

Spiritual Formation in Relation to Seminary Life

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A paper prepared for the Consultation on Spiritual Formation held for representatives of St. John's Seminary and Fuller Seminary at St. Andrew's Priory, Valyermo, California, July 1977.

PURPOSE

The purpose of a seminary program of spiritual formation is to ensure that all the elements that go to make up seminary preparation—whether academic instruction or pastoral training or student-faculty community life—that all of these elements will bear fruit in personal interior conversion of the candidates for ministry.

Conceivably it might happen that academic studies in the field of theology would issue in mere intellectual brilliance so that the student of theology while knowing all about God would fall short of knowing God. It is equally possible that pastoral training might lead to a merely professional competence so that the prospective minister though able to function smoothly in a variety of pastoral situations would fail to gain entrance to the hearts of those to whom s/he ministers. Neither can we dismiss the likelihood that participation in community life with teachers, fellow-students and friends would generate only the exterior forms of civility and piety.

In such an eventuality, though a certain religiosity might result from the general seminary program, no real deepening of religious spirit would have been achieved. Formally, requirements might have been met but no true fitness for ministry would have been assured. Clearly there is a need for some program of spiritual formation whose function would be to see to it that a lively exchange takes place between the various

elements of seminary training and the personal spiritual life of the student.

MEANS

A program such as we envisage would therefore employ a variety of means to facilitate personal spiritual growth in the face of a student's encounter with theological studies, pastoral education and community life and discipline. Only one of these means will be singled out here for special mention, namely, spiritual direction.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Inasmuch as the chief indication of spiritual development is to be found in growth in prayer and discernment, a key element in any program of formation should be the requirement that a student have a personal counselor with whom s/he could freely discuss his/her experience in establishing the practice of reflective prayer and likewise his/her successes and failures as s/he wrestles to discover him/herself in the course of his/her passage through the years at seminary. Regular consultation with his/her director would be the principal means of ensuring that the combination of prayer and discernment was leading the student to a deepening union with the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

This brief statement about the purpose and one of the means of a seminary program of spiritual formation might be brought home more forcibly if we draw the reader's attention to a commonly occurring difficulty in seminary preparation for ministry. The difficulty in question, though never absent in any age, is one to which we are peculiarly prone in a culture that is achievement-centered and success-oriented. We have in mind the temptation of the prospective minister to understand his/her vocation in terms of a useful specialty which s/he will exercise among his/her people—still another service though of an exalted

character.

Anxious as s/he is to take his/her place in the world of today, the student may nurture the ambition to become a 'power for good' in the world. Just as the physician exists to solve health problems for his/her patients and the lawyer to solve legal problems for his/her clients and city administrator to solve urban problems for the citizens so the student for ministry might easily conceive his/her vocation as that of being yet another problem-solver but at the high level of religious and moral life. Armed with counseling techniques and enriched with theological insights s/he could then take his/her place in the world of useful specialists.

Not the least function of a program of spiritual formation would be to help the student to recognize and deal with this fascination with ministry as power in a world of power. Part of the task of the student's director would be to lead him/her through prayerful reflection to a gospel perspective of his/her ministry. Through wise direction the student would be brought to see that, while there are indeed problems in life for the solution of which people might well consult a minister of religion, that is the least of his/her 'uses' to his/her flock. More truly the minister is one to whom his/her people come at those junctures of life when they have come face to face with the unsolvable, those moments when they meet with the limits of creaturely power, when they experience darkness or have intimations of mortality. At such moments, people have need to draw near to one who, while able like other men and women to swim in the waters of life and stay afloat in them, is not averse to drowning graciously in them, able to be overcome. People need one who has entered deeply into the paschal mystery of Jesus, rejoicing in life but at ease with death.

Mastering the negative is the acid test which distinguished the disciple of Christ from the purveyors of non-Christian humanisms. Clearly it is of paramount importance that the positive thrust of academic studies in theology (*Fides quaerens intellectum*), the positive drive behind pastoral training (the

organized promotion of Christian education, Christian worship and Christian service), and the positive accomplishments of life in the student-faculty community (the ability to live together in love and understanding)—that all these positive elements in seminary life operate in such a way as not to hinder the student from keeping a place in his/her heart for the sweet powerlessness by which we are to be carried into the hands of the living God.

This is the only 'power' and 'technique' which the student for ministry may rightfully expect from his/her seminary. A program of spiritual formation exists to meet his/her expectation.

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