

Challenges and Opportunities of Formation Programmes for Chinese Students – The Example of Ireland

Norman Jennings

Introduction

My name is Norman Jennings and I am a priest member of St Columban's Missionary Society. I was ordained in 1966 having studied philosophy and theology in a pre-Vatican 2 seminary. After Ordination I was sent on mission to South Korea where I spent the next 12 years. After studying Pastoral theology and Counselling in the US and becoming a supervisor in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) I was assigned to the Columban Formation in Maynooth, Ireland, in 1983. I was a member of the formation team for 10 years and Rector for the last 6 years. Since 2000 I have been a member of the Columban out-reach to the Church in China and Co-ordinator of the China Formation Programme where suitable personnel from China are sponsored by the Columban Fathers to study in Ireland and having received their degrees return to China to teach in a seminary or Formation programme.

Student Formation in Ireland in 1983

With the decrease in numbers joining seminaries in Ireland a “rationalization process” had taken place after Vatican 2. Academic training was offered in one or two Colleges/seminaries, e.g. Maynooth and Kimmage, and other areas of Formation – spiritual, pastoral, psychological – were done by each Congregation separately in their Formation House. This meant that Societies like the Columban Fathers had to move from their “own” seminary in Dalgan Park, Navan, to the seminary in Maynooth in order for students to receive their academic training. This was a huge paradigm shift for us. The Formation staff were trained to deal with the spiritual, pastoral, psychological aspects of formation, so apart from the academic, the needs of each student were addressed in the Formation House where both the staff and students lived.

Fr. Norman Jennings, St. Columban's Missionary Society, Ireland. This text is his contribution to the 9th European Catholic China Colloquium “Challenges of Evangelisation – China and Europe,” Konstancin/Warsaw, September 10–13, 2015.

I was responsible for the Pastoral Training and Supervision of the students. Students did pastoral ministry every week and reflected on their experience in a small group of no more than 6/7 students. Each student spoke out of his own personal experience and what he considered to be the needs of the patients he had visited. He wrote this up in a verbatim outline so his experience was available in writing to the other members of the group.

Two Important Changes from the Pre-Vatican 2 Model

The first change was that the Academic Training was separated from the other areas of Formation, so whether the student had reached the required academic standard to progress to the next stage of his training was decided by the College he attended and not by his Formation team.

Secondly, the group process modality was now integral to the pastoral, spiritual and psychological training and development of each student. Students were expected to participate in the group, not only by sharing their knowledge and thoughts about the subject under discussion but also what feelings or emotions came up for them as they reflected on how best to use this learning in the pastoral situation. A holistic approach to learning was fostered and the focus of the formation was on integration. On the whole I found that the young seminarians were much more in touch with their feelings and much more open to sharing them than my generation was. At times they did not find it easy to share out of their experience but nevertheless they were open to the process.

Contact with China

In the mid-80ies Columbans were again able to enter China and meet with Bishops, Priests and Sisters. After some time Columbans began to receive requests from Bishops and Religious Superiors to help with the on-going formation of Chinese Priests, Sisters and lay people. In the mid-90ies we began to sponsor Priests, Religious Sisters and lay people recommended by their Bishop or Religious Superior to come to study in Ireland with the understanding that, having completed their studies, they would return to China and be at the service of their local diocese or Catholic community.

Two Important Points: The Priests and Sisters who came to Ireland to study had completed their seminary/religious formation and were ordained or finally Professed. They were not students.

Their formation had taken place in seminaries/religious houses that were based on the pre-Vatican 2 model with its emphasis on academic learning. They had received little or no training in the process model of formation/education which was in place in formation programmes and educational establishments in Ireland at this time.

Challenges for Chinese Students

Coming from a pre-Vatican 2 model of seminary training into a process orientated model where the emphasis was on sharing what the particular learning (theology, scripture, etc.) meant to them and how it affected them personally was very difficult for most. One major difficulty was language. Sharing one's thoughts and feelings needed a higher standard of English than was required for academic study. We found that, having arrived in Ireland, most students needed an intensive English language course before undertaking their study.

Secondly, sharing their thoughts and feelings in a public way was foreign to them. We realised that most students only did this type of sharing in the sacrament of penance when in the seminary or formation houses. They found it difficult in the beginning to distinguish between sharing their feelings and emotions in the reflective process and sharing their moral faults and failures. They thought wrongly that we were asking them to share their moral faults and failures which of course we were not requesting. Moral faults and failures (sins) were confessional matter for sharing only in confession and not in a process group. They struggled with this distinction. Nevertheless we continued to emphasise that the ability to share one's feelings be they positive or negative in a process group is a good way of integrating the rational with the emotional parts of oneself into the mature whole.

Opportunities for Chinese Students

As well as the academic courses in Theology and Scripture available in Dublin, the Jesuits in Manresa offer courses in Spiritual Direction which introduce students to the basic principles of Spiritual Direction. Fr. Michael O'Sullivan also gives an excellent one year MA course in Spirituality.

There are also two Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) centres in Dublin, at the Mater hospital and at St Vincent's hospital. The Association of Clinical Pastoral Education, Ireland, is concerned with a holistic approach to health, well-being and personal development with a special focus on spiritual and religious care. Courses are offered up to and including Supervisory level in Clinical Pastoral Education.

Chinese students coming to Ireland will experience an Irish Church that is coming to terms with a serious decline in its influence and is facing a big challenge to its significance and relevance among the young and the middle-aged. Formerly this was not the case. But the students will also find a lot of people in Ireland coming from a strong faith background trying to make sense of their faith today and how best to pass it on to the next generation. In this situation they may be surprised to find the topics of faith, religion and spirituality featuring very regularly in the papers and discussed on radio and TV. When living in Ireland they will become part of this struggle.