

Spiritual Formation In Seminaries

The Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education has published a "Circular Letter Concerning Some of the More Urgent Aspects of Spiritual Formation in Seminaries." The letter was distributed in mid-February to the bishops of the world. It was dated Jan. 6. "In the soul of a young person today, spiritual hunger naturally and generally takes the form of an anxious search for a reason for living," the circular letter states. It notes: Young men entering seminaries have already begun to understand that Christ is the reason for living; they know of the quest of other young people; and they want the seminary to enable them to help others discover this meaning in life. The circular letter discusses four points: 1. Priests need to be formed so that the word of God is welcomed by them and loved in depth; 2. Priests need to be formed who recognize in the paschal mystery the supreme expression of God's word; 3. Priests need to be formed who fearlessly accept the fact that real communion with Christ entails self-denial and obedience; thus the

seminary must impart a sense of penance; and, 4. A seminary ought to be a school of filial love toward her who is the mother of Jesus. The text of the circular letter follows.

To all local ordinaries:

The document titled "*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*" and, following this, the various national "*Rationes*" produced by bishops' conferences have given to spiritual formation its deserved place, namely, the most important of all.

However, there are many signs today which indicate that it might be opportune and useful to reflect further and deeper on this matter. We presume that people today are ready to accept such further reflection and, with the help of God's grace, we expect rich fruit from it.

After pointing out encouraging signs in this field, the present circular letter aims not at producing a complete and systematic study, but at calling the attention of seminary authorities to certain selected areas where immediate

effort seems to be needed. At the conclusion, a suggestion will be proposed that could be quite important for the future of the priesthood in the Catholic Church.

I. Introduction

Providential Signs

The sign which we would like to point out first, since it has made the greatest impression on us in this sacred congregation, is the truly exceptional quality of the "plans of action for vocations," which we ventured to ask the bishops to prepare and which are arriving here at a rate that we had never dared to expect. The climate of courageous faith shown by the spiritual aspects of these plans indicates that the time might have arrived for some initiatives in the spiritual field that will not be undertaken in vain. If these plans put forward by the dioceses were concerned only or mainly with clever vocational techniques, they would not justify this present circular letter. However, the position that prayer occupies in them — always in the

forefront of every initiative and the animating force behind it — brings evidence of the presence of a grace. We are living in one of the "favorable times" when generous commitments can be demanded.

Resurgence of Vocations

Moreover, projects and hopes are not the only things involved. The widespread increase in the number of vocations throughout the world confirms the presence of a providential activity which is bearing fruit. Of course, many dioceses and even entire countries — although these are in the minority — are still behind in this trend and are a source of worry. But, it is remarkable that in those places where the upward trend is the strongest, and especially where it is most unexpectedly vigorous, one often comes across the following interpretation of the facts by the bishops: It is, first of all, to the spiritual renewal of seminaries that the increase must be attributed. This renewal has been sought and produced in different forms, but there are certain common points to which we must return if we are to gather any profit from these experiences and find our way forward.

The Urge to Pray

Another consideration cannot

be ignored. Everyone today agrees that recognition must be given to a real "urge to pray" more or less everywhere in the church and even outside of her. The number of "centers" is almost beyond counting where people come to learn about prayer, where they gather to pray and where they hope to find a "teacher of prayer."

People sometimes go to great lengths in order to find such a person and run the almost certain risk of losing their way and being disappointed. A new method needs only to be suggested somewhere and immediately students are found who arrive ready to try it out. But whatever may be the spiritual qualities involved, whatever may be the setbacks and errors, it is undeniable that there exists a general and profound inclination to pray.

In many ways this invitation to prayer is receiving a worthy answer. But do we realize sufficiently the extent of this quest or the extraordinary opportunity that is being offered to the church for the progress of the faith? We do so long as we are able to find in our priests real "teachers of prayer" with a firm knowledge of tradition, priests who experience God in a deep and fervent way, who are capable of being wise and prudent "directors of souls" following the paths of the great masters and who are also responsive to the needs of the time. This is quite a different matter from judging various prayer movements, often confused in their origins. Rather, it means helping priests to be able to reply effectively to the call God gives to his chosen ones, so that they can become "teachers of prayer."

Spiritual Resurgence in the Church

Furthermore, the general context of the life of the church must be taken into consideration here. Can one avoid the feeling that the church has just lived through an impressive series of events, the spiritual richness of which has disconcerted the usual opinion makers and left them confounded, as if they were faced with evidence of the intervention of something that goes beyond human factors? Who was not struck and even dumbfounded by the surprising dignity of the funeral of Pope Paul VI? The whole world was able to witness this through our advanced means of social communication. Who did not suspect that there was at least something other than a prominent "news story" in the astonishingly rapid and unanimous conclaves which followed and in the

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eventual arrival of the pope "from afar," whose simplicity and radiant faith immediately captured the hearts of the faithful? One can suppose that the presence of such a leader — emerging from the storms of the post-conciliar period — is an exceptional opportunity for encouraging priests to arm themselves with that same faith, a faith that springs from sources of prayer.

The Young Generation

We must note here the extent to which the younger generation has in its own way responded to the situation which we have been describing. Young people are waiting for Christ. They are awaiting someone to point him out to them and to make them love him. They are ready to welcome priests who are able to do this. Many of them would give themselves enthusiastically for this very mission. Therefore, our seminaries must be prepared to meet their expectations. The future of the church at the present moment depends most of all on the spiritual formation of future priests.

In the soul of a young person today spiritual hunger naturally and generally takes the form of an anxious search for a reason for living, which the world about him does not provide. It leaves him to face life while being

deprived of what would give sense or purpose to life. We ourselves know, through faith, that this reason for living is none other than Christ. The young man who aspires to the priesthood usually has already begun to understand this. He also knows that other young people already have some intuition about Christ and that, more or less distinctly, they have already begun to call on his name. He would like to make him known to them in fullness of truth. He expects the seminary to make him capable of rendering this service to them.

Christ the Ideal of the Seminarian

No other group than the young is more aware of the spiritual vacuum that needs to be filled. However, because of this there is no other group in which solutions born of despair are more to be feared: the attraction of false ideologies, the mindless promise of destructive experiences such as drug taking, the rejection of all constraint whether moral, familial or social and, in extreme cases, the renunciation of life itself.

One who brings to this generation the person of Jesus Christ, who is the only true response, will himself have to be solidly prepared for his task and to have found in Christ not only light but strength, the true reason for living, the authentic model

for humanity to follow, the savior to whom we must submit and with whom we must "cooperate" to use a well-known phrase of St. Teresa of Avila.

It is from this starting point that the essential task of a seminary must begin, the task that belongs to all who are responsible for forming future priests.

It is toward Christ in fact that grace has attracted the gaze of the young men who aspire to his priesthood. They have already given him their hearts in an outburst of generosity which is still ignorant of the demands of formation, but which already instinctively consents to all the sacrifices involved. The future priest knows that he will have to give everything and, in the depths of his soul, he already has done so.

Jesus Christ: Life in a seminary must be designed solely to allow this initial grace to come to full maturity, according to the measure in which it is given to each. The heart of the future priest will have to free itself from everything which, by nature or habit, could constitute an obstacle to the development in him of the love of Christ.

All the resources of his being must be employed so that they become instruments to the accomplishment of this one end. It must be Christ who is known, sought, loved ever more fully

through study, through personal sacrifice, victory over self and in the slow conquest of the virtues of justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence. It must be Christ who is contemplated with enough fervent and patient persistence so that little by little, according to the admirable idea of St. Paul (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18), the very face of Christ is imprinted on that of believers. It must be Christ who is ceaselessly offered to the Father for the salvation of the world in the mystery of which the future priest will be fully the minister. It is Christ whom a future priest cannot fail to proclaim and whose kingdom, by the power of the Holy Spirit and to the glory of the Father, must be the permanent concern and the only reason for a seminarian's existence.

II. Guidelines

Four Directives

We believe it is our duty to point out four of the most urgent guidelines which the work of spiritual formation for future priests ought to follow:

1. Priests need to be formed in such a way that the word of God is welcomed by them and loved in depth. This word is none other than Christ himself. For this end we must begin with the cultivation of a sense of

genuine interior silence. To acquire such a sense is difficult. As St. Ignatius of Loyola says, "to find Christ" is not possible without long and well-directed, patient effort. It is the way of prayer which is esteemed, loved, desired here despite all the distractions and all the obstacles. The future priest, through his own real experience, must be able to be a "teacher of prayer" for all those who will come to him or whom he will seek out, and for all whom so many false prophets today easily lead astray.

2. Priests need to be formed today who recognize in the paschal mystery, of which they will be the ministers, the supreme expression of God's word. To this end they must be taught the way to communion in the mystery of Christ who died and rose from the dead. It is there that Christ is truly the "savior." If the image we have of Christ is not that of the "crucified one," we have an image of someone else. St. Paul recalled this with singular vigor (cf. 1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2). Now it is the priest who in the eucharistic mystery makes present the sacrifice of Christ and gathers the Christian people around him to participate in it. One can say without hesitation or exaggeration, therefore, that the life of a seminary can be judged by the understanding it is able to impart to future priests about this

mystery and about the inalienable responsibility which priests have to make the faithful communicate worthily in it.

3. Priests need to be formed who are fearless in accepting the fact that real communion with Christ entails self-denial and, in particular, an understanding that following Christ entails genuine obedience. Thus the seminary will have to impart a sense of penance.

This means, of course, the sacrament of penance, but also and above all it means teaching seminarians that penance which is indispensable for anyone who wants to live in Christ, not participating falsely in his mystery, not refusing a share in his passion, but carrying one's cross in his footsteps, acquiring those virtues which support a Christian soul and enable it to prevail, that is to say, "stand firm" against the enemy in the combat, which St. Paul compares to the contests in a stadium (1 Cor. 9:24). A seminary which allows a future priest to leave unaware of the struggles which await him and of self-denial, without which his fidelity is impossible, just as for the ordinary faithful, would have gravely failed in its mission.

4. Finally, a seminary ought to be a school of filial love toward her

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who is the "mother of Jesus" and whom Christ on the cross gave us as our mother. This must not be merely a pietistic and sentimental note attached to spiritual formation in seminaries. Rather the taste for prayer to the Blessed Virgin, confidence in her intercession and sound habits in this area are to be an integral part of the formation program of a seminary.

Now we shall discuss each of these points more thoroughly.

1. Christ the Word of God

Interior silence

A candidate for the priesthood must become capable of listening to and understanding the word, the *verbum Dei*.

It is not necessary to insist here on the manifest quest for interior silence, both among Christians and non-Christians alike. One could cite the groups being formed, the centers being created, the often frantic search for those who are deemed able to unlock a "secret" in regard to this matter, the interest shown in various formulas which more or less take their inspiration from certain areas of Asia, etc.

Let us leave aside all detailed description of these searches for silence and all attempts at judgment.

Let us here simply recognize the quest and go on to draw conclusions in regard to our future priests. They must receive an experience of interior silence. They must acquire a genuine sense of it. They must become capable of communicating it to others.

First of all, it is important that priests should have a precise idea about this silence. They must know in what it consists. Surely nobody will confuse it with a simple external silence, from which, however, it is in a certain way inseparable, which we shall mention later. There are other, more serious, ambiguities in this field, and many people become exposed to them when they get involved in Oriental mysticism or other similar activities.

Christian mysticism has no other aim than to bring about a meeting with Christ, to foster an interior intimacy and a real dialogue with him. Genuine interior silence, about which someone like St. John of the Cross speaks so well, has in Christ its source and its goal. It is the fruit of living faith and of charity. It is abandonment to God and dependence upon him and is in itself "distinct from one's feelings and from the extraordinary" (St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort). It is a profound attitude of soul which seeks everything from God and is entirely turned toward him. It is not linked essentially

to any bodily position and even less does it concern a sensible manifestation of the Holy Spirit. This is what the seminarian will have to be made to discover and accept. This will be done by training him in the school of sound spiritual masters and in that of the church herself in her official prayers.

The art of prayer

To attain interior silence proper steps must be taken. Training in this field is slow and difficult because it involves liberating a man from certain internal inclinations and from the constant distractions of the world. Without pretending to make quick and superficial judgments about some methods proposed here and there, we must beware of "shortcuts" which promise too much too soon, throw us off the right track and create false quests with an illusion of almost automatic and deceptive results. What results? A certain human warmth is taken for spiritual well-being; violence is done to the body in a way that harms the soul; beguiling music is taken for prayer, etc.

The school of faith is arduous and it is this that we are speaking about here. The true instruments in this area are: contact with authentic teachers, prayer that is patiently cultivated and, above all, a perfect and deep

participation and sharing in the official prayer of the church. We must add to this the presence of a guide, the sort of director which the future priest himself will become tomorrow. Furthermore, we must not separate this aspect of the life of faith, which is truly fundamental, from the other aspects of formation, making the rule a faith which is exercised through love.

Spiritual masters

The church, thank God, has never lacked "spiritual teachers." Their recognized personal sanctity and the extraordinary fecundity of their activity are there to invite us and encourage us. They are the "saints" who have formed generations of saints. Everyone remembers their names, but how many future priests will come into real contact with them before leaving the seminary? How many will, through such contact, acquire a genuine spiritual climate for themselves, a taste for the things of God, and a desire for interior silence, which is not deceptive and which allows them to discern falsehood in these areas? Every seminary must have a policy about this and each seminary must give its students a habit and a taste for the great spiritual writers, the real "classics." Reading these classics does not exclude other spiritual reading, but reading these

writers must be a preeminent activity and must remain indispensable.

Learning how to pray

In this context, the students must be taught to pray. They must accept the fact that at first this will be arduous and sometimes disappointing. There should be no fear of issuing rules, of humbly adopting a method and of putting the method into practice. If in a given context ample prayer in common is not thought possible, then at least the times for private prayer must be firmly stipulated and the seminary must make certain that personal prayer is conscientiously carried out.

Abstract preparation should be avoided. Instead, one must turn to the Gospel and constantly recall the goal: "to search for Christ," "to wait on him alone," "not thinking a beautiful idea is necessarily a good result," "learning the limits of one's knowledge," "deepening rather than widening one's experience," etc. This then effects a development; from simply listening one passes to asking, from wordless adoration one passes to praise, etc. This is what the guide or director must continually call to the seminarian's mind so that he will not go astray and may evaluate his progress correctly.

Prayer of the church

Nothing, however, is more important and decisive than a deeper and more complete participation in the official prayer of the church. This is to say, first of all, the Mass and the Liturgy of the Word which constitutes the first part of it. (We shall return to this later.) But it also means the Liturgy of the Hours. The prayer of the church is nourished by the prayer of the psalms. The church receives from God himself these "inspired" words. They are like the "mold" into which she pours human thoughts and feelings. It is the Holy Spirit who through the psalms suggests words and forms the heart. It was thus that Jesus prayed. His passion bears witness to this. It was thus that Mary prayed, if one accepts the evidence of her "magnificat." There is no prayer more able gradually to create the inner silence that men seek, the silence which is true, the silence which comes from God, than the divine office when it is simply, intelligently and perfectly sung. Either inwardly or, better still, in community.

External silence

In all of this material silence is not useless nor a matter of indifference. When inner silence exists it calls forth external silence. It
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demands this and it fosters it. In its turn external silence serves the purposes of interior silence. In a seminary, which is preparing future teachers of prayer, there must be external silence. The seminary rule of life must provide for this as a priority. However, if the students do not understand the origin of such silence and what it is meant for, it can only be received by them as meaningless and be badly accepted. On the other hand, where internal silence has been deepened, the demand for material silence is all the stronger and more vigorous. There can be no doubt that in a seminary where external silence does not exist interior silence is also absent.

General seminary climate

It is immediately obvious that such initiation into prayer requires certain conditions and if such conditions are not provided, seminaries are failing in their duty. We have already stated that formation for prayer is inseparable from general education. It cannot remain isolated. It must be linked to a life of neighborly love and to a search for Christ through study and to service in the kingdom of God which is present and will be present in the future in the church. However, training in prayer also demands specific and particular methods.

Above all, the main task of those responsible for the running of the seminary is the formation of the students in interior silence. They must make continual and concerted efforts in this undertaking. Each has a special part to play in this, from the rector to the spiritual director, to each member of the staff. If this chain is broken, there is no real formation. If each seminary authority is not aware of his responsibility for this formation in his conscience and in fact or if he does not allow this to be the object of mutual and continuous reflection, the best methods will lose their value because the right general climate does not exist.

2. The Word of the Cross: the Redemptive Sacrifice

Sacrament and sacrifice

The prayer of the church reaches its "apex" in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In the words of the Constitution on the Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council (n. 10), it is "the summit and the source." In fact, the eucharist is nothing other than the sacrifice of the Lord which is offered and shared within the community of the baptized. The providential renewal

begun by Pope St. Pius X has born great fruit and the Second Vatican Council has given new thrust to this effort. Future priests must be able to exploit this movement in depth and at the same time maintain its proper direction. Today this requires a firm hand, a solid and sure theological sense, an absolute fidelity to the discipline of the church, and deep and well-nourished personal experience.

The eucharist is the "sacrament of the redemptive sacrifice." Theology has never ceased explaining this mystery from which the church permanently draws life. The fullness of this mystery is such that human thought can scarcely grasp it. At times there is a risk of reducing it in order to make it fit within the categories of human reason. At other times there is risk of exploiting one aspect of it to the detriment of others, which is to say there is a risk of disturbing the structure of our faith.

That is why in a seminary the doctrine about this matter must be taught with extreme care and must be constantly recalled. No single aspect should be sacrificed to another. The teaching of the Council of Trent on the reality of the sacrifice must be professed in all its force as must the teaching on the "real presence." The aspect of brotherly communion, however deeply understood, cannot overshadow the fundamental aspect of the sacrifice of Christ, outside of which the eucharistic banquet loses its meaning. The deviations which are occurring today on these points cannot be ignored and future priests must be carefully warned about them. Pastoral work which does not have its basis in doctrine cannot be considered beneficial.

Eucharistic adoration

Eucharistic faith has undergone an inevitable and gradual development through the centuries in the matter of worship outside of the liturgical sacrifice. This has opened up a certain space for eucharistic prayer, offered with grateful fervor, to Christ given for us in the host and sacramentally present, beyond the confines of the Mass, especially reserved as "viaticum" for the dying. The continuous development of the cult of eucharistic adoration is one of the most marvelous experiences of the church.

The extraordinary sanctity which has developed from it and the number of whole communities specifically consecrated to this adoration are a guarantee of the authenticity of its inspiration. Someone like Brother Charles de Foucauld, alone in the desert with the eucharist, yet shining out in the church through his "little brothers" and "little

sisters," is a most striking example of this in our own time. A priest who does not have this fervor, who does not acquire a taste for this adoration and is unable to communicate this to others is betraying the eucharist itself and is blocking the way of the faithful to an incomparable treasure.

The priesthood

The doctrine of the priesthood is grafted onto this. The encouragement given to the theological consideration of ministries in the church should not cast doubt on the doctrine of priestly ministry as this was happily and solidly defined in the church, especially in the Council of Trent. Clerics and lay people have a complementary mission in the church. The development of lay ministries does not alter the specific nature of the ministerial priesthood. Far from compromising the sense and importance of God's word, the eucharistic action consecrates it.

Two aspects are welded and bound together in the person of the priest, the two aspects by which people are given food from heaven. These are the two aspects which are stressed so strongly as radically united in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John, speaking about the preaching of Jesus at Capernaum. The priest is ordained to prepare and distribute under two sacramental forms — that of the sign of the word and that under the sign of bread — the eternal bread which is Christ.

Even in these, his own fields, in missionary areas the ministerial priest might need some assistance. However, whatever aids the church recognizes as legitimate and on occasion necessary from the laity, a priest cannot lose nor abandon his own essential responsibility. When a layman is asked to preach, the priest remains responsible for the choice of a collaborator, whose appointment cannot be taken lightly, and for the contents of what he preaches. It is exactly the same way when the priest chooses extraordinary ministers of holy communion. This is why the seminary must attach extreme importance to the means which the church has instituted for preparing future priests to become conscious of the charge laid upon them and its special significance.

The two liturgical ministries which formerly were called minor orders, namely lector and acolyte, are no less indispensable or serious today in the rather modest garb they now wear. To underrate their value, for example by conferring them both at the same time, is to go against a good of the first order and to deprive oneself of a supernatural, pedagogical resource

in a serious area. One ought to reread the moving letter of St. Cyprian (Epistle XXXVIII, in the edition of Canon Bayard, Paris, 1925, pp. 96-97) in which he called to the office of lector a young Christian who rendered himself worthy of it by risking martyrdom. St. Cyprian presents this office as a necessary and desired preparation for higher responsibility, that of the priesthood.

The discipline of the church

Understanding the eucharist leads one to understand and to respect meticulously the discipline of the church in this matter. People often speak today about "creativity." However, this can only be understood correctly within the framework of the rules formulated by the church. The rules which order prayer must be accepted with the same obedience as those which concern faith, according to the classical formula, *lex orandi est lex credendi*. These are inseparable.

The rules formulated by the church are deeply linked to the essential values which individuals might lose sight of, even inspired, as they might be, by real pastoral concerns. Thus it is possible for the faith to become disordered. Furthermore, this produces difficult problems and painful divisions.

The essential point of reference here is the ecumenical council. It has been abundantly proved that the general orientations of the council, if they are faithfully observed, do not irritate the people of God. They rebel only against novelties and excesses.

For instance, the council is far from having banned the use of the Latin language. Indeed, it did the contrary. Thus the systematic exclusion of Latin is an abuse no less to be condemned than the systematic desire of some people to use it exclusively. Its sudden and total disappearance will not be without serious pastoral consequences. Only in a gradual way can the "word of God" take on, for the general good, the apparel of everyday language. Otherwise it will be confused with the "words of men" in the consciences of the faithful (cf. 1 Tm. 2:13). This is why the seminary must ensure that future priests understand the seriousness of what is at stake and help them not only to practice but also to love obedience. There is quite enough room for new initiatives in the liturgy within the framework of the official directives.

Christ the bread of life; word and eucharist

The disciples on the road to Emmaus felt their hearts burn within them (cf. Lk. 24:32) while scripture

was being explained to them by the mysterious traveler. But they recognized him only in "the breaking of the bread." At each Mass the church retraces the same road. Through his Holy Spirit Christ comments on the scriptures for his people so that they may be ready to take part in the banquet prepared by his hands. The deep unity of the mystery of the divine word, now offered so liberally in the liturgy with the eucharist itself is something that must be evermore deeply experienced by future priests.

There are in fact not two separate "tables" since the one leads to the other, just as the revelation in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to St. John goes from the bread of the word to the bread of the eucharist. The whole of this Gospel is slanted toward the "hour" of Christ which he spends so much time explaining. The whole teaching of the word was designed to bring people to an understanding of the paschal mystery. In fact, it was "for this that he had come." The liturgy of the word prepares one for the sacrifice. It is in this liturgy of the word which precedes the eucharist that the word acquires its full meaning. It lives fully only through formal contact with the eucharist.

The "celebrations of the word" provided for by the ecumenical council cannot avoid making reference to the eucharist. And, it is here that the prayer life of a future priest must realize its full promise, find its full significance and locate its true value.

Clerical dress

It can be truly said that one can judge the spiritual climate of a seminary by its participation in the eucharist. Is this not the place perhaps to note that at the eucharist people see the need and the meaning of clerical dress, which has been too easily abandoned, to the harm of the very pastoral work this was supposed to foster?

Pope John Paul II has already recalled on several occasions the need for a priest to appear before men for what he is, one of them certainly, but marked by a deep sign which sets him apart and which sends him out in the name of God to God's followers and to all the world. Now how is it possible to deny the evidence? In the eyes of the faithful and in the very conscience of the priest the significance of the "sacraments of faith" is steadily degraded when a priest is habitually negligent about his clothing, or even fully secularized when he is the minister of them. These sacraments include penance, anointing the sick and, above all, the holy eucharist. Often the situation ends with the priest

not even using the prescribed liturgical vestments. If this trend is thought to be inevitable the end is disastrous and fatal. The seminary has no right to be lax when faced with such possible consequences. It must have the courage to speak, to explain, and to make demands upon its students.

3. The Word of the Cross: Spiritual Sacrifices

Alongside the eucharist, penance must be assigned an important place. This word has been used as the name of a sacrament, but when used in the context of priestly life one must obviously extend its meaning to one which involves an effort tending to unite one with Christ the redeemer and to participate personally in his passion in an effective way. The priest must become a "teacher of penance" to others in the same way he must be a "teacher of prayer."

Preparation for penance

The Second Vatican Council did not relegate the sacrament of penance to the shadows. If it seems to have become less important when compared to the practice of the recent past, one can state that this is a real abuse. "Penitential celebrations" were not designed to gradually eliminate individual confession and to substitute for it "general absolution," which some falsely claim is a return to early Christian practice. Public penance in the early church involved a small number of specific sinners who were well-known from private contact over a period of time with the bishop. The so-called "public" penance involved bringing to public notice a penitent whose penitential journey had up to that time been private. What has this ancient rite got in common with an absolution given to an indeterminate group about whom nothing is known? Even if the church allows "general absolution" in cases of necessity and under certain conditions, it is in private penance, in the way in which theology has progressively defined and explained it, that one finds a resemblance to the public penance of the past ages.

Having said this, it must now be asserted that penitential services are a very fine initiative which in a timely way bring people's consciences to a state where they feel able to go individually to a priest. Some find these devotional services provide a suitable spiritual atmosphere, which they did not have in the past, enabling them to gain a clear idea about the will of God and his specific demands and allowing them to put things right which had been long amiss.

One can see what kind of rich

training the seminary must give to future priests if they are to succeed in this area, following the instruction on liturgical formation in seminaries, issued by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education recently (n. 35). Through authentic contact with the word of God, seminarians must be trained to have a right idea about the structure of a Christian conscience, which is certainly based on charity, but which is also well aware of how charity has to be translated into action, in justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence, to use the classical expressions. At the same time they must be trained to put all this reflection and investigation in the context of the love of God from which genuine and calm contrition can spring.

Private penance

From all this, personal contact with a priest becomes a natural consequence. Nothing can take the place of that meeting with a priest when a mind that has been informed and a heart that has been stirred asks him whom God has given the power to forgive sins to utter those irreplaceable words which we hear so often in the Gospels and which touch the heart of each repentant sinner: "Your sins are forgiven."

If possible and when it is thought useful, this pardon is matched with appropriate advice. While the preparation may have been communal and has permitted each penitent to benefit from the prayers of all, the pardon is, of itself, personal and incommunicable. The seminary must impart to its students a taste for this private absolution along with one for communal celebrations of penance where these are possible. The future priest who has grasped this well will find the courage to impose on himself the hard regime that made the Cure of Ars a saint and of which someone like St. John Bosco has given a magnificent example in more recent times.

Spiritual directors

It is important to note that in the context of the sacrament of penance which is worthily and authentically received the light of the Lord passes freely and goes beyond pardon. A priest who hears confessions becomes in many cases a "spiritual director." He helps people to discern the ways of the Lord. How many vocations have never been discovered through a lack of this unique supernatural contact in the course of which a priest could have at least asked a question? One can probably attribute the striking slackening off in the number of vocations at least partially to the gradual decline in the practice of private confession. A seminary must

realize that it is preparing future "spiritual directors."

Self-denial and the rule of life

The sacrament of penance is never anything other than the intervention of God, who comes to bring to fruition an individual's work, in which the penitential service was a preliminary and fortunate stage. God comes to meet the penitent who must continue as a Christian to carry his cross in the footsteps of Christ.

The expression "self-denial" is rarely heard today. Self-denial itself is accepted very unwillingly. However, it is indispensable for everyone according to his state in life.

A priest cannot be faithful to the charge laid upon him and to all his priestly commitments, especially celibacy, if he has not been prepared to accept and impose upon himself real discipline. Seminaries do not always have the courage to say this or to demand it, especially in relationship to a "rule of life," a set of rules which are wise, modest and yet firm and which will prepare the students to impose on themselves in the future a rule of life.

The absence of precise rules to be obeyed is a source of many problems for a priest. He is left open to wasting time, to losing all idea of his mission and of the restraints it imposes on him, to a progressive vulnerability to all attacks of his feelings, etc. It should be remembered what sacrifices conjugal fidelity involves. Surely priestly fidelity can demand no less. This would be quite paradoxical. A priest simply is not permitted to see, hear, say or experience everything he feels inclined toward. A seminary must train future priests to enable them, in their inner liberty, to bear sacrifices and to accept personal discipline both intelligently and loyally.

Obedience

One cannot avoid pausing a moment to consider the problem of obedience. The word "obedience" must stop being a forbidden word. One cannot be a disciple of Christ and still deny a title which St. Paul uses for Christ as one of his claims to glory (cf. Phil. 2:8-9). Not only is personal freedom uncompromised by obedience but, when it is well understood, it is the highest expression of freedom.

Obviously then, obedience must be well understood. One certainly cannot claim to be obedient to God when he refuses to obey those to whom God has confided his mission. Indeed, the exercise of authority and obedience cannot be understood unless on both sides there is expressly involved a notion of obedience to God. In this matter both

the rector and the seminarian must have their attention fixed constantly on the will of God.

This will of God is made explicit in the "common good" of the seminary. It is the rector's job to clearly define this "common good," to help people to see it and accept it, to help them understand it and love it, to stimulate people to put their initiatives and good will at its service, to interest his students in grasping this "common good" in those points where they might find it unclear and to dialogue about it. Finally, he must judge with authority and without hesitation. It is the duty of a future priest to listen to and understand the rector whom the Lord has given the mission of governing in his name. It is also his job to cooperate, according to his capacity, in bringing about the fulfillment of the common good. This always consists in creating and maintaining an atmosphere in which the priesthood of Christ can be discerned and recommended to all, in which the grace of God can do its work in everyone, and in which no more or less is demanded than people are capable of giving.

Obedience will always be a sacrifice. It must at the same time be a joy for it is a way of loving God. In the future, a young priest will have to practice obedience in many ways. He must in the seminary be enabled to understand it in the person of Christ and to love it. In this context one can authentically experience a real brotherly, Christian community in the seminary in which all are bound together by the will to cooperate with each other for the good of the kingdom of God.

4. The Word Made Flesh in the Womb of the Virgin Mary

The Marian mystery and object of faith

A point of major importance would be omitted in the present circumstances if there was neglect in remembering briefly and firmly the place that should be occupied in seminary life by devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The word "devotion" today is rather equivocal. It might seem that what is being dealt with here is a personal and entirely optional matter. In fact it is a question quite simply of accepting the faith of the church and living out what our creed requires us to believe. The word of God became incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The words of Christ on the cross would serve to show, were it needful, that it is not some simple, ephemeral contribution made by Mary to the economy of salvation that we are concerned with here. The annunciation

is another name for the incarnation. The church gradually has become more aware of the Marian mystery. Far from adding her own conjectures to what she found in sacred scripture about Mary, she has met the Virgin at every stage of her journey toward the discovery of Christ.

Christology is also Mariology. The fervor with which our supreme pontiff, Pope John Paul II, lives the Marian mystery is nothing other than fidelity. This is the way in which love of the Blessed Virgin must be taught in a seminary. The problems which Christology faces today could find their main solution in a fidelity of this kind. In particular, devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary can and must be a guarantee against everything which would tend to eradicate the historicity of the mystery of Christ. One cannot help but wonder whether the decline in devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary does not often mask a certain hesitation to profess frankly and openly the mystery of Christ and the incarnation.

Marian attitude

Obviously, the mystery of the Virgin cannot be lived out except in an inner climate of simplicity and abandonment which has nothing to do with sweet sentimentality and superficial outpouring of feelings. Contact with the Blessed Virgin can only lead to greater contact with Christ and his cross. Nothing better introduces one, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and of the apostolic exhortation *Marialis Cultus*

of Pope Paul VI, to the joy of believing. "Blessed are you who have believed" (Lk. 1:45). A seminary must give its students, without shrinking from this task, a sense of the authentic mystery of Mary. This should be done through the means traditionally used by the church to arrive at a real interior devotion, such as the saints possessed as, in the expression of St. Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, the "secret" of salvation.

III. Conclusion

In conclusion we wish to offer a suggestion. In fact, we would like this suggestion to be followed and gradually to become part of the normal seminary practice in a solid and lasting way.

The ideal which we have in part described is not easy to attain. The generous young men who offer themselves for the priesthood come from a world in which inner recollection is almost impossible because of continuous overexcitement of the senses and of overabundance of concepts. Experience shows that a period of preparation for the seminary, given over exclusively to spiritual formation, is not only not superfluous but can bring surprising results. There is evidence from seminaries in which the number of candidates has suddenly gone up. In these the people responsible attribute this to such a brave initiative. This period of spiritual apprenticeship is welcomed by the students.

It appears that it is the diocesan authorities who are rather opposed to this spiritual propaedeutic period. This

seems to come from a lack of priests and a view that it would be foolish to institute such a practice. In reality, were it tried they would soon become convinced of its benefits. Permit us to insist, in conclusion, that this suggestion be tried.

This period of preparation would benefit from being conducted somewhere other than the seminary itself. It should be of sufficient duration. Thus something could be achieved at the beginning which might be very difficult or impossible to achieve later on when seminary training is taken up with a great deal of intellectual work. Then the students often do not have the leisure and the freedom of mind to accomplish a real spiritual apprenticeship.

If this suggestion is followed, the things indicated in this circular would have a good chance of success and one could expect they would bear rich fruit. Evidently, this will not always be possible. But other possibilities might open themselves up to generous imaginations who will try to understand and put into practice the matters mentioned in this circular letter and who are prepared to give themselves trustfully to Christ so that their labors may be helped and sustained by his grace.

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Cardinal Gabriel-Marie Garrone,
prefect
Archbishop Antonio M. Javierre Orta,
secretary □