

**SACRA CONGREGATIO
PRO INSTITUTIONE CATHOLICA**

**TO THE ORDINARIES OF THE WORLD
ON THE STUDY OF PHILOSOPHY
IN SEMINARIES**

Your Excellency,

In the present period of various kinds of change in the life of seminaries, this Sacred Congregation would like to call to Your Excellency's attention a matter which, in our opinion, is of great importance.

As is well known, among the various problems connected with the conciliar renewal of seminaries, *a particular place is held by the philosophical formation of future priests.* The Second Vatican Council, with the intention of creating a solid base for the study of theology, and of setting down the necessary premises for a fruitful encounter between the Church and the world, faith and science, and the spiritual patrimony of Christianity with modern culture, thought it opportune to insist, among other things, on a profound reform in the teaching of philosophy, offering for this purpose certain fundamental directives (See the Decree "Optatam totius", n. 15; the Pastoral "Ad Gentes", n. 16).

A vast and demanding program is supposed which, in present circumstances, while assuming a certain urgency on the one hand, is encountering not a few difficulties on the other. As a matter of fact, the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, which has been following matters in this area with special interest, has been able to note on various occasions not only praiseworthy efforts and progress, but also, unfortunately, signs of disquiet which are sometimes causing discouragement and lack of confidence.

Today, at a distance of six years from the Council, it is necessary to take stock of the situation and draw concrete and

precise conclusions for the future. In fact, the difficulties which the efforts for philosophical renewal today encounter are undeniable and as such demand a careful examination together with an attentive study of the proper remedies to overcome them.

I

CURRENT DIFFICULTIES IN PHILOSOPHICAL STUDIES

The present reform of philosophical studies in seminaries should be seen in the framework of the spiritual climate of the times, which confronts philosophy with both a favorable and a hostile attitude. While on the one hand our times, with their many social changes and ideological movements, are richly suitable for a serious re-thinking of philosophy even to the point of declaring, in some extreme cases, that it is useless or to be avoided. There can be no doubt that modern culture, shutting itself off always more and more to the problem of transcendence, is becoming adverse to authentic philosophical thought, particularly to metaphysical speculation which alone is able to reach absolute values. :-

In this regard, first of all, one must mention the modern spirit of technology which tends to reduce "homo sapiens" to "homo faber". Technology, while bringing to mankind numerous and undeniable advantages, is not always favorable toward giving man a sense of spiritual values. As is commonly seen today the mind of man seems predominantly turned toward the material world, toward the concrete, toward the domination of nature by means of scientific and technical progress, reducing knowledge to the level of positive sciences. The unilateral accent placed on action looking to the future and optimism nourished by an almost unlimited confidence in progress, while aimed at immediate and fundamental changes in the economic, social, and political fields, have a tendency to overlook the permanent character of certain moral and spiritual values and, above all, to consider as superfluous, or even harmful, authentic philosophical speculation, which rather should be thought of as the indispensable foundation for such changes. In such a climate, serious research in the highest truths is often unappreciated, and the criteria of truth are no longer the sound and indisputable principles of metaphysics, but rather the "present time" and "success". Therefore, it is easy to understand how the spirit of our times shows itself to be ever more anti-metaphysical and consequently open to every kind of relativism.

It is no wonder that in this context many no longer can find a place for a philosophy which is distinct from the positive sciences. Today, as a matter of fact, while there can be noted by almost everyone a clear diminishing of interest in the classical philosophical discipline, the importance of the natural sciences and anthropology is being rapidly increased. With these an attempt is made to give an exhaustive explanation of reality to the point of completely eliminating philosophy as something archaic and destined to be by-passed. In this way instead of the looked-for encounter which could contribute to the true benefit and progress of both science and philosophy, there is present rather an antagonism with negative consequences for both.

While many scientists are opposed to a philosophy distinct from the positive sciences, even to the point of disputing its existence, there are certain theologians who consider philosophy useless and harmful for priestly formation. These theologians maintain that the purity of the gospel message was compromised in the course of history by the introduction of Greek speculation into the sacred sciences. They think that scholastic philosophy has weighed down speculative theology with a quantity of false problems and they are of the opinion that the theological disciplines must be undertaken exclusively with historical method.

Other difficulties are born from the very field of philosophy itself. In fact, even where philosophy is not opposed, philosophical pluralism makes ever greater advances, due no doubt not only to encountering various cultures of the world and the diversity and complexity of philosophical currents, but also to the almost inexhaustible sources of human experience. This process is growing, notwithstanding the admirable efforts which various modern philosophers are making to give more coherence to their systems and more balance to their positions. The immensity and depth of the questions arising from various new philosophies and from scientific progress is such as to render extremely difficult not only a synthesis, but also an assimilation of these new notions, so necessary for teaching philosophy in a way that is living and efficacious.

It is natural that this situation should have serious repercussions on the study of philosophy in seminaries, and should be reflected both in the professors and in the students. It is commonly noticed how grave and many are the exigencies that impose themselves today on a professor of philosophy: the need to assimilate a great quantity of new ideas deriving from a variety of philosophy mentalities and from the progress of

science; problems that are often totally new; the need for a new adaptation of language, teaching method, etc. And, all this has to be addressed often in a relatively restricted period of time; with little means, and with a student body not always adequately interested or prepared.

Not a few difficulties come from the students. Although they frequently show interest in certain problems touching men and society, they are not given any encouragement by the modern cultural climate to study philosophy, being in general much more attuned to images than to reflection. And, above all, their previous training is often of a mainly technical nature and directed to practical matters. There are other circumstances of a more special nature which render the study of philosophy less attractive to students today: the perplexity which many display in front of the multiplicity of contradictory philosophical currents; the over-involved (in their opinion) search for truth, which cannot possibly be unbiased; the aversion to fixed systems, especially if recommended by authority; the deficiencies of a poorly updated teaching, presenting outmoded problems, distant from real life; a certain archaic philosophical way of speaking, little intelligible to modern man; an excessive abstraction which impedes the students' clear view of the connection between philosophy and theology and, most of all, between philosophy and activity from which they desire most seriously to prepare themselves.

From these things there can be seen in various seminaries a certain sense of discomfort, of uneasiness, and of dissatisfaction regarding philosophy and doubts about the value and practical utility of philosophical studies. From these things also we can see the phenomenon of the partial or complete abandonment of the authentic teaching of philosophy in favor of the sciences, which seem to be more real and directed to the concrete needs of life.

As can be seen, the main difficulties which place the study of philosophy in seminarians into question today seem capable of being reduced to the three following points:

1. Philosophy does not any longer have a proper object. It has been in fact absorbed and substituted for by the positive sciences, natural and humane, which are concerned with true and real problems and which are studied with the help of those methods which are recognized today as uniquely valid. This is the attitude inspired by the currents of positivism, neo-positivism, and structuralism.

2. Philosophy has lost its importance for religion and for theology: theological studies must detach themselves from philosophical speculation as from a useless word-game and must build up in full autonomy on a positive base, furnished by historical criteria and by special methods of exegesis. Theology of the future will, therefore, be the special competence of historians and philologists.

3. Contemporary philosophy has become today an esoteric science, inaccessible to the greater part of the candidates for the priesthood: the modern schools of philosophy (phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, neo-positivism, etc.) carry on their labors at such a level of technicality of vocabulary, analysis, and demonstration as to have become a highly specialized field for select students. Therefore neither the suitability nor the possibility of inserting such a difficult and complex study into the ordinary formation of candidates for the priesthood is seen.

It is understandable that these obstacles would seem to many insuperable and as such should cause in certain areas a very real sense of discouragement.

II

THE NECESSITY OF PHILOSOPHY FOR FUTURE PRIESTS

1. Although understanding all that has been mentioned above, *we are nevertheless convinced that all the tendencies to abandon philosophy or to diminish its importance can be overcome and, therefore, ought not to be a cause for discouragement. Even though the obstacles which today militate against the teaching of philosophy are many and difficult, it is hard to see how philosophy can be undervalued or simply suppressed in a process of formation toward a true and authentic humanism, and especially in view of the mission of the priesthood.* Indeed, a desire to give in to such tendencies would mean ignorance of all that is most genuine and deep in modern thought. There can be no doubt that the most fundamental problems of philosophy are found today more than ever at the center of the anxieties of contemporary men, even to the extent of having invaded the entire field of modern culture; literature (novels, essays, poetry, etc.), the theatre, the cinema, radio and television, and even song. Here are constantly evoked the

eternal themes of human thought: the meaning of life and death; the meaning of good and evil; the basis of true values; the dignity and rights of the human person; the confrontation between culture and a spiritual heritage; the scandal of suffering, injustice, oppression, and violence; the nature and the law of love; the order and disorder in nature; the problems of education, authority, and freedom; the meaning of history and progress; the mystery of the transcendent; and, finally, at the depth of all these problems, God, His existence, His personal characteristics, and His providence.

2. It is evident that none of these problems can find an adequate solution on the level of the positive sciences, natural or humane, because the specific methods of these sciences do not provide any possibility of confronting them in a satisfactory way. Such questions as these pertain to the specific sphere of philosophy, which, transcending all merely exterior and partial aspects of phenomena, addresses itself to the whole of reality, seeking to comprehend and to explain it in the light of ultimate causes.

Thus philosophy, while needing the support of the empirical sciences, is nevertheless in itself a science that is distinct from the others, autonomous, and of the highest importance for man, who is interested not only in recording, describing, and ordering various phenomena, *but above all understanding their true value and ultimate meaning*. It is clear that any other type of knowledge of reality does not bring things to this supreme level of knowledge which is the characteristic prerogative of the human spirit. As long as there is not an answer to these fundamental questions, all culture remains inferior to the speculative capacity of our intellects. If it can be said that philosophy, therefore, has an irreplaceable cultural value, it constitutes the soul of authentic culture, inasmuch as it puts the questions about the meaning of things and about the existence of man in a way that is truly adequate to the deepest human aspirations.

3. Also in many instances, an exclusive recourse to the light of revelation is not even possible. Such an attitude would be fundamentally insufficient for the following reasons:

a) A complete adherence by man to divine revelation cannot be conceived as an act of blind faith, a fideism lacking rational motivation. The act of faith presupposes of its nature "*the reason for believing*", the "*motives of credibility*", which are in great measure philosophical: the knowledge of God; the

concept of creation; providence; discernment of the true revealed religion; knowledge of man himself as a free and responsible person. It could be said that every word of the New Testament formally presupposes these fundamental philosophical ideas. Therefore, a priest needs philosophy to secure for his own personal faith the rational basis of scientific worth which will match his intellectual attainments.

b) The problem of "*fides quaerens intellectum*" has not lost any of its reality. Revealed truth always requires reflection on the part of the believer. It invites a work of analysis, of deeper study, and of synthesis, which work is called speculative theology.

Evidently here must be no repetition of the error of past centuries when theological speculation was often carried on in an exaggerated and unilateral way without sufficient regard for biblical and patristic studies. In this regard, it is necessary to restore the primacy of study to the sources of revelation as well as to the transmission of the gospel message through the centuries, a primacy that is beyond discussion and that can never be diminished in importance. It is proper to condemn any unjustified intrusion of philosophy into an area that is essentially that of revealed knowledge. But today, with a correct equilibrium established and enormous progress accomplished in the biblical sciences and in all the sectors of positive theology, it is both possible and necessary to complete and perfect this historical labor with a labor of rational reflection on the data of revelation. Thus there can be set forth richer and more certain data which in time the speculative theologian must confront with a critical understanding of the concepts and mental categories in which revelation is expressed. In this delicate work, the speculative theologian must not only use the treasures resulting from the discoveries of the natural and especially the humane sciences (psychology, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, pedagogy, etc.), but he must also have recourse in a special way to the help of a sound philosophy so that it can make its contribution to the reflection on the presuppositions and on the conclusions of the knowledge furnished by the positive disciplines. From the fact that the methods themselves of positive science (exegesis, history, etc.) start their work from various given preliminaries, which implicitly are results of a philosophical choice, a sound philosophy can notably contribute, among other things, to a critical evaluation and a clarification of such a choice (today this is especially necessary, for instance, regarding the exegetical method of Rudolf Bultmann), without, how-

ever, assuming an absolute, critical function in the face of divine revelation.

This reciprocal influence of the two sciences, deeply rooted already in their very natures, has become accentuated in recent times by new situations created in the field of theology; theology, seeking to open up new dimensions (historical, anthropological, existential, socio-political, correct practice, etc.) as well as to deepen its methods (the hermeneutic problem), is facing a new type of problem which sometimes touches the very presuppositions of theological knowledge (as, for instance, the possibility of dogmatic definitions of permanent value) and which therefore, requires a new clarification and deepening of certain concepts, as, for instance, the truth, the capacity and limits of human understanding; progress, evolution, human nature and the human person; the natural law, the imputability of moral actions, etc.

c) *Philosophy is also irreplaceable for the encounter and dialogue between believers and unbelievers. In this regard, philosophy has a very evident pastoral value. It is, therefore inadmissible that a Catholic priest, called to exercise his ministry in the midst of a pluralistic society where fundamental philosophical problems are being debated through all the means of social communication and on every cultural level, should be unable to engage in an intelligent exchange of views with non-Christians on the fundamental questions which are close to his own personal faith and which are the problems most agitating the world.*

d) Finally, it must be pointed out that all pastoral direction, pedagogical choices, juridic norms, social reforms, and many political decisions carry within themselves philosophical presuppositions and consequences which need to be clearly and critically evaluated. *There can be no doubt that authentic philosophy can notably contribute to humanizing the world and its culture, supplying a proper hierarchy of values so necessary for any fruitful action.*

III

SOME INDICATIONS FOR THE TEACHING OF PHILOSOPHY

We have tried to make clear why a solid formation in philosophy is today more necessary than ever for future priests. At the same time we have tried to answer some objections brought

against philosophy by positive scientists and by some theological circles. It now remains to answer those difficulties which come from the actual situation of philosophy itself, that is, philosophical pluralism, the highly technical level of the vocabulary, etc.

These difficulties are real but they must not be exaggerated. In every case it is a good thing to wish to obtain the highest possible level; but on the other hand, we must be realistic and avoid the fault of "perfectionism". In the difficulties of the present time, each seminary must come to realize what is possible, taking into account the concrete situation and the local resources, without attempting a completely perfect ideal.

1. The first efforts must be directed to the concrete organization of studies in accordance with the following objectives:

a) Provide for a solid professional preparation for the teachers. Given the increased demands of philosophy, it is absolutely necessary that the professors be given a serious and specific preparation, acquired in centers of study which give assurances of being proper from the doctrinal point of view and as institutions of authentic philosophical research.

b) Promote by every means the permanent updating of the professors by courses of study and meetings for the exchange of ideas and for the exchange of teaching experiences. To assist in the accomplishment of their work a contribution could be made by suitable economic remuneration and a correct distribution of the teaching load, giving to each one a chance for serious and systematic personal study.

c) To face up to the difficulties of the students, improve the methods of teaching as set forth in the Decree "Optatum totius", n. 17 and in the "Ratio Fundamentalis", chap. XV, but always preserving intact the time assigned to the study of philosophy, that is, the two years set out in n. 61c of the "Ratio Fundamentalis".

For a more secure orientation for the students it would be well to promote, within the autonomy of the single disciplines, a dialogue between the teachers of philosophy and those of theology to create a certain coherence between the two, according to the requirement for an efficacious interdisciplinary collaboration of the "Ratio Fundamentalis", n. 61b, chap. XI, note 148a.

d) Improve the library of the seminary, making sure that it has enough good publications useful for the research of both the professors and the students.

e) Promote a close collaboration between the seminary and other theological institutes, working toward an exchange of teachers.

Evidently the local authorities must judge the suitability of the adoption of these and other appropriate remedies according to concrete necessity. In every case, however, in all the desirable efforts of renewal, one must never forget the fundamental importance of Higher Schools of Philosophy (Philosophical Faculties) and of the other Centers specializing in philosophical studies.. To these pertain the delicate and grave duty either of preparing future teachers or of sustaining this formative activity by periodic courses of renewal. To them also belongs the duty to diffuse scientific data and, most important, to publish suitable text books answering the needs of our times. It must be, therefore, one of the main concerns of the competent authorities to see to the organization and the functioning of such institutions.

2. In the same measure with which there is 'established a sound organization of studies, there must also be provided a solution to the more important and delicate problems of the content of the teaching and of the program of studies. These problems must be faced bearing in mind the purpose of these studies in the framework of priestly formation.

Although the Second Vatican Council drew out with clarity certain fundamental lines for the proper renewal of philosophical teaching, today six years after the Council, we have to unfortunately admit that not all seminaries are following these lines wished by the Church. Various causes, often complex and difficult to define, have brought about a situation in which the teaching of philosophy, instead of going ahead, has lost much of its vigor, presenting uncertainty with regard to its content and with regard to its purpose. In view of this situation, it is necessary to set down the following:

Philosophical formation in seminaries may not be limited to teaching the students to "philosophize". Certainly it is important that the young seminarians learn to "philosophize", that is, to search with sincere and continuous love for the truth,

developing and improving their critical sense, recognizing the limits of human knowledge and deepening the rational presuppositions of their proper faith. But this is not enough. *It is necessary that the teaching of philosophy present the valid principles and materials which the students can attentively consider, seek to weigh, and gradually assimilate.*

Nor may the teaching of philosophy be reduced to an inquiry which limits itself to gathering and describing with the help of humane sciences the data of experience. It is necessary that it go on to a truly philosophical reflection in the light of secure metaphysical principles in a way as to come to affirmations that are of an objective and absolute value.

To this end, the *history of philosophy* is certainly useful, since it presents the main solution that the great thinkers of humanity sought to give through the centuries to the problems the world and of life. Also useful is the study of *contemporary philosophy* and the study of works selected from literature to better comprehend the problems of today. But, the teaching of philosophy may not be reduced to the presentation of what others have said. It is rather necessary to help the young student to directly face reality, to seek to confront and examine the various solutions to its problems and to form proper convictions and to arrive at a coherent vision of reality.

It is clear, furthermore, that this coherent vision of reality to which philosophical studies must bring seminarians, cannot be in contrast with Christian revelation. Certainly there is no difficulty in admitting a healthy philosophical pluralism, due to the diversity of regions, cultures, and mentalities through which different ways to the same truth can be pursued. This truth, of course, can be presented and explained in various ways. However, *it is not possible to admit a philosophical pluralism which compromises the fundamental nucleus of affirmations connected with revelation, since a contradiction is not possible between the naturally knowable truths of philosophy and the supernatural truths of faith.* With this in view, one can then affirm in general that the very nature of the Judeo-Christian revelation is absolutely incompatible with all relativism epistemological, moral or metaphysical, with all materialism, pantheism, immanentism, subjectivism, and atheism.

Furthermore the above-mentioned fundamental nucleus of truths contains in a special way:

a) that human knowledge is capable of gathering from contingent reality objective and necessary truths, and thus of arriving at a critical realism, a point of departure for ontology;

b) that it is possible to construct a realistic ontology which brings to light transcendental values and ends with the affirmation of a personal Absolute and Creator of the Universe;

c) that there is likewise possible an anthropology which safeguards the authentic spirituality of man, leading to a theocentric ethic, transcending earthly life, and at the same time open to the social dimension of man.

This fundamental nucleus of truths which excludes every historical relativism and every idealistic or materialistic immanentism, corresponds to that solid and coherent knowledge of man, of the world, and of God of which the Second Vatican Council spoke (Decree "Optatam totius", n. 15). The Council wished that the teaching of philosophy in seminaries should not leave out the riches of past thought which have been handed down ("innixi patrimonio philosophico perenniter valido", *ibid.*) but should also be open to accepting the riches which modern thought continually brings forth ("ratione habita quoque philosophicarum investigationum progredientis aetatis", *ibid.*).

In this sense the repeated recommendations of the Church about the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas remain fully justified and still valid. In this philosophy the first principles of natural truth are clearly and organically enunciated and harmonized with revelation. Within it also is enclosed that creative dynamism which, as the biographers attest, marked the teaching of Saint Thomas and which must also characterize the teaching of those who desire to follow his footsteps in a continual and renewed synthesizing of the valid conclusions received from tradition with new conquest of human thought.

All of this must be done taking into particular account the type of problem and characteristics proper to the various cultures and regions, making it possible for the students to have an adequate grasp of the major philosophical ideas of their own time and own environment so that their studying of philosophy will be a real preparation for the life and ministry which awaits them, and so that they will be in position to dialogue

with the men of their own time (Decree "Optatam totius", *ibid*.) not only the believers, but also with those who have no faith.

Your Excellency, in calling to your attention the problems in the philosophical formation of future priests, we wish to offer you something to consider and above all some help toward a suitable renewal in this area which the present circumstances show to be so important. Fully conscious of the limits of this letter-restricted only to essentials-given its purpose-we hope nevertheless that it, together with the clear texts of the Second Vatican Council and of the "Ratio Fundamentals Institutionis Sacerdotalis", can furnish at least some useful indications and guide-lines to teachers in their work.

Assuring you and all who are dedicating themselves to the formation of your seminarians of our greetings and cordial good wishes, we remain with every sentiment of high esteem.

Fraternally yours in Jesus Christ,

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Rome, January 20, 1972