

NOTES AND COMMENTS

MIXED PRIESTLY TRAINING

IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY AND THE MAGISTERIUM

An appraisal of certain disastrous reforms in Seminary education which boast of "inventing" today experience that have failed yesterday.

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(continued)

POSTSCRIPT

I am very grateful to a good friend of mine who did not hesitate to confide me his misgivings regarding the adverse reactions of many to my previous study concerning mixed priestly training. He told me frankly that "some are going to criticize my ideas as old fashioned, Trent-inspired, etc." I only hope the phrase "Trent-inspired" is not said in a sarcastic tone. For any orthodox Catholic, Trent has as much elaborations of self-styled proponents of a "modern theology".

Some of these "modern theologians," according to my friend, averred that "things have changed and must change. The experience of centuries — for them — has no validity against modern trends." This may be true in many cases: what was valid in the past may have no relevance to the present. However, we must be careful about a reckless "relativism" which tends to deny the changeless principles of science and, particularly, of faith. True, we have made meteoric leaps in technology. But one thing, among others, has not changed: human nature. Its physiological and psychological drives, function and aspirations; its inordinate passions — corollaries of original sin; the *basic* pedagogical norms for educating the adolescent and the youth in the formation of sterling character and, still more, in the attainment of a genuine Christian and priestly holiness. All these do not change; they remain the same — in the Middle Ages as in our own contemporary technology-

oriented society. Hence, we can and should learn something from history, if we are to avoid future blunders. "History," it is said, "is the mistress of life."

My friend further informed me that the advocates of a mixed priestly training may possibly point out that such is the system used by Protestants and Moslems whose *married* ministers turn out to be "fairly good men, dedicated to God and close to the people in *all kinds* of civic activities". Protestant ministers were usually educated in regular colleges or universities; some took theological and philosophical courses, but always living a mixed life with their people. Moslem spiritual leaders were not subjected to a closed training, segregated from the world, as that of our Seminaries. They are chosen from among the people. This system which has worked well for the ministers of other religions, why would it not work well for our Catholic priests of today? Is there anything wrong with that system of priestly training?

The objection at first sight seems to have some value; but its fallacy can be soon detected. First, let it be noted that there is a great (we should say, *immense, essential*) difference between the Catholic *Priesthood*, and the religious *ministry* of Protestants and Moslems. *Strictly* speaking, Protestant *pastors* and Moslem *imams* are *not* real priests, since these *ministers* lack the "typically priestly function of *sacrifice*".¹ Hence, to establish a comparison between Catholic *priests* and Protestant or Moslem *ministers* seems to be inadequate. But let us overlook this difference and take a closer view of the comparison presented as an objection to our Seminary type of education for the candidates to the Priesthood.

If Catholic priests were to limit their ministry to leading in communal prayers and singing, reading and explaining the Bible or the Koran, officiating at initiation rites, wedding ceremonies or funerals, and offering some guidance and counseling now and then: if they would be able to fix certain "office hours", instead of being on the beck and call 24 hours a day, rain or shine; if they were not bound to such heroic holiness as to profess *consecrated celibacy*, in order to remain, like

¹ cf. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1967, Vol. XI, pp. 766-767: *Priest and Priesthood*.

Christ — whose supreme and eternal Priesthood they share — “totally dedicated to the service of God and men”² . . . then, I would say, our Seminaries are superfluous! Many of our zealous lay apostles (especially in the case of married deacons) can lead the worshipping people as well as any Protestant or Moslem minister. Many of our good Catholic Actionists actually turn out — without any Seminary training — “fairly good men in the apostolic ministry, dedicated to God and close to the people in civic activities”, as the spiritual leaders of other religions. But obviously they cannot offer the Holy Sacrifice, forgive sins, administer the last Sacraments: they are not *priests*, “Christ’s servants, stewards entrusted with the mysteries of God”,³

The Sacramental character of the Catholic Priesthood demands a greater holiness of life, both interior and exterior, than that of the laity,⁴ and even of the religious state.⁵ It demands the “HEROISM of a unique and limitless love for Christ the Lord and for His Church”, “modeled on *the total and exclusive* dedication of Christ to His mission of salvation”,⁶ so as to attain “even in the practical field, the maximum efficiency and the best disposition of mind, psychologically and effectively, for the continuous exercise of a perfect charity. This charity will permit him to spend himself *wholly* for the welfare of all, in a fuller and more concrete way (2 Cor. 12,15). It also guarantees him obviously a greater freedom and flexibility in the pastoral ministry, in his active and loving presence in the world.”⁷ “Like Christ Himself, His minister is *wholly and solely* intent on the things of God and the Church (c.f. Lk.2. 49; I Cor. 7, 32-33), and he imitates the great High Priest who stands in the presence of God ever living to intercede in our favor . . . ; and he recognizes (through the devout recitation of the Divine Office) the necessity of continuing his diligence at prayer, which is the profoundly *priestly occupation* (Acts 6,4).”⁸

² cf. Pauli Pp. VI, Encycl. SACERDOTALIS CAELIBATUS, n. 21.

³ I Cor. 4, 1.

⁴ cf. C.I.C., can. 124.

⁵ cf. S.Th.Aq., *Summ. Theol.*, 2,2, q. 184, a.8.

⁶ cf. Pauli Pp. VI, *op. cit.*, n. 25

⁷ *Ibid.*, n. 32

⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 28

This high degree of holiness and its consequent HEROIC AND LIFELONG demands, in particular that of *consecrated celibacy* evidently cannot be attained without a *very special* and "adequate formation" that "should harmoniously coordinate grace and nature."¹⁰ "The young candidates for the priesthood should convince themselves that they *could not follow this difficult way (of life) without a special type of asceticism, more demanding than that required of all the other faithful, and which is proper to themselves.* It will be a demanding asceticism but not a suffocating one, which consists in the deliberate and assiduous practice of those virtues which make a man a priest: self-denial in the highest degree... (Mt. 16, 24; Jn. 12, 25); humility and obedience...; prudence, justice, courage and temperance...; a sense of responsibility, of fidelity and of loyalty in the acceptance of one's obligations: a balance between contemplation and action; detachment and a spirit of poverty...; chastity, the result of a persevering struggle, harmonized with all the other natural and supernatural virtues: a *serene* and *secure* contact with the world..."¹⁰

Cardinal Lavigerie, founder of the White Fathers missionaries of Africa remarked: "You must be fully convinced of this: for the apostle (as all priests ought to be) there is no medium between HOLINESS, if not acquired, at least *desired* and *striven after*, and GRADUAL PERVERSION."¹¹ And a contemporary writer, Erik von Kuehnelt Leddihn in *Commonwealth*, describes it more graphically: "A priest is a man who has risked almost everything in a Divine Game in which a *glowing* SANCTITY and a *particular dry* ROT TO THE SOUL are the frightening alternatives."¹²

Thus we are ready to understand better the absolute need of the *special* (not "abnormal") type of training given in our Seminaries. That training aim mainly to educate the youth from their early adolescence for the HEROIC LIFE OF THE CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD, and not simply for the professional career of a Protestant pastor or a Moslem

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, nn. 60-63

¹¹ *Ibid.*, n. 70

¹¹ cf. Dom J. — B. Chautard, *The Soul of the Apostolate*, New York, 1933, p. 181.

¹² cf. Leo Trese, *Tenders of the Flock*, Sheed and Ward, 1957, p. 180.

imam. Military or naval academies offer also and demand an "especial" (not "abnormal") kind of training with very rigid and strict regulations, discipline and even a certain segregation from the world, because the future officers and leaders of the army and navy need that peculiar training to succeed in the most exacting duties and far-reaching responsibilities they will assume in the future. The prospective "soldiers of Christ" (II Tim. 2.4), nay, future captains and leaders of the People of God, our candidates to the Priesthood ought to have similarly the "special" (not "abnormal") Seminary training demanded by the wisdom of centuries and proposed by the Church, *not only in Trent but also in the Vatican II.*

I have stressed the words "special" — not "abnormal" —, because the rather secluded life of our seminarians, "segregated," not "separated," from the world, has been over exaggerated. Its main purpose is to discern and foster the seeds of a priestly vocation in a suitable environment; to safeguard the unexperienced-and immature minds from the allurements of the world, at an age when they need most a kind, wise understanding and a sure spiritual guidance to overcome the crisis of adolescence and reach the solid Christian maturity of manhood, ready to make a free and deliberate choice of the priestly vocation with its consequent vow of perfect and perpetual chastity. It is true that Seminary directors in the past committed the mistake of keeping young seminarians quite far removed from suitable contacts with their family and with the world, so that their training seemed more proper for those called to a monastic life than to the diocesan priesthood. This mistake — which should not be unduly exaggerated — was a reaction to the bigger mistake of a "mixed clerical education" that preceded it and prevailed in former ages. But the mistake of an excessive seclusion from the world should not be attributed to the Seminaries as an institution, but to the shortsightedness of Seminary educators who, religious as oftentimes they were, thought well to apply to diocesan Seminaries the type of training they got in their novitiates and scholasticates.

Pius XII, however, years before the Vatican II, pointed out already this mistake, proposing in his *MENTI NOSTRAE* (23 September 1950) that seminarians should "come in *closer* contact, **GRADUALLY AND PRUDENTLY**, with the judgments and tastes of the people..." The

mistake denounced by the Pope was "too much seclusion from the world,"¹³ whereby he takes for granted that *some* seclusion from the world is inherent to the very nature of Seminary training. Hence, the Pope's wise directive in no way could be interpreted as if we should push the seminarians into the world, or bring the world into the Seminary — as many seek to do in our days. Seminarians should certainly have normal contacts with their families — especially if these are true Christian homes, which unfortunately is not always the case — and a GRADUAL and PRUDENT contact with the people of the world whom they will serve. Let us not forget the Pope's qualifying words: GRADUAL and PRUDENT. Such contacts will most aptly be obtained, generally, in the exercise of apostolic works, helping the parish priests in visiting the poor, the laborers, the sick; directing youth organizations and wholesome recreational activities: sports, scouting, etc.; teaching catechism to the children. . . . And many of these things were already practiced in Seminaries of the first half of this century, though not always in sufficient degree, as Pius XII has hinted.

But this is very different from mixing the seminarians with worldly youths in habitual social intercourse, letting them attend parties and socials (including dances!) or lose precious time in frivolous visits and worldly conversations that foster dangerous friendships and companionships. Many of these social activities may be, with due cautions, quite proper and unobjectionable for young men who do not aspire to the lofty ideals of priestly life and consecrated celibacy; but for inexperienced and immature candidates to the Priesthood such familiarity with the world may prove fatal. In the same Apostolic Exhortation MENTI NOSTRAE, Pius XII warns *all priests* about the dangers to their chastity because of "laxity in public morals, or because of the allurements of vice so easily seductive in these days, or, finally, because of that excessive liberty in relations between the sexes which at times dares to insinuate itself even into the exercise of the sacred ministry." And on this account the Pope enjoins *the priests* that in directing associations and sodalities of women, they should "avoid every familiarity, give their services in a

¹³ cf. A.A.S., 42 (1950), pp. 686-687. The Pope speaks of "*locis ab hominum societate paulo nimium sciunctis*"; and "*ut alumni SENSIM PRUDENTERQUE in intima populi consilia ac studia penetrent . . .*"

way befitting sacred ministers, and let their activity be confined within the limits of their priestly ministry."¹⁴ Will not these warnings and recommendations of a document so frequently cited by the Vatican II be more suitable for the young aspirants to the Priesthood?

There is doubt that "segregation" — not "separation" — from the world (the distinctive words are based on the Gospel — Jn.71, 11-17 — and the Vatican II, PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS, n.3) is a must in the training of future priests, as it is in the actual life of any Catholic priest worthy of that name. And yet it is common nowadays to claim and emphatically assert in the name of modern science — Psychology, Pedagogy — that such type of education is something "abnormal" for the youth. I am not expert in those sciences, although, modesty aside, I have completed the studies required for an M.A. in Education. And frankly I can say that in the long course of my studies I have not found any serious pedagogical work offering solid proofs to conclude that Seminary education (a special, boarding-school type of training) reasonably removed from worldly influences is anything "abnormal" for adolescents. Nay, I could cite a lot of psychological and pedagogical investigations of contemporary and even post-Vatican II authors¹⁵ who do not support the above contention, which on the other hand is clearly rejected by the OPTATAM TOTIUS of Vatican II. The glaring fact that thousands and thousands of exemplary, deeply mature, saintly and dedicated parish priests and Bishops were formed, trained and educated during the last four centuries in the Tridentine Seminaries — so unjustly denigrated today — is sufficient to refute the derogatory remarks hurled

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 664.

¹⁵ Cf. Roberto Zavalloni, *Psicopedagogia delle Vocazioni*, Brescia, 1967; *Studi Psico-pedagogici sulla Vocazioni*, Brescia, 1961; Andrea Maggiali, *Psicopedagogia dei candidati al sacerdozio*, Ed. Ancora, Milano, 2a.ed., 1965; Nazario Giordani, *Quaderni di Pedagogia Seminaristica: La Psicologia a servizio della Vocazione: La Cartella Personale nei Seminari*, Grottaferrata (Roma), 1964-1965; Giuseppe Cenacchi, *La Pedagogia Seminaristica nei documenti del Magistero Ecclesiastico*, Rovigo, 1964; Pier Carlo Landucci, *Formazione Seminaristica moderna*, Borla, 1961; Luigi Marinelli, *I Seminari verso nuove conquiste*, Ed. Paoline, 1965; J. Matte-Langlois, *Famille, Vocation et Seminaire*, Ed. du Cerf, 1966; Clemente Sanchez, *Seleccion y Formacion de los Aspirantes al Sacerdocio*, Madrid, 1961; etc. etc.

against such institutions of the Church. I have spent a quarter of a century in Seminary work and I can affirm, perhaps with a little more experience than many self-made modern "reformers" (or rather, destroyers) of our Seminaries, that these educational centers, in spite of their past defects, undeniable imperfections and imperative need of renewal, have done an immense good to the Church.

Let us sum up these observations with a few questions and answers — as in a true dialogue — related with all that has been said already.

"Protestants seem to have fairly good men as ministers dedicated to God and their people; and these have been usually trained in regular colleges and universities, living a mixed life with their people. *Have they failed in their spiritual mission? Why shall we not train our future priests in the same way?*"

No! We do not say that Protestant pastors fail in their spiritual mission. But we maintain that our priestly life and ministry is quite different from theirs: the heroic demands of our apostolic mission are obviously much higher than those of pastors whose services are well remunerated and may well be coupled with the duties towards a family they have the right to form and support. Hence, since our priestly profession is so different from their evangelical ministry, the kind of education that may be good for them, is not and cannot be good enough for us. As simple as that! And the proof may be found in the history of past centuries, where the same type of education for the Protestant ministry was in vogue in the Catholic Church, and it failed dismally.

"Have Protestant ministers given bigger scandals, by their improper behavior, than Catholic priests?"

I think we make too big a fuss about the scandals of Catholic priests who, unfaithful to their duties, form a small but noisy minority: noisy, precisely, because they are rather the exception, as Judas among the Twelve. Why shall we overlook and bypass the silent but heroic life of thousands and thousands of Catholic pastors who, day after day, year after year, to the very end of their life, go on quietly through the hidden path of their priestly duties, unknown to the world, but "beloved by God and men," highly esteemed and venerated by the flock they serve so disinterestedly? And if it is true that Protestant ministers do not give big

scandals, why not ask and find out whether they offer as many and as high examples of heroic dedication as our Catholic missionaries in remote and lonely regions (as many of our rural parishes are), destitute of all material comforts, and as St. Paul "perfectly willing to spend all what they have, and to be expended, in the interest of the souls" (2 Cor. 12, 15) entrusted to their care?

"Minor Seminaries, at least, have no reason to continue. Children should be with their parents: the home is their normal environment. They are too young to decide what to do with their lives. There is not enough freedom in the Seminary where they are indoctrinated. Later on they wake up to the problems of life; but it is too late. Hence, they become dissatisfied. And if ever they are ordained, they make frustrated priests."

Let us examine these alleged reasons against Minor Seminaries. "Children should be with their parents." True, at least, as a general rule, since admittedly everybody knows many exceptions to that ideal rule. But, strictly speaking, we do not send "children" to the Seminary. We send "boys" who — according to Trent's injunction — must be, "at least, twelve years old," that is, those who are either beginning their adolescent age already. For adolescents' education we cannot say that only the family is necessarily the normal environment. Admittedly, the ideal education of the young at any age should be found, whenever possible, in the home. . . . This is not any "modern" discovery. Tacitus in days of old acknowledged this pedagogical principle when he said: "*In gremio matris educari.*" But there are many cases, especially for the secondary education of adolescents, when circumstances demand that a good boarding school should provide "in a normal environment" the education they cannot get staying at home. No one ignores the advantages and the dangers that any boarding school (even a good one) may present to the youth. But the risks may well be prevented, at least in great part; and, on the other hand many of the advantages can not be obtained in the limited circle of ordinary families, especially if they are not true Christian homes, as is, unfortunately, the case more than often in our times.¹⁶ All this is particularly true with reference to Seminaries: they

¹⁶ Cf. Dr. Tihamer Toth, *Formacion religiosa de jóvenes*, Madrid, 1955, pp. 451-456.

are an especial type of Boarding Schools which provide, in an especial but normal environment, educational opportunities for those adolescents who want to follow, or may presumably have the call to pursue such an especial vocation as that of the Catholic Priesthood.

"But they are too young to decide what to do with their lives." Good heavens! Who says a minor seminarian should decide already what to do with his life! What we do is to *prepare* him at an early age for that decisive step which he will take in a distant future; otherwise it may be too late. "There is a proverb: a boy will keep the course he has begun; even when he grows old, he will not leave it." (Prov. 22, 6).

"There is not enough freedom in the seminary: the boys are indoctrinated. Later on they wake up to the problems of life: but it is too late." Seminarians make their well pondered and final decision when they are at least twenty-one years old (not before that age); they have then as much freedom and maturity — if not more — as any youth who gets married at this age. With respect to "indoctrination," could we not retort the objection, and say that without the Seminary training they are easily "indoctrinated" in the world's maxims, and almost pushed into the easier and more comfortable life of the rank and file of the ordinary laity? Pope Paul VI in SUMMI DEI VERBUM (Nov. 4, 1963) said: "Precisely because the secular culture of our days stresses too much among the Christian people the esteem and pursuit of external goods, the esteem of many towards the lasting values that belong to the supernatural order diminishes. In the face of this, how our youths, even those animated with the best intentions, resolve to follow the vocation to the sacred ministry, if *in their own homes or in the schools* where they attend, all that they hear are only praises on the excellence and advantages of profane sciences?"

"Therefore — continues the Vicar of Christ —, in order that the young and the adolescent acquire and foster in themselves a just *esteem of the priestly life*, and be encouraged to embrace it with enthusiasm and generosity. IT IS NECESSARY . . . THAT THOSE ADOLESCENTS WHO SHOW CLEARLY A SINCERE INCLINATION TOWARDS THE PRIESTHOOD TOGETHER WITH A FIT-

NESS FOR SUCH CALLING, ENTER AS SOON AS POSSIBLE THE SEMINARY OR A RELIGIOUS INSTITUTION. *Only thus, by means of this timely measure, can be safeguarded in these youths, far from the seductive fascination of the world, and can be cultivated in a most suitable nursery THE SEED OF A DIVINE VOCATION, whose existence the Directors of the Seminary or Religious Institute shall have to discern with utmost care, and if found authentic they should help in making it grow into maturity.* "And all this great and difficult educational work — concludes the Holy Father — *must be carried out WITHIN THE SEMINARY.*"

That is why Vatican II in OPTATAM TOTIUS speaks so forcefully about the utmost opportunity and convenience of MINOR SEMINARIES, and the absolute need of MAJOR SEMINARIES. Those who want to eliminate these venerable institutions are obviously going against the mind of the Church, as expressed not only in Trent, but also in Vatican II.

But the new "reformers" insist: *"The youth in the Seminaries become dissatisfied. And if ever they are ordained, they make frustrated priests."* About frustrated priests we should indeed admit that their failure in many cases could be traced to a defective, superficial formation in the Seminary; but not to the Seminary itself. In this connection we deem it opportune to quote here the wise remarks of Bishop Adrian of Nashville, U.S.A.: "Who is responsible that so many priests have been derelict in our day? Not that the priests themselves are not to be blamed — they are intelligent, mature men; but evidently the faculty of the Seminary which these young men attended for eight or twelve years have a great responsibility *Lax discipline; POOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTION; TOO MANY CONTACTS WITH THE WORLD; the teaching of false or questionable doctrine or behavior — these and like causes prevented these fine young men from acquiring that solid faith and DEEP LOVE FOR PRAYER AND MEDITATION which are so essential for every good priest.* And if the corruption occurred after ordination, then the Bishop probably has not been sufficiently vigilant."¹⁷

¹⁷ Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition September 11, 1969, p. 3.

These serious words should give us all plenty of food for thought. There is indeed a crisis of priestly vocations. It is a blunder to attribute it to the Seminaries as an institution; and yet, there is no doubt that such crisis is *partly* due to grievous defects found in the training given in many — if not most — of our Seminaries. There are certainly other causes that explain the crisis; but the above mentioned is what concerns us now. And the remedy is not to eliminate the Seminaries, but to correct their defects. We do not cure a headache by beheading the patient! Our Seminaries are in dire need of “renewal” and *aggiornamento*” in all levels: scientific, pastoral, disciplinary . . . , but above all in a deep, solid SPIRITUAL FORMATION and authentic SPIRITUAL DIRECTION, without which all the rest may be of little or no use at all. The Church Magisterium in the Encyclicals of the last Popes since St. Pius X, and lately in the OPTATAM TOTIUS and PRESBYTERORUM ORDINIS of the Vatican II, has given us clear and precise norms on these matters. In my modest opinion we have not observed these norms with unreserved fidelity. Perhaps, here lies the heart of the problem, and the real key for solving the crisis of priestly vocations.
