psychosexual development, and affective maturity) and for the formators it addressed four dimensions: *Human Formation Program in the seminary, candidate's involvement in the formation, psychosexual development and difficulties of the seminarians, and preparation of the formators*. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the collection of data for the main research was entirely conducted remotely (online and through voice-calls). In this paper I will only report some of the results from the qualitative analyses.

Evaluation of the Human Formation Programs in the Two Seminaries

Human Formation Programs (HFP) in both seminaries only began to be implemented a few years ago. Formators and seminarians are aware of the importance of the Human Formation during the training and they are investing generous effort, enthusiasm, and determination. However, at the moment, several problems and challenges persist. In particular, there are too few formators directly involved in HFP (especially when compared to the number of seminarians in the seminary) and their own preparation is inadequate to face the complexity of the young seminarians and their personal issues. For instance, from the formators' interviews it appeared that only three formators, for more than one hundred seminarians, were in charge of HFP in Seminary A (SMA), but only one of them specialized in counseling/psychology (the other two majored in Spirituality and Bible). Seminary B (SMB) has fewer seminarians, but only two formators (both holding a degree in psychology) were responsible for spirituality. In both seminaries, external specialists had been invited in the past to offer courses or seminars related to specific topics in the area of HF, especially psychosexual development. However, in the interviews formators explained the huge difficulty in recruiting qualified professionals in China.

Regarding the duration of HFP in the two seminaries, seminarians and formators recognized the necessity of a continuous HFP throughout the whole seminary formation. However, HFP in both seminaries are usually organized during the first year, before the seminarians begin their theological studies (in SMB only during the first semester of the first philosophical year). HFP is mainly taught through academic courses (one or two semesters) or short-term workshops (with a typical duration of one week) on specific topics. This variety of formative offerings allows for the exploration of areas in HFP from a theological perspective and gives room for group discussion. Though, due to the sensitivity of some topics and to specific cultural features, formators denounced candidates' poor

personal involvement during these courses, being pretty passive and unable to freely and fully share their doubts, opinions, or personal experiences.

All the formators participating in the study emphasized the necessity of personal accompaniment (i.e., spiritual direction) as an integral and fundamental part of their HFP. However, due to the above mentioned problems (i.e., scarcity of formators, lack of preparation, sensitivity of some topics) and the fact that it is not mandatory, most of the seminarians have no regular personal meetings with their formators.

From the analyses of the HFP contents, as described by seminarians and formators, results showed that both seminaries highly appraised psychology and sexuality, with a strong emphasis on self-awareness and interpersonal relationships, too. Confusion emerged between Human Formation and Spirituality, as exemplified by the following quotes, the first one from a formator and the second from a seminarian:

In our HFP there is also a course regarding prayer life, which is done in three phases, also addressing psychological, sexual, and emotional issues. (SMAF [Formator from Seminary A] 004, line 12)

I think our formators are working hard, trying their best to offer a good HF; but I found that there is a problem: Spirituality and HF are always messy together. In the spirituality courses, they will talk about HF, and in the HF courses they will mainly talk about spirituality; the problem is a lack of clarity, integration, and balance between HF and spirituality. (SMA 005, line 59)

Other areas related to HFP mentioned in the interviews concern emotions, interpersonal communication (i.e., non-violent communication), and spirituality. There is a noticeable positive inculturation attempt, especially in SMA, which offers some courses from a Chinese cultural perspective, such as the contribution of Tai-Chi spirituality and Chinese philosophy to Christian spirituality. A serious issue that emerged from the research findings was the absence of specific courses or workshops regarding fundamental topics, such as safeguarding of minors and the prevention of Internet sex addiction.

Formators explained the importance of psychology as invaluable for seminarians' growth in HF. In the last five years, both seminaries began to integrate introductory courses on psychology in their formation. However, some formators reported the difficulty of including psychological courses in the Chinese cultural context, where psychology had never been developed enough, or had even been considered by many in the past as a superstition. Interestingly, all the formators reported the urgent need for a professional psychological assessment of all the candidates prior to their entrance into the seminary or during their first year, as illustrated by the following quotes:

It is really hard to offer a HF which is really helpful to them. For instance, we still don't have a psychological evaluation for the seminarians. Here in China, it is very difficult to find qualified professionals, who also understand the peculiarity of a seminarian's vocation. Without a psychological assessment, it becomes really tough for us formators: we are not prepared enough to help them to face their deep issues or traumas. (SMBF [Formator from Seminary B] 001, line 31)

I think we need seminarians' psychological evaluation very much. Our formation would be much better if there were these professional tests. We have nothing yet, only some external observations (seminarians' behavior, academic achievement, prayer life), but we do not really understand their psychology. (SMAF 004, line 35)

According to the interviewed seminarians, they would like to receive more help from their formators in the area of their interpersonal relationships (57.14%), while the majority of formators (85.71%) reported seminarians having major difficulties in dealing with their sexuality. Other challenges faced by seminarians and mentioned by their formators were Internet/Pornography addiction (71.43%), stress/anxiety (57.14%), incapacity to share their problems (42.86%), no contact with the outside world and the opposite sex (42.86%) and personal childhood/family problems (42.86%). Other difficulties mentioned by formators regarded seminarians' low self-esteem, online gaming addiction, the use of smartphones, and China's "special situation." In general, most of the seminarians (71%) expressed a negative evaluation of their formators: according to them, formators are not adequately prepared (27.59%), put exaggerated emphasis on rules/discipline (24.14%), do not know their seminarians well (17.24%), are too conservative in their formation methods (13.79%), change too frequently or are often absent from the seminary (13.79%), and have serious moral or psychological issues themselves (13.79%). Formators judged their preparation as insufficient, too. The majority of both formators (57%) and seminarians (68%) reported how HFP in their seminary is inadequate to help seminarians with their actual needs and expectations. Most of the candidates (23 out of 28, 82.14%) found HF extremely helpful and were profoundly interested in continuing to learn more, as illustrated by these quotes:

I am very willing to engage in human formation, because in the seminary we are not of the same age, we need to get in touch with people of different ages and backgrounds. For this, we need to understand the characteristics and needs of different psychosocial stages and ages, to find suitable methods of interpersonal communication and adjust formation according to the different situations we meet. (SMA 012, line 63)

I am very interested in HF. I would like to learn more about addictions, especially sex and drug addiction. I know many priests who cannot help others because they were never taught how to deal with these serious issues. I know that Bible study and prayer are better and more helpful, but I need to learn more about psychology to better help people. (SMB 004, line 56)

Seminarians' Perception of Celibacy and Their Psychosexual Health

Almost the totality of the seminarians (89%) support the requirement of celibacy for priests. Only three seminarians reported to be undecided and none of them expressed a negative view of celibacy. However, only six seminarians (four from SMA and two from

SMB) explicitly expressed concrete motivations to sustain their positive view of the celibate life. Specifically, five candidates affirmed how a celibate priest is called to and able to “love more,” with all his human dimensions, including sexuality. For instance, one seminarian declared: “I don’t think the priest is celibate because he is a ‘castrated man’; the opposite is true: celibacy is to love more!” (SMB 014, line 108). Another candidate enlarged the same concept, explaining how the natural sexual drive needs to be sublimated and put to serve the highest value of love:

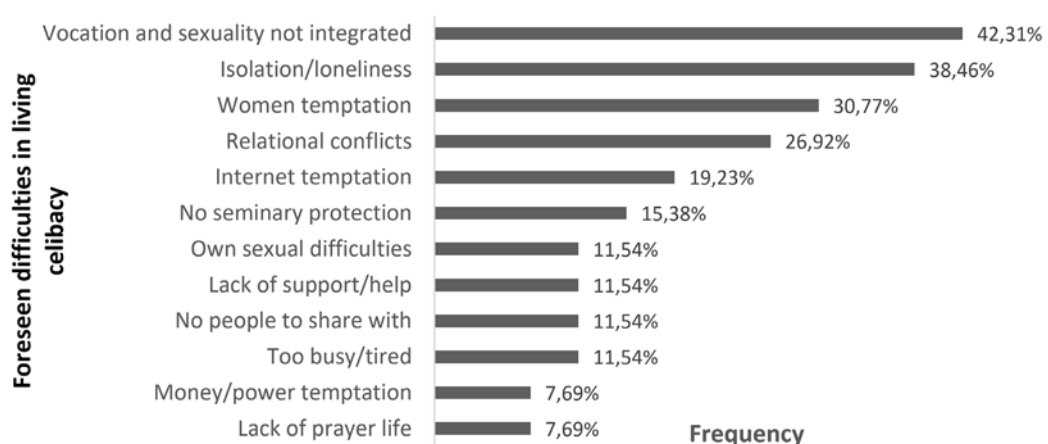
I think we need to turn this sexual force (xìng dònglì 性动力) to strengthen our motivation and ability to love. If we don’t use this power to love others, there will be problems. Because especially for us boys, this sexual drive is very strong, we can’t suppress it; and if we do, soon or later it will abruptly explode. So, sexuality should be used in loving others. This sexual power can also become the strength that helps us to face our difficulties (such as when we need to face some very annoying people in the Parish) because libido, the sexual power, also comes from God. (SMA 015, line 99)

Finally, one seminarian pointed out the crucial importance of celibacy in deepening a priest’s relationship with God:

Fully living a celibate life is discovering the importance of a personal relationship with God, which is the most important value for all and the focal point that sustains our vocation. (SMB 008, line 40)

All the seminarians except one (97%) expressed serious worries and preoccupations when thinking about their future celibate life (as reported in Figure 1). In particular, candidates were mostly afraid of their incapacity to integrate their sexuality and their vocation to the priesthood, loneliness, and human isolation, temptations from women in the parish, especially those living in difficult situations and in need of being comforted by the priest, relational conflicts in the parish and among the priests, and the temptation of pornography.

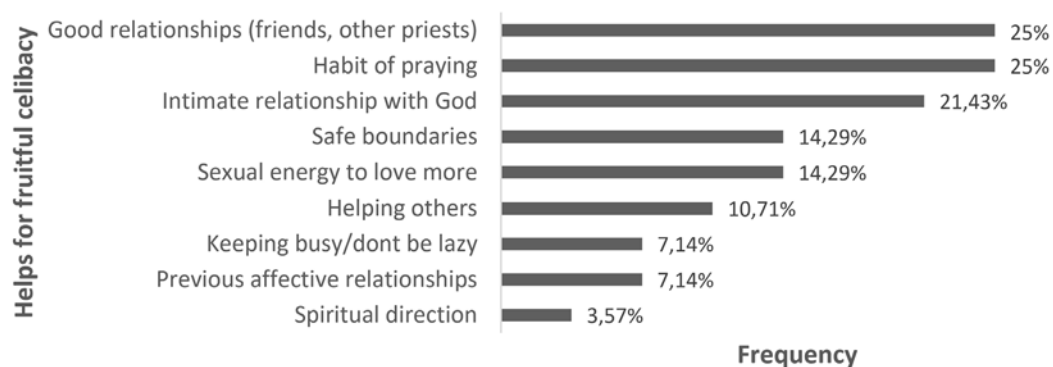
Figure 1: Foreseen Difficulties in the Celibate Life (Seminarians’ Interviews)



Seminarians illustrated concrete strategies that help them to live a rich celibate life, avoid falling into unhealthy behaviors or remaining isolated and frustrated. As illustrated in Fig-

ure 2, the three major categories mentioned by seminarians were persevering in the prayer life, keeping an intimate relationship with God and cultivating healthy relationships with friends and other clergies in the diocese. Other important aids reported by seminarians were keeping safe boundaries with the opposite sex, direct sexual energy to love others more, helping others, and treasure previous affective relationships.

Figure 2: Concrete Helps for a Fruitful Celibate Life (Seminarians' Interviews)



Similarly, formators made concrete suggestions for overcoming difficulties related to celibacy, too. While for candidates the spiritual dimension was listed as one of the major factors helping them in their path toward their celibate life as future priests, the majority of formators emphasized sexual education, seminarians' acceptance of their own psychosexual dimension, and more contact with the outside world (especially with women and married couples, for a realistic vision of married life and healthy friendships with the opposite sex). In SMA, for example, formators invited some Catholic couples to share about their married life, but also priests and nuns to talk about their concrete vocational experiences.

Sexual Education and Psychosexual Difficulties

In the interviews, seminarians expressed their opinions regarding the sexual education received in their lives. The largest number of candidates (around 65%) reported their sexual education as being absent or inadequate, as exemplified by the following quotes: "The main problem is that, because of Chinese culture, family and school education do not provide an adequate sex education to the children" (SMB 014, line 73); "I think I have many problems in the area of sexuality, especially because I did not get a proper sex education. Basically, I didn't receive any sexual education before joining the seminary" (SMA 017, line 78). More than half of the seminarians (58%) explained how they began to receive proper sexual education only when they joined the seminary. For instance, a seminarian from SMA explained:

When I first joined the seminary, I was thinking that sex is always to be considered as a bad or a dirty thing. Especially in the church, sex is always considered a sin. But then, thanks to our human formation, I grew up and slowly understood a little bit more, accepting that sexual arousal is not a sin, but a natural thing.

Through the formation in the seminary, I finally discovered that sex is not a bad thing, but a beautiful one. (SMA 003, line 70)

Exactly half of the group of seminarians stated that their first source of sex information was pornography and for a few of them (15%) peers were the first source of information. Nine seminarians (32.14%) admitted having tried to cope with their lack of knowledge regarding sexuality by finding information by themselves through books or on the Internet.

Seminarians were also aware of the problems derived from a lack of sexual education, as illustrated by the following quote:

Before joining the seminary, I also did many “abnormal things” in the sexual area, such as anal relationships with male friends, or using some objects to have pleasure exploring my body. I think the biggest problem was the lack or absence of sexual education from my family or school. Without it, I couldn’t understand many things, my life was messy, I was lost like a blind man without any guidance. (SMA 017, line 68)

On the contrary, more than one-third of the seminarians (35.71%) found the sexual education they received in the seminary beneficial for their growth. It helped them to have a more positive attitude toward sexuality and be able to discern between healthy and unhealthy sexuality. One seminarian expressed his reflection on this journey with these words:

I think psychosexual development is a process of progressive discovery of our self-identity. At the beginning of this process, I was very simple-minded, I didn’t understand a lot of things, I made a lot of mistakes, too. But later, I gradually began to understand and passed from accepting my sexuality to a full acceptance of my sexual identity and desires. Before I could only see sexuality as a sin. (SMA 009, line 64)

Seminarians’ Openness to Formators regarding Their Psychosexual Issues

Seminarians were fully aware of their difficulties in talking about sexuality among themselves and, in particular, with their formators. Twenty seminarians (all the seminarians from SMA and six from SMB; 71.43%) affirmed they had never shared with formators about their sexual difficulties; furthermore, five candidates (17.80%) reported having rarely mentioned sexuality with their formators. Seminarians themselves felt ashamed, but they also pointed out how formators themselves were embarrassed to address this issue, not feeling comfortable with it, as exemplified by the following quotes:

I am about to graduate and I have never talked about these sexuality issues with my formators. (SMA 011, line 97)

Basically, I have never talked about my sexual issues in the seminary. Because I don’t trust my formators, and also because they never openly asked me about it. (SMA 010, line 85)

Usually we don't naturally talk about sexual issues in class or even in our spiritual direction. Our formators feel embarrassed to ask, and we also feel very embarrassed to talk about it. (SMA 012, line 85)

Only three candidates reported often talking with their formators about issues related to their sexuality, receiving great help from them. One of the seminarians said:

It is hard to explain, but I think that 70% of the content of my spiritual direction is related to my sexuality. The first help received from my formators was to teach me specific solutions/strategies (i.e., doing physical exercise, prayer) to deal with my sexual desires; they also helped me to understand, without feeling too guilty; I also learned how to reject bad sexual thoughts/actions, without shame or rejecting myself. (SMB 001, line 87)

A more personalized accompaniment was the most cited area in need of improvement by seminarians (43%). Both formators and candidates reported other similar suggestions in the same areas (see Figures 3 and 4): for instance, more sex education, psychology courses, practical formation, and sharing among seminarians. Seminarians also emphasized the necessity of HFP all along the vocational journey, from the minor seminary throughout the major seminary and as an integral part of the priestly ongoing formation.

Figure 3: Formators' Suggestions for Improving HFP (Formators' Interviews)

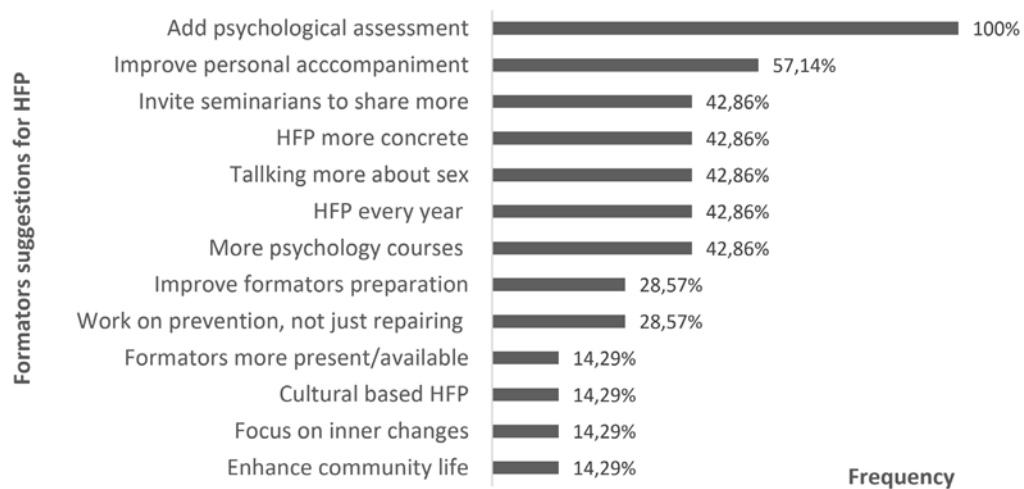


Figure 4: Seminarians' Suggestions for Improving HFP (Seminarians' Interviews)



The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Several studies (Man *et al.* 2020; Tikka *et al.* 2020; World Health Organization 2020; Seth *et al.* 2021; Todres – Diaz 2021) described a significant psychological suffering (i.e., acute stress, anxiety, depression, compulsion) in the general population worldwide during the Covid-pandemic. An important symptom was the worsening of psychosexual misbehaviors (i.e., online pornography, cybersex, online sexual abuse). Local studies in China (Chung *et al.* 2021; Li *et al.* 2021; Bai *et al.* 2022), especially focusing on youth, reported high levels of psychological distress in both youth and their parents. Seminarians and priests were also impacted by this dramatic situation (Crea *et al.* 2021): seminaries and churches were closed for a long period, aggravating the clergy's isolation, loneliness, and anxiety. However, despite these difficulties, new opportunities emerged, too: for instance, amid the pandemic Catholics in China were able to successfully use available resources offered by priests and nuns through the Internet: online prayer groups, masses, and online formation (i.e., Bible, Morality, Spirituality, Catechesis). According to Murphy (2021, pp. 264-265), this virtual classroom was a great opportunity to reach many Catholics and help them to be united and grow in their faith. Even if it was not part of the interview questions, some seminarians (34%) also mentioned the impact of the Covid-19 on their daily life, formation, and psychological well-being. Some of them explained that, because of the strict lockdown in China, their seminaries had to close for several months, too. Others were worried about their studies and exams, not knowing when and how the seminaries would have reopened, as illustrated by this quote:

At the moment, because of the pandemic (Covid-19), we cannot go back to the seminary, at least for a few months, so I don't know if and how this situation will affect my studies. (SMA 15, line 14)

Other seminarians found a positive effect of this forced lockdown on their relationship with their family of origin:

During Covid-19 our relationships in the family got closer and closer; because we couldn't go back to the seminary for a long time, so I could stay at home and spend more time with my family; this helped me to feel that I have never left this family, that I still belong here. (SMA 005, line 32)

Because of the Covid pandemic, in the last part of this academic year, we couldn't go back to the seminary. We had to stay at home for a long time. I found that my relationship with my parents during this period at home changed a lot. It became deeper, closer, and more mature. (SMB 11, line 25)

Some seminarians explained how during the pandemic, their difficulties in the area of sexuality became worse, due to the isolation at home and the lack of social interaction, as exemplified by this quote:

I have always struggled with my sexuality. However, in the last six months, it got worse. Because of the pandemic, I had to stay at home alone for a long time. I was very depressed; my mood was very low and sad. I didn't have enough energy, and

I used masturbation and pornography to find some pleasure and overcome the boredom, but without much effect. (SMA 013, line 88)

Similarly, two formators described the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on seminarians and their HFP with the following words:

Due to the Covid-19 situation, the interpersonal relationships with people outside the seminary (family, parishioners, friends) were reduced to almost nothing. (SMAF 006, line 42)

Now that external professors and experts cannot come because of the pandemic, we have a huge problem. We are not professionals and don't know how to explain these concepts properly, we don't have enough preparation. (SMAF 001, line 60)

Summarizing, according to the qualitative data, the Covid-19 pandemic negatively impacted seminary formation and seminarians' emotional well-being, but for some candidates it helped to improve their relationships with their families.

Chinese Culture, Values, and Society

During their interviews, seminarians revealed specific aspects of Chinese culture and society that impacted their lives:

Filial piety: Filial piety is a crucial aspect of Confucianism, which obliges the children to respect and take care of their parents. For instance, filial piety could impact the role played by the family in the vocational choice. Having a member of the family joining the priesthood gives prestige and high honor, and some families will push their children in this direction. On the other hand, other families will strongly oppose the vocational choice of their children, especially if the family members belong to other religious denominations, are atheists, or want their son to remain close to them and support the family (Champoux 1994). Furthermore, filial piety could also influence other relationships outside the family, for instance with teachers at school, employers at work, rectors/formators in the seminaries, and/or political authorities. The risk of this apparent submissiveness and compliance is often an unexpressed disappointment and a lack of independence, autonomy, and critical thinking (Champoux 1994). Some seminarians explained how filial piety (*xiào 孝*) affected their life and vocation, as described by the following quotes:

According to Chinese culture and tradition, parents are very serious and strict with their children and keep a relational distance from them. (SMA 013, line 36)

Because my father and grandfather have passed away recently, I am now really worried about my mother, my grandma, and my younger brother. I feel a little guilty, because of filial piety I should be there and help. (SMB 013, line 16)

Zhòng nán qīng nǚ 重男轻女: As males, sometimes being the first child and the only male in the family, seminarians felt a great responsibility toward their families. In China, especially in the past and in the countryside, boys were preferred over girls (*zhòng nán*

qīng nǚ), but at the same time had to bear more responsibility toward the family, as illustrated by this quote:

When I was a kid, my mother beat me badly once! It was the first time I saw my mother losing her temper with me. It hadn't happened before because my mother had always followed the principle 重男轻女 ("boys are more important than girls"). (SMA 008, line 12)

"Moving children" (liú dòng ér tóng 流动儿童): Other candidates reported another typical situation in China, regarding those children that must follow their parents who continue to change cities for work or those left behind in their native place by their parents. These children are called "migrant children" or, literally, "moving children". Some of the candidates belonged to this category, especially the poorest ones among them, as illustrated by these quotes:

I belong to the so-called category of "migrant children" (流动儿童). My parents were never at home when I was a child, so I grew up with my grandma. (SMA 013, line 36)

My father worked outside and we had to follow him to other cities. It was very hard, because we didn't have the right to access public schools or health care, and it was hard to have stable friends. (SMA014, line 11)

Smoking and drinking alcohol: Other seminarians described another cultural aspect that worried them, which is the excessive consumption of tobacco and alcohol in the society, also among Catholics. Candidates, especially those who dislike smoking and drinking, found this problem very serious, being very hard for them to reject, as represented by these quotes:

As a future priest, if members of the Church or the government invite me to drink with them, what do I have to do? I really do not like to drink alcohol like them, but it will be very difficult, almost impossible, to refuse. (SMA 006, line 38)

One huge problem for me is the relationship with the faithful in the Church. In fact, the current mentality of the Catholics in China is the same as that of other people in society. They like to smoke and drink alcohol, which is a way for Chinese people to build trusting relationships. However, I am not interested in any of these. I don't like smoking or drinking, so I don't know how I will be able to build good relationships with the parishioners. It will be difficult. It is not that I am afraid, but sometimes it becomes inconvenient (bù hǎo yì si 不好意思) to refuse to drink or smoke. I also believe that at that time, when I will work in the parish, God will help me find a good way to build a relationship with the faithful, without being forced to drink or smoke. (SMA 011, line 47)

Because of this social problem, many seminarians and priests felt forced to begin to smoke and drink, with some of them developing addictions and consequently serious health problems.

Chinese Catholic Church: In their interviews, numerous seminarians described concrete characteristics of the situation of the Catholic Church nowadays in China, which impact their life and vocation. Half of the seminarians mentioned the division between official and non-official (underground) communities and the tight control of the government on the Church. Seminarians appeared to be aware of and worried about the concrete difficulties they would face as ministers in the Catholic Church in China, as represented by the following quotes:

The major difficulty for a priest in China is definitely how to deal with some government policies on religion. This affects our daily life and pastoral work. (SMA 016, line 40)

The division between official and underground Church is often produced by external and material problems (government control, power issues, reciprocal hate). When you can't change the system, you just need to struggle to be a good person yourself. (SMA 014, line 35)

My family has been Catholic for a long time, belonging to a traditional underground community. As kids, they forced us to attend Mass and pray; my grandma would often tell us stories about the martyrdom of some Chinese priests. (SMB 013, line 23)

Other seminarians cited another concrete issue regarding priests' financial situation in China. Due to the specificity of the Church in China, every diocese has different policies regarding financial support for clergy, depending on the relationship with the local authorities and the wealth of parishioners, too. Some seminarians were worried about two concrete issues they have to deal with in the future: how to support their parents if they will need financial help from them (see filial piety) and who would take care of them when they retire or if they get sick. One seminarian explained this issue with these words:

Another problem is the issue of post-retirement health care for clergy. Many priests are worried about who will take care of them when they get old. I know some priests began to pay for private healthcare insurance every year, so they could get some money or medical support. In some dioceses, they have begun to build some retirement homes for the elderly, as a source of financial income and as a way to solve the problem of the elderly priests. (SMB 016, line 23)

Recommendations for Seminary Formation's Policies and Practices

The indications offered by other experts in the field and the findings from my empirical study suggest several theoretical and practical implications:

Implementation and Reorganization of HFP:

Seminarians and formators are aware of the importance of the HF in the seminaries, as beneficial for seminarians' mental health and vocational growth, as well as for the en-

tire Church. In recent years, formators in China have been putting in effort and enthusiasm, generously investing in HF. However, despite the good intention of formators, the study findings revealed the presence of huge problems that need to be addressed. The first recommendation for formators is to offer a deep-rooted theoretical formation of HF, supported by practical examples and concrete applications, too. Regarding the contents, both formators and candidates expressed the necessity to have more teachings regarding healthy sexuality and psychological topics, especially safeguarding of minors and Internet sex addiction. In particular, the research findings showed the majority of seminarians lacking basic knowledge of sexual education, being psychosexually immature, and holding a negative perspective of celibacy. The introduction or the renewal of specific courses on healthy sexuality and celibate life must be accompanied by the personal accompaniment of seminarians.

Formation of Formators:

From the study there emerged the impelling necessity of recruiting more formators in the seminary and training them to be more mature and professionally prepared. In China, there are still no specialized schools forming Catholic formators, where they can learn theoretical and practical tools to be prepared to accompany formandees. In the future, the possibility of having such precious resources should be explored. Furthermore, in some seminaries in other parts of the world, there are already “specialized formators,” distinct from the others (rector, spiritual director, teachers), to be responsible for the organization and planning of HFP in the seminary.

Reform of Seminary Structure and Formation

As a consequence of the above-mentioned problems, a renewal of the seminary structure and the formation programs is necessary and urgent. However, finding a concrete solution is not an easy task. For instance, it is necessary to form seminarians in a distinct environment, at least for a short period, but the rigid structures of the seminaries, the excessive number of seminarians, and the strict separation from the external world could not favor the growth of candidates’ responsibility and human maturity. Perhaps, having smaller seminaries (family-style communities) could facilitate a more personalized formation. Furthermore, inviting nuns and lay people to the seminary, having some work experiences outside the seminary, offering longer periods of pastoral ministry (under the supervision of vocationally and humanly mature parish priests), and/or living for some months in a Catholic family in the parish, could be beneficial for the seminarian’s personal growth and vocational discernment.

Psychological Screening and Professional Help

Formators should be assisted, when needed, by other external professionals (i.e., psychologists, psychiatrists). First of all, formators and seminarians should verify their own attitude

toward psychology (i.e., the presence of taboos) and, when necessary, some seminarians should be referred to external professionals to address specific psychological problems (i.e. traumas, addictions, emotional imbalance). However, it is important to work on prevention, requiring, for instance, a compulsory psychological screening prior to the admission to the seminary for all the candidates. The majority of the dioceses around the world already followed this precious indication from the Holy See (i.e., Congregation for Catholic Education 2008; National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1993; NCEA 2010).

Conclusion

Despite the numerous limitations (possible cultural bias; the limited time, resources, and sample size available; the Covid-19 pandemic; the particular situation of the Catholic Church in China), this preliminary investigation of the Human Formation Programs in the seminaries in China confirmed the presence of several inadequacies and, consequently, the urgency of prioritizing and investing more resources on the human growth of seminarians. Above and beyond personal problems of the candidates (psychological difficulties; weak vocational motivation; psychosexual immaturity), many difficulties are also due to the quality of formators (i.e., lack of preparation; personal problems) and to structural problems (i.e., overcrowded seminaries, with few formators; formation focused on rules and academic preparation; specific social and cultural factors; absence of psychological screening of the candidates). The noble efforts and sacrifices of the formators should be supported by offering them an adequate preparation in the field of Human Formation and the possibility of radical changes in the seminary structure and formation.

Enhancing the quality of the Human Formation in the seminary could improve the caliber of seminarians and priests, as an attempt to prevent the emerging of serious psychological and moral problems, “for our good and the good of all His Holy Church.”³

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