Spiritual Ideals in Seminary Formation: Completing the Vision of the Second Vatican Council

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In our preaching courses at Saint Meinrad, one of the things we continually stress is the relative, and perhaps surprising, newness of the ideal of preaching in the life of the Church as we understand it today. I emphasize the idea of contemporary understanding because, of course, we have always had preaching in the Church, even before the time of the Church's formal parameters. Today, however, we have a new understanding of preaching drawn from the Church's own teaching in the Second Vatican Council and augmented by the expansion of this ideal in the life of the Church in the important document on preaching, *Fulfilled in Your Hearing,* and others like it that followed. I mention this "newness" of preaching as prelude to the comments I would like to offer on spiritual formation. Spiritual direction and spiritual formation are not new in the life of the Church. Of course they are not. They are as old as Christ's discussions with his disciples about the meaning of parables (see Matthew 13). As old as the Sermon on the Mount, as old as his various discourses in any of the Gospels. In our time, I believe we can trace the trajectory of a new understanding of spiritual formation that continues to evolve.

In my presentation, I would like to proceed as follows: First, I wish to examine, albeit briefly, the development of the ideal of spiritual formation historically and in the Church's documents. I think there can be little doubt about the dramatic changes in the Church's approaches that have emerged since the Second Vatican Council. Second, I would like to look at the ideals of spiritual formation in the most recent iteration of the *Program of Priestly Formation* (*PPF*), focusing on its nature as comprised of elements found in both the internal and external forums, elements which do not compete with each other but which complement each other. Finally, I would like to examine what might be some "best practices" for spiritual formation not only in the seminary, but extending beyond the walls of the house of formation and into the vineyard in the lives of priests today.

Seminary Spiritual Formation Prior to Vatican II

Let me begin with what is most likely to be an apocryphal story. One of our now-deceased monks told the tale that in his seminary days in the 1940's, seminarians lived together in common dorms. Fifty to sixty were housed in a single room with only a trunk and a bedside table provided for the needs of each one. In those days, we had approximately 800-900 seminarians studying at Saint Meinrad at three levels from age 13 to age 25 or so. According to the tale-telling monk, the confessor in the seminary provided this advice for how these young men should deal with temptations to unchastity. He was told: If you feel certain urges coming on, put a glass of water on your bedside table and when you feel that the temptation is great, merely knock the glass of water to the floor. When you have to get up and clean up the mess, you will find that your temptations

are quenched. The monk went on to relate that all night long you would hear a succession of glasses being knocked to the floor: smash, smash, smash, down the rows of beds.

The story may be apocryphal but I do believe it captures something of the essence of what we dare to call spiritual formation in a pre-conciliar Church world. Spiritual formation was equivalent to the practice of confession, a very regular activity and one which, while possibly offering some level of counsel, was mostly about the remission of sins, and, I would dare to say, sins that were often of a particular *genre* given the population.

Spiritual Formation in *Optatam totius*

The dialogical conversation about the spiritual life between elements in the internal forum and elements in the external forum, which we see today as constituting the essence of contemporary spiritual formation most likely was something that only substantially emerged after Vatican II. In paragraph 11 of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* we read:

> [It] is the duty of priests, by the ministry of the word and by the example of their own lives, showing forth the spirit of service and the paschal joy to demonstrate to the faithful the excellence and necessity of the priesthood; then they should see to it that young men and adults whom they judge worthy of such ministry should be called by their bishops to ordination, sparing no effort or inconvenience in helping them to prepare for this call, always saving their internal and external freedom of action. In this effort, diligent and prudent spiritual direction is of the greatest value. (*PO* 11)

Likewise, in the document of Vatican II related to priestly formation, *Optatam totius* we have a very substantial section on spiritual formation. Here, perhaps for one of the first times, spiritual formation is connected.

> The spiritual training should be closely connected with the doctrinal and pastoral, and, with the special help of the spiritual director, should be imparted in such a way that the students might learn to live in an intimate and unceasing union with the Father through His Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. (*OT* 9)

I am not sure, but I would suspect, that prudent spiritual direction, while being of the greatest value, was little understood. Of course, we know that conversations about the spiritual life were common enough in a post-Tridentine Church. The example of St. Francis de Sales offers us that, but systematic spiritual direction was not widely practiced in seminary circles outside of confession.

Spiritual Formation in the *Program of Priestly Formation*

In our country, the greatest gift we as formators have is the succession iterations of the national norms on priestly formation known as *The Program of Priestly Formation*, now in its sixth edition. These documents are, of course, normative. It is interesting, however, that the

discussion of spiritual formation only gradually takes hold in the imagination of the documents. For example, if we look at the third edition of the *PPF,* promulgated in 1981, we find very little in a practical way on the subject of spiritual formation. That document connects spiritual formation with the "collaborative effort of the whole community" and while it does recommend the "professional" formation of directors, a reality that might have been difficult to fulfill in the early 1980's, it is largely silent on the means of attaining this goal or *what* it means. Paragraph 92 adequately sums up the document's timbre:

> The director of spiritual formation should be innovating in finding means to make direction effective and elicit recommendations from the faculty, as well as having the responsibility of arranging group discussions and advisory consultation for the faculty involved in personal and group formation. (*PPF* 3rd ed., 92)

That might be a good idea, but it still seems a bit unfocused as to the *nature* of spiritual formation.

In terms of the development of spiritual formation, the watershed event is, of course, the promulgation of *Pastores dabo vobis* in 1992. For good or ill, mostly good, the document has more or less completely informed seminary formation since its appearance. Our work has been framed in terms of the four pillars of formation, intellectual, human, pastoral and spiritual. I would say in the area of human formation, the document was a revolution. Likewise, *Pastores dabo vobis* provides a new focus which earlier iterations of various formation documents hinted at and yet did not always successfully achieve, namely, that spiritual formation in its broadest sense extends *beyond* the practice of spiritual direction, or we might say it moves spiritual formation, at least partially into the external forum.

We can see this already in the fourth edition of the *PPF*. Here the norms are laid down first in terms of the *external* forum, the importance of liturgy, of devotional prayer, of sacramental celebrations with emphasis on the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. Likewise, the document recommends that, "catechesis should be given" concerning the sacraments, what might seemingly be an odd recommendation for Catholic seminarians, but I believe we formators know it is not always prudent to expect too much, at least in the beginning. In the fourth edition of the *PPF* there follows a series of norms relating to spiritual direction, or the *internal* ideals of spiritual formation. Here we do not necessarily find much that is new. I do believe, however, that the influence of *Pastores dabo vobis* was revolutionary. We are still living in its wake.

Now almost ten years ago, many of us had the opportunity to go to a series of meetings in Rome concerning the *Ratio Fundamentalis Sacerdotalis*, promulgated in 2016. The collection of discussions and meetings, at least in my estimation, were quite productive and they foreshadowed the first serious re-vamping of seminary formation since *Pastores dabo vobis.* The sixth edition of the *PPF*, now nearly four years old, represents our national implementation of the *Ratio fundamentalis* drafted by the Congregation for the Clergy to govern priestly formation throughout the world.

We all know the outlines of the new *PPF*. We have read and at least begun some implementation of the new document in our various seminaries, but I would like to highlight a few

places related to the advancement of spiritual formation in seminaries which the new *PPF* offers. Here I will focus on the stages of formation in *major* seminaries hoping that some ideas may also apply elsewhere. As we know the document identifies four stages of seminary formation: the propaedeutic stage, the discipleship stage, the configuration stage and the vocational synthesis stage. All of these stages are identified carefully in terms of their goals and ideals. Among these goals and ideals, in general terms are the norms laid down for spiritual directors. Much of this we have already seen. I think the most important part of this section of the new PPF (paragraphs 104-112) is the advice related to the engagement between the internal and external forums. I would like to address this question a bit more in a moment, but for now the most significant idea is that directors should be pointing seminarians toward the external forum when situations arise that affect the public life of the seminarian. Moving things into the external forum is a new emphasis in formation from the standpoint of previous expressions of spiritual formation in the successive editions of the *PPF*.

The new guidelines go on to outline goals and directions for seminarians in the various stages of formation. Propaedeutic seminarians should be seriously focused on spiritual formation and human formation. Interestingly, the directions *of Optatam Totius* bring into focus the need for this focused spiritual formation:

> In order that the spiritual training rest upon a more solid basis and that the students embrace their vocation with a fully deliberate choice, it will be the prerogative of the bishops to establish a fitting period of time for a more intense introduction to the spiritual life. (*OT* 12)

I think there can be little doubt among formators that this is an important prospect, to help new seminarians to acclimate to a life of prayer and examine their vocations from a spiritual perspective and personal perspective before they begin a process of intellectual formation on what is, for many of them, uncharted ground in philosophy and theology.

> Those elements in the spiritual dimension to be achieved … include growth in prayer and the spiritual life (e.g., elementary discipline in public and private prayer, interest in and attention to spiritual direction, understanding the importance of silence and a growing habit of silence. (*PPF,* 6th ed., 235)

The discipleship stage also outlines its own set of criteria and goals related to spiritual formation in that: "the seminarian demonstrates a growing openness to the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of formation in his life." (*PPF,* 6th ed., 236). The document goes on to offer some benchmarks for this stage including participation in communal spiritual exercises, regular spiritual reading and the ability to speak about the spiritual life with ease.

In the configuration stage the document speaks of a benchmark of friendship between the seminarian and Jesus Christ. The development of practices of prayer and liturgical awareness is further emphasized. The document also speaks of a spiritual maturity that ought to permeate the seminarian so that he sees his vocation as a priest as something permanent, a caveat undoubtedly in the mind of the Congregation for the Clergy.

Finally, in the vocational synthesis stage, the transitional deacon uses the new setting for ministry to focus his spiritual and ascetical practices and ideals to fit the practice of the priesthood into the future.

What follows in the document is a long series of norms relating to spiritual formation. I was intrigued by the prominence given to the public expression of the seminarian's spiritual life and what I would consider a de-emphasis on spiritual direction, not that it is negated, but that it is merely seen as *one* component of spiritual formation and not the entirety of what is intended by the concept of spiritual formation.

Best Practices for Initial and Ongoing Spiritual Formation

I would like to offer a few insights into what may be some best practices relating to spiritual formation, before and after ordination:

1. Seminarians must be clear about the importance of both the internal and the external forums. The documents all emphasize this and from a practical point of view I see this as essential. The idea of internal and external forums may in fact proceed from the dominance of a "confessional" model of spiritual direction in the past. However, I believe that the rigorous observance of the confidentiality demanded in the internal forum, particularly as seminarians begin the process of formation, is essential. They need a confidential space, at least initially. Psychological counseling, of course, is a legally protected reality, but even with spiritual directors, outside of the privilege of confession, seminarians must have a place to be themselves and focus on the fine-tuning of their character without the external formation staff breathing down their spiritual necks. In my experience, spiritual directors respect the limits to the internal forum and refer their directees to the external forum when the situation necessitates. While spiritual directors, in my view, should sit in on formation staff meetings, they should remain largely silent, and completely silent about those for whom they offer direction. Spiritual directors should NOT participate in meetings with diocesan vocational personnel and bishops. This strict dichotomy of practice between the internal and external forums also begins to instill in seminarians the real significance of confidentiality in the priesthood. I believe that we are experiencing a greater degree of transparency by seminarians in the external forum. One can witness this even in the application process. Likewise, seminarians frequently come to me as rector with issues that might have once been seen as internal matters. They come on their own. They are willing to talk. However, this trust is something that must be earned and I hold that a breakdown in confidentiality in the internal forum will only lead to a masking of the real spiritual and human development issues going on in the life of the seminarian.

2. Dioceses need to provide more resources in order to provide greater opportunities for spiritual direction for priests themselves. Many of the dioceses with which we deal, being more rural, have fewer resources for spiritual direction for priests either because of a lack of qualified directors or great geographic distances between priests which prohibits regular visits. This is sometimes an issue, perhaps a more serious one, relating to the sacrament of reconciliation. One of the positive outcomes of COVID, at least so far as spiritual direction is concerned, has been the possibility of on-line visits with directors. I believe this can

work, but it does not negate the need for providing more qualified directors for diocesan priests. Here is the value: No priest should be without a spiritual director, and yet, one wonders how many priests are wandering in a spiritual desert without direction. Likewise, something we are experiencing is the rising interest in the laity in the practice of spiritual direction. Here I believe it is essential for seminarians to receive training as spiritual directors, beginning in the seminary. The significance of formal training cannot be gainsaid. Providing priests with qualified spiritual directors should not be gainsaid. Seminaries should have certification programs for the ministry of spiritual direction. All seminarians should be given a taste of this, while some are more extensively prepared for more formal ministry in this area.

3. Seminaries need to take seriously the external forum aspects of spiritual formation. For example, seminary liturgies ought to represent as much as possible the parish liturgies for which seminarians are being prepared. Esoteric aspects of liturgical practice which may well suit the liturgical tastes of seminarians but are sometimes ill-suited to the practices of the majority of parishes they will serve are useless. In the seminary it is necessary to model excellence in parish liturgy. Likewise, the seminarian should be exposed to meaningful devotional prayer, which can certainly form the seminarian himself, but more importantly can also shape the way in which he can incorporate these practices into his future ministry. It is also necessary not only to provide the Sacrament of Reconciliation but to encourage its proper use which should be frequent, but not abusively so.

4. Seminaries should also provide conferences, lectures and workshops on various topics relating to spiritual formation. At Saint Meinrad, we have a program called "Our Daily Bread" which offers specialized workshops in spiritual topics for students at each level of formation. I believe it is also important to provide for meaningful opportunities for theological reflection to help integrate the spiritual and pastoral pursuits of seminarians.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let me return to the topic with which I began this presentation, homiletics. Preaching, we are told, is essential to life of the faithful. Likewise, quality in preaching is a responsibility of the ordained ministry. The practice of preaching, I propose, is a meeting point for many of the values of spiritual life. Those include: the commitment to regularly study God's Word, the importance of immersion in the life of the parish, the gift of listening to the needs of parishioners, neighborhood and the larger Church, and, perhaps most importantly, the means by which these insights are gained not only through pastoral observation, but also through the spiritual development of the ordained priest. Conscientious preaching is a sign of the spiritual health of the priest. It is, in many ways, the culmination of his own efforts at growing in the interior life. Of course, there is much more to be said on the topic of spiritual formation, but I also challenge myself and my seminary community as its leader, to look for new ways to deepen the ideals of spiritual formation for the sake of fostering a healthy and satisfying ministry in the life of each priest.