

LAYMAN'S VIEW

TRAINING THE SEMINARIAN

BY

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The kind of training a seminarian receives will determine to a large extent the kind of priest he is going to be later on. As the term implies, the seminary is the seedbed from which the seminarian receives nutrients and care for his initial growth until, like the seed that sprouts and grows, he is ready for transplant. If the seminal potentialities are not drawn out under adequate conditions and conditionings, the plant can hardly be expected to grow into a sturdy tree that can withstand the onslaughts of the cruelties of the world and serve the purpose of bearing healthy fruits the world needs very badly.

The last Vatican Council emphasized the role of the Church in the social growth of the modern world. The priest is expected to work not only as the spiritual pastor of the flock but as a community leader who shall work within the social context of the community, perfecting that social context in the true spirit of the social nature and ends of the Church.

But the priest can hardly do this if he has not been prepared for it during his seminary formation. The strong tendency towards purely spiritual and speculative development of the individual in the seminary has proved fatal to the social requirements of the ministry. Newly ordained priests who come face to face with their parochial assignments for the first time find themselves at a loss. Existing practices within the parish, the expectations of the people and the concrete problems of the parishioners are a different picture from the theoretical cases in the books.

It is true that the newly ordained priests is equipped with the basic or fundamental principles of moral theology and the pastoral ministry. But to settle down to the practical level of real life, translating the knowledge from the books in terms of the actual and the particular in concrete forms is not an easy task. The transition is a trying experience. And in many cases, before the newly assigned priest gets over the confusion, he gets contaminated by the apathy of his elders in the parochial ministry — an escape perhaps from the more difficult alternative — and ends up as just one of them.

The burden of forming priests responsive to the social needs of the times rests, first and foremost, with the seminaries. In the same way that universities and the general school system in the Philippines are being called upon to depart from their traditional attitude of isolationism, so should our seminaries be enjoined to overhaul their systems, as the Church itself has been overhauled, in order to install a new approach both in the training and formation of seminarians and in the carrying out of the priestly ministry when these seminarians are later on ordained and assigned to their respective parishes.

In the first place, there are the customs and traditions which a priest cannot escape from in the performance of his pastoral work. These customs and traditions are so deeply ingrained in the Filipino way of life that their practice cannot simply be cast aside without a frown of suspicion or resistance even in matters of religion. The last Vatican Council, cognizant of this need, defined in no uncertain terms the acceptance and absorption into the liturgical ceremonies of lay practices according to local customs and traditions which are not superstitious in nature. The Church can no longer afford to impose its own traditional practices to the exclusion of all the rest. Growth is a matter of accretion both from within and from without, adapting the organism to its environment, absorbing what is needed and rejecting what is undesirable. In the Church, the priest is the catalyst who hastens this growth. His failure to play the role properly will spell out the failure of the Church in meeting the needs of society.

The unfortunate fact that many priests do not live up to their role expectations as agents of social growth both of the Church and of the

community in which the Church is established is traceable to inadequate training along this line in his seminary formation.

A boy usually enters the seminary at an early age, when he has not yet developed a feel of society. The neighbor he sees is the seminarian next to him and the community he knows is the seminary group with which he sleeps and prays and plays. Traditionalism prevents him from exposure to what is mundane, and he grows in a world of abstractions. His only reality is the ordered life of the seminary, saddled with restrictions and anathemas for what is taken for granted in the outside world.

The practice of allowing seminarians to live with their parents for certain periods of time, usually during vacation months, is in itself an inadequate measure. It has turned out to be more of a test of the seminarian's resistance to worldly temptation than a training for his future pastoral work in a secular environment.

There is a need for a positive and concrete program of training in parish social life in seminaries, a program of training that will expose the seminarians to the actual life and social needs and practices of the diocese to which he belongs, supplementing formal classroom instructions on actual cases. It may perhaps be suggested that lectures by laymen be introduced in seminaries to enable the seminarians to exchange ideas with the more authoritative members of the lay sector. For once, the excellence of the layman over the priest in so many areas has to be recognized. The priesthood is not a know-all, do-all institution. The priest and the seminarian for that matter has so many things to learn from the very people over whom he will exercise his authority. And it is an accepted fact that authority is best respected by the subordinate when the competence of the person in authority is recognized.

Experience has taught us that the most acceptable and effective priests are those who have a feel of the layman's pulse. Many of such priests invariably come from religious or missionary groups, whose training include an intensive study of the social background of their prospective constituents. This is one type of training seminarians need imperatively if they are to be effective pastoral workers later on.

This training includes a working knowledge of particular areas in the social life and practices within the community. Lay organizations, for example, are select groups representing these social life and practices which the seminarian must be familiar with before he assumes parochial responsibilities. These organizations are embodiments of the people's needs and aspirations which they aim to resolve or meet. Those among them which are centered on the Church, as the Holy Name Society, the Legion of Mary, the Adoracion Nocturna group, the Apostleship of Prayer, the Block Rosary, not only give the priest an insight into existing needs of the community but actually serve as instruments which the priest may utilize for the effective implementation of his pastoral programs. Without the priest's leadership initiative, these organizations will fail to realize their ends and serve no more than being burdens and even hindrances to effective pastoral work. Their life and fruitful operations depend on the priest. And only a working knowledge of the priest regarding their aims and their membership potentialities can enable him to utilize them to full advantage.

Let the seminarians take up formal and practical courses in organization and management, which, after all, is the trend among leaders in the public and private sectors. The pace of development in the Philippines is such that any leader — whether in politics or business — can hardly succeed unless he keeps abreast. The priest cannot afford to be an exception. We have seen that successful politicians and businessmen are also civic leaders — active, consistent and persevering — motivated by no more than material gains and personal advancement. May it not be expected that the priest whose interest are nobler, and of a more far-reaching objective and scope, should likewise play an active role in community civic leadership?

Athletics in particular is an effective medium of fostering community growth and moral development of the parish. The Salesian Fathers and other religious groups specializing in the formation of boys have found this out and they are now the most successful in leading the youth along the paths of righteousness even in societies characterized by juvenile delinquencies and youth unrest. The seminarian shares a common denominator of age with the young generation of his time. More than anybody else, he can be best trained to lead the youth whose temperament he feels and whose energy he shares. The present seminary

curriculum already includes athletics and this should be an ideal situation for the development of the seminarian along this line. But he needs the additional training on scientific athletics management. If it is necessary to enlist the services of lay athletic directors in seminaries, the idea is not only good but certainly fruitful.

In the rural areas, the priest can lead in introducing better farming methods and other progressive means of farm living. Those that are too poor may get started through cottage industries or similar income earning activities. Self-help cooperative systems and collective management programs are undertakings which the priest, in his position as parish leader can venture into with maximum benefit to the parishioners which in turn can attract them to center their interest in the development of their spiritual life. Seminarians intended for rural assignments must be trained along these lines, again with the assistance of technical know-how from the lay sector necessary.

As will be noticed in all the preceding proposals, the role of the laymen in the training of the seminarians is emphasized. It cannot be denied that there are talents among laymen which priests — at least for the present — do not possess. Introducing the expertise of these laymen to the seminary classroom will abbreviate the training of seminarians which otherwise would take long years of exposure to parochial life later on as priests. And with greater affectiveness, considering that then, the transition from seminary training to actual parochial work would not be as abrupt as it is now.

At present, most parish priests are not knowledgeable in the practical needs of the community life of their constituents. So they either shy away from any attempt to solve these needs, or they attempt to prescribe solutions which — being borne out abstractions characteristic of traditional seminary training — fall short of realistic standards.

It is not enough that a priest give his blessings. He should also, as he is expected to, project his community leadership. He is not only a representative of God with the people, but is also and simultaneously a representative of the people with God. He is responsible for the well-being of his flock. This well-being which is ultimately the spiritual, is perfected by perfecting the whole man in each and every member of the community.