



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Reflections from the Park

#2

February 27, 2024

Baltimore: Roland Park Neighborhood

Formation 1: Discernment

I spent a couple of days in Milan during my trip to Italy in December, just before returning to Baltimore. I went to Milan for three reasons: to visit a good friend; to visit the Basilica of St. Ambrose; and to visit the Cathedral (Duomo) to spend some time praying at the tomb of St. Charles Borromeo, the Patron Saint of Seminarians. I'll write about St. Ambrose, for whom I have a special devotion, in a future reflection, but today I'd like to reflect on what seminary formation is really about, inspired by my visit to the tomb of St. Charles Borromeo.

Charles was born in 1538 to an ancient and noble Lombard family. His mother Margaret was from the Medici family of Florence. Her brother was elected Pope in 1559 and he called Charles to Rome to work in the Curia. Made a cardinal in 1560, he organized the final session of the Council of Trent in 1562-63, then returned to Milan as Archbishop in 1565. He diligently implemented the decrees of the Council, especially those which called for the establishment of seminaries for the training of priests and was eventually declared the Patron Saint of Seminarians and seminaries. Our small chapel at St. Mary's is named after St. Charles Borromeo for that reason.

Milan had not had an archbishop for 80 years and clergy and laity had drifted from the teachings of the Church. St. Charles labored to reform Italy's largest archdiocese. The selling of indulgences and Church offices, a major cause of the Protestant Reformation, was prevalent; monasteries were "full of disorder" and many religious were "lazy, ignorant, and debauched" (Susan Swetnam in *My Best Teachers Were Saints*).



The tomb of St. Charles Borromeo, patron saint of seminarians, at the Cathedral of Milan.

St. Charles believed the failings that led to the Protestant Reformation were due to ignorant clergy. He emphasized sound education in Catholic doctrine, beliefs, and practices in his seminaries, which greatly improved men's readiness for the priesthood. He founded a lay fraternity, the Oblates of St. Ambrose, a "Third Order" and early opening for lay people to serve the mission of the Church.

He was a leading figure in the Church's response to the Protestant

Reformation, along with St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Philip Neri, which included the founding of seminaries. He is directly linked therefore to the mission of Jean-Jacques Olier who founded the Society of St. Sulpice.

The idea of "formation" has deep roots in Sacred Scripture. In Genesis 2:7 we read "... the LORD God *formed* the man out of the dust of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being." The essential insight regarding formation for the priesthood is that it is God's work, not our own. God works through seminary "formators", but it is God's work not our own. It is God who "forms" priests. "Formators" must be open to God acting in them, just as any priest is a conduit of God's grace, not some work of his own: God's will accomplished through the promptings of the Holy Spirit. One of the first principles of Fr. Olier was, "Abandon yourself to the Holy Spirit" (*se laisser à l'Esprit Saint*)! That is what we encourage seminarians to do here at St. Mary's: Abandon yourself to the Holy Spirit; allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit; listen for the voice of the Holy Spirit; allow your thoughts, feelings and actions to be prompted by the Holy Spirit, not your own will, and God will lead you where He wishes you to be; God will *form* you into the person He wants you to be. When your desires become what God desires for you, when you acquire the dispositions of Christ and see the world as Christ saw the world, you will find what you are looking for; you will find your happiness; you will be the vessel of grace you long to be and God wants you to be. You will flourish humanly and spiritually, and you will be configured to Christ, which will make you an effective and beloved minister of the Gospel and you will find your happiness and fulfillment.

Seminary formation is a great adventure, a great quest to discover oneself and be “formed” according to God’s plan. As said in Jeremiah 1:4-5: “The word of the LORD came to me: Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I dedicated you, a prophet to the nations I appointed you.” God knew us even before we were formed in our mothers’ wombs! We are created by God to be who God created us to be. This understanding is distinctly counter-cultural today, but it is the authentic Christian view of who and what we are, a foundational insight that underlies seminary formation. It is the work of seminary formators to help each seminarian clear away the underbrush (distractions and obstacles to discovering his true identity and calling). Formation for the priesthood is all about coming to understand what I was called to be even before I was formed in my mother’s womb; understanding this as the pathway to fulfillment, flourishing, and happiness for those who are called, and a lifetime of profound service to God, the Church, and the people of God.

God does not call priests alone as individuals. He calls communities of people with a particular identity whom priests are called to serve; whom priests call together, form, and minister to as individuals and as a whole. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us:

62 ... God formed Israel as his people by freeing them from slavery in Egypt. He established with them the covenant of Mount Sinai and, through Moses, gave them his law so that they would recognize him and serve him as the one living and true God, the provident Father and just judge, and so that they would look for the promised Saviour.

63 Israel is the priestly people of God, “called by the name of the LORD,” and “the first to hear the word of God,” the people of “elder brethren” in the faith of Abraham.

64 Through the prophets, God forms his people in the hope of salvation, in the expectation of a new and everlasting Covenant intended for all, to be written on their hearts.

We as Christians are the people of God of the New Covenant, the new priestly people of God which the Church tells us “subsists” in the Catholic Church. The divisions among Christians are unfortunate, and something of a mystery, but it is no mystery that the pastoral ministry of Catholic priests occurs mainly in the parishes of the Catholic Church. The essential thing to remember is that the call to priesthood comes from God, and that formation for this ministry is the work of God. It involves first and foremost discernment: listening for the voice of God and the promptings of the Holy Spirit and responding to that call and God’s plan for our lives and for His Church. This succeeds to the extent that we abandon ourselves to the Holy Spirit, allowing God to act in us and through us. Seminary

formation is about disposing seminarians toward an openness to that call, and a willingness to follow wherever it may lead. These principles, inspired by the writings and spirit of Jean-Jacques Olier and St. Charles Borromeo, continue to guide our work of seminary formation at St. Mary's.

We, too, live in a time of reform following a great Church Council. We live in times when many have drifted from the teachings of the Church, and many have been scandalized by disordered and even debauched behavior on the part of ministers of the Church, including priests and religious. But perhaps we are on the cusp of a great renewal of the faith and the Church's ministry, just as Olier and St. Charles were. May we live in that hope. St.

Charles Borromeo, patron saint of seminarians, and Jean-Jacques Olier founder of the Society of St. Sulpice, pray for us that this will be the case. Through your intercession may we be filled with energy so our efforts will flower in a new generation of faithful and holy priests whose abandonment to the Holy Spirit will lead to a great flowering of Christian faith and the Catholic Church in the years ahead.

In the next *Reflections from the Park*, I will write about the human dimension of formation, the foundation for all the other dimensions of priestly formation, and how our outlook on human formation continues to be influenced by Olier, St. Charles Borromeo and St. Ambrose.



Fr. Brown prays at the tomb of St. Charles Borromeo, patron saint of seminarians, during his visit to the Duomo (Cathedral) of Milan.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Phillip J. Brown, P.S.S." with a stylized flourish at the end.

Fr. Phillip J. Brown, P.S.S.
President-Rector