

MIXED PRIESTLY TRAINING

IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY AND MAGISTERIUM

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

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Seminaries in the post-tridentine era
(XVI - XX Centuries)

"The Church of Rome brought about in the Council of Trent the true renewal of life and ecclesiastical discipline which the Protestants had tried but in vain. The main target of this renewal was to be *the clergy*. EXPERIENCE HAD SHOWN THAT THE EDUCATION OF THE CLERGY IN THE UNIVERSITIES (where they mingled with laymen -C.) WAS NOT SATISFACTORY. INsofar AS MORAL EDUCATION WAS CONCERNED, THESE CENTERS WERE NOT A MATCH WITH THE CATHEDRAL SCHOOLS. THE SEMINARY, although new as an institution, WAS NOT WITHOUT PRECEDENT IN THE CHURCH. ITS MISSION WAS BASICALLY THE SAME AS THAT OF THE EPISCOPAL SCHOOLS, although there was need to reform in some way their structure, adapting it to the demands of the times."¹

¹ Manuel Fernandez-Conde, *El decreto Tridentino sobre Seminarios y su aplicación en España hasta el año 1723*, Roma 1937. Unpublished doctoral thesis, ap. Biblioteca della Pontificia Università Gregoriana, Roma: cit. G. Pellicia, op. cit., p. 257, footnote 1.

Pius IV wished to be the first in implementing the tridentine decree by opening in Rome a Conciliar Seminary. By that time the Eternal City had already the *Collegio Romano*, the *Collegio Germanico* and the *Seminario Romano* — aside from other older, but less adequate institutes — for the training of the candidates for the priesthood. Pius IV turned his attention to the *Seminario Romano* and wanted to transform it into a prototype and pattern of an authentic Tridentine Seminary. But a heap of difficulties put off the realization of this plan until the beginning of the year 1565. Thus some zealous Bishops² went ahead of Rome. Most outstanding among them was the pioneer and patron of Seminaries, St. Charles Borromeo³ who founded the Seminary of Milan in 1564, and published in 1582 his famous "*Institutiones ad universum Seminarii regimen*" (Regulations for the over-all administration of a Seminary), which thenceforth served as guidelines for the fundamental rules of all authentic Conciliar Seminaries. In the said Rules we read: "Since in every priest and pastor of souls, sanctity and science are required, BOTH MUST BE ACQUIRED IN THE SEMINARY."⁴

A monumental renewal of this dimension would mean however a revamp of outdated structures and a change of deep-rooted educational systems, like the training of priests in the midst of the world or the exclusive stress on intellectual formation in Universities and Colleges. This demanded the erection of new buildings, dedicated teaching staffs, economic resources, etc. not easily available. These were insurmountable difficulties that stood quite often in the way for a ready and immediate implementation of the tridentine decree as desired by all. One thing was the ideal proposed by the Church, and another thing was the stark reality: the ideal was indeed beautiful, but its realization was regrettably subject to circumstances beyond human reckoning.

The first tridentine-typed Seminary in Rome accepted, together with the seminarians, others so-called "*convictores*", i. e. intern lay students, who did not aspire for the priesthood; the seminarians, on the other hand,

² G. Genacchi, op. cit., p. 93, footnote 14.

³ St. Pius X, Ep. *La ristorazione*, 5 maii 1904: cit. L. G. Garola, op. cit., p. 32, footnote 17.

⁴ S. C. de Sem., op. cit., pp. 277, footnote 66.

⁵ S. C. de Sem. opñ cit., pp. 109-110.

attended classes in the *Collegio Romano* where lay students were also admitted. Once again we meet a *mixed priestly training* to neutralize or devaluate the efficacy of the Seminaries!

But the baneful effects of such system did not remain unnoticed. A report of the Jesuits submitted to Pope Paul V, among other remarks, spoke of the NECESSITY OF SEPARATION BETWEEN THE "CONVICTORES" AND THE CLERICS.⁵ Economic reasons (at least partly, for there were other factors and circumstances proper of those times) seemed to justify this undesirable mingling of laymen and clerics in Seminaries, or in college and university classes. The set-up, however, was not so disastrous in its consequences, as later on it became, for we have to bear in mind that those "convictores" of the XVI century were bound to follow the same strict disciplinary rules of the seminarians, and received a religious education almost identical to that of the clerics.⁶ And yet, this notwithstanding, the same Jesuits who ran that Seminary soon became aware that AN ENVIRONMENT SET APART AND AND MORE RECOLLECTED WAS FOR THE CLERICS,⁷ in spite of the fact that the number of "convictores" in relation to that of the seminarians was not great. When the *Seminario Romano* was inaugurated in 1565 the "convictores" numbered 14 or 15, while the clerics were 63. This in some way explains how that first Seminary of Rome, although it was more a Seminary-Boarding House or Seminary-College than an authentic tridentine Seminary, was able to maintain a truly edifying measure of fervor among the candidates to the priesthood. And this — it is right to avow — was due to the zeal of the Jesuit Fathers who were its directors.

Among many other edifying details we take the occasion to quote some observations from Father Polanco, which confirm what we have already pointed out elsewhere, namely, that the education "segregated" from the world, required for aspirants to the priesthood, although it is somewhat "special" and above the ordinary, is not "abnormal", as contended today. "Admitted at the age of 12 or 18 — remarked Fr. Polanco — full of certain worldliness or tender attachment which at the begin-

⁵ G. Pellicia, op. cit., p. 277. footnote 66.

⁶ Ibid., p. 284.

⁷ Ibid., loc. cit., footnote 89.

ning they felt towards their parents and relatives, after making the spiritual retreat and general confession, they have changed much, and became obedient and humble, and so detached from their relatives that when they went to see and visit them, they tried to return as soon as possible (at the appointed hour) to the Seminary."⁸

In 1568 a Canonical Visit was made in the *Seminario Romano*. According to the Visitors (the Bishops of Piacenza and of Castro) this Seminary did NOT DULY ACHIEVE ITS PURPOSES, for three reasons: FIRST, BECAUSE IT ALSO ADMITTED YOUNG MEN WHO DID NOT ASPIRE TO THE PRIESTHOOD; 2nd., . . . ; 3rd. . . . Consequent upon this Visit it was decided to decrease the number of "convictores" to only 40, over and against the protests of their relatives. In 1586 the "convictores" were 58; the previous year there were 100. They went to the extent of reducing the number to 25. The register of January 18, 1586 showed that the "convictores" numbered 37, while the clerics were 52. THE MOST SERIOUS INCONVENIENCE detected by the aforesaid Visit as ALARMLNGLY OBJECT-IONABLE was the LIVING TOGETHER OF "CONVICTORES" AND CLERICS. After the Visit the necessity of correcting such defect was felt more imperative than anything else in the *Seminario Romano*: the necessity of separating the "convictores" from the clerics, as the Jesuit Fathers made clear with a sense of urgency in the report submitted to Pope Paul V, as we have mentioned above.

Concerning this matter, stress was made on the fact that the DIFFERENCE OF PURPOSES (educational) DEMANDED ALSO A DIVERSITY OF MEANS IN THEIR RESPECTIVE FORMATION (i.e. of the seminarians and the laymen) IN STUDY, DISCIPLINE, CONDUCT, PIETY; IN THEIR DRESS, FOOD AND LODGING, AND "IN ALL OTHER THINGS THAT CONCERN BODILY COMFORT." THE CLERICS (or seminarians) NEED A CLOSER ATTENTION AND CARE IN THEIR SPIRITUAL LIFE, FOSTERING RECOLLECTION, SIMPLICITY, MORTIFICATION, MODESTY AND SPIRIT OF POVERTY IN ALL THINGS; BUT IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THIS, SEPARATION

⁸ Ibid., pp. 286-287.

IS ABSOLUTELY NEEDED, WITHOUT WHICH THE CLERICS UPON SEEING THE EASY LIFE OF THE "CONVICTORES" WILL NATURALLY WANT THE SAME WAY OF LIFE. FURTHERMORE, "THE PECULIAR FAMILIARITIES AND PRIVILEGES OF THE "CONVICTORES" ARE APT TO MAKE A CLERIC DEVIATE FROM THE RIGHT PATH OF HIS OWN VOCATION AND STATE OF LIFE. NEEDLESS TO SAY, EITHER THE EXERCISES (educative) OF BOTH GROUPS ARE CONFUSED IN THIS MINGLING (of seminarians and laymen), OR THE PROGRAMMING OF SAID EXERCISES ACCORDING TO THE RESPECTIVE VOCATIONS OF THE STUDENTS, IMPLIES A QUASI UNSURMOUNTABLE DIFFICULTY."⁹

Such from the very outset was the appraisal of the experienced directors of that pilot Seminary which was called upon to be the pattern and prototype of all the Seminaries of the catholic world. Unfortunately the higher authorities did not pay due attention to the wisdom contained in these observations. Under Paul V (1566-1572) THE LIVING TOGETHER OF THE "CONVICTORES" (laymen) AND THE SEMINARIANS CONTINUED. And worse still, the "convictores" increased in number, while the clerics decreased. In the Apostolic Visit of 1630 the "convictores" went up to 130. The laymen in the Seminary of Rome was already noted since 1593 under the pontificate of Clement VIII, whose solicitude for the good formation of the clergy was otherwise well known and undeniable.¹⁰

And with THIS FATAL LIVING TOGETHER, THE PROBLEM OF FORMING WELL THE FUTURE PRIESTS CONTINUED. AT TIMES IT BECAME CRITICAL WITH THE REVIVAL OF UNBECOMING PRACTICES IN THE PAST HAVE PROVED DISASTROUS, AND WHICH COULD HAVE BEEN SUPERSEDED HAD THE SEMINARY FOLLOWED FAITHFULLY THE NORMS TRACED OUT IN TRENT. And so in this state of things, the internal life of the *Seminario Romano* continued until the fateful days of the suppression of the Society of Jesus in the XVIII

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 300-302.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 302, footnote 145; cf. G. Genacchi, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

¹¹ G. Pellicia, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

century.¹¹ But this should not lead us to the conclusion that the Roman Seminary was a total failure. No, it produced indeed a great deal of good to the clergy and to the Church of Rome. **BUT IT FELL SHORT OF THE EXPECTATION.** It certainly could not be presented as the ideal Seminary, pattern and prototype of the Tridentine Seminaries.¹²

And if all this happened in the capital of the Catholic world, no one need be surprised that in the rest of Christendom most Seminaries in the XVII and XVIII centuries were far from being the authentic Tridentine Seminaries. As a matter of fact, most dioceses had no Seminary at all; or if there was one, it was generally a *Seminary-College*, where laymen as interns lived together with the seminarians, or where lay students attended classes mixed with the seminarians. Thus the fruits obtained in all parts were so meager and poor that the reform of Trent could have been readily considered a sham, and its marvellous decrees mere ink on paper.

A century after Trent, in France the so-called "firstborn of the Church during the time of St. Vincent de Paul, the Conciliar Seminaries were still unknown. What they called Seminaries (the few that existed then) were particularly mere "lodging houses" of clerics who attended, as in the Middle Ages, the colleges and universities outside, or at most Seminary-Colleges discredited by the pest of *mixed* priestly training. Hence the lamentable state of degradation in which the clergy of that nation was found in the XVII century. In 1643 a canon wrote St. Vincent de Paul: "In this diocese the clergy is without any discipline; the priests have neither piety nor pity; there are pulpits, but no preachers: the authority of the CHURCH is either hated or despised..." And a Bishop declared himself frustrated "because—as he wrote to the same St. Vincent — of the great and unbelievable number of ignorant and vicious priests that form my clergy... I feel horrified when I pause to think that my diocese has about 7,000 priests who are drunkards or lascivious, and who without any vocation ascend daily to the altar." And all the Bishops of an ecclesiastical province had to meet in order to deal about means to check and stop the vice of drunkenness to which most of their priests were addicted. "In some places—the Bishop of

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 303.

Belley reported—the parish priests come out of the church, and with the surplice on, follow their parishioners to the tavern and talk and drink with them; in other places, once the Divine Office is finished, they harness their horses and join the chasers to the nearby forest.” And the Bishop of Cahors told St. Vincent that in the diocese of Rodez the priests were “so depraved that upon the death of their Bishop in 1648 they threw away their clerical attire. Some hanged their cassocks in the windows of the cabarets, others drank toasts to his health, and those who had abandoned their mistresses, took them back over again.”

The ignorance of the French clergy in those days was terrific. In a gathering of priests there were some who could not answer how many natures has Christ. There were pastors who heard confessions without knowing the formula of sacramental absolution. And the liturgy for the administration of the sacraments and the Mass were nowhere taught until Arian Bourdoise established his first seminary in 1620. For many the priesthood was a mere career, perhaps the easiest and most attractive in view of the beneficiary revenues. The will of the parents, almost always, took the place of a true vocation. Among the noble classes it was the custom to assign the eldest son to the priesthood if by nature he was unfit for the military career. Other wise, the second to the eldest, by all means, must climb the steps of the altar. Cardinal Medicis said in 1597: “Among the Church prelates there are few who are intelligent; and they are very careless in granting the Holy Orders. That is why we have so many ignorant priests, beggar priests, priests without any canonical title, or ordained before the canonical age and without any previous training, specially among the religious...” According to St. Vincent himself: “A man after a varnish of theology or some elements of philosophy, after his lower studies or after a little latin, would go to a parish and administer the sacraments the way he liked.”¹³

The well known historian Daniel-Rops strikes at the root of all these evils when he writes: “The Council of Trent, in its XXIIIrd session, had asked bishops to set up seminaries in their dioceses for

¹³ Jose Herrera, C. M.—Veremundo Pardo, C.M., *San Vicente de Paul*, B.A.C., Madrid 1955, 2a. ed., pp. 400-404.

the training of their future priests, but EVEN SEVENTY YEARS AFTER THE CLOSURE OF THE COUNCIL the *precise formula* on which it was to be based HAD NOT YET BEEN FOUND. All the reformers were thinking about it, especially Bérulle and Bourdoise. So far the results had been poor. The Fathers of the Oratory had been trying unsuccessfully for twenty-two years to do something. M. Bourdoise, at Saint-Nicolas du Chardonnet, had, in thirty years merely succeeded in founding a community of priests for the training of the young: a useful work, indeed, but with limited possibilities. All the bishops with whose training Monsieur Vincent had been more or less directly concerned begged him to establish REAL SEMINARIES. The saint still hesitated. Was that what God wanted of him? His sons had a vocation, to go and preach to the good people in the country districts, and there were not enough of them to enable him to branch out into such a vast undertaking as the *establishment of seminaries*. If only Heaven would give him a sign! Once more Providence did give him the sign he wanted; and it was through the medium of Cardinal Richelieu himself who during a memorable interview, invited Monsieur Vincent to resolve the problem which he had so much at heart.

"Accordingly the *College des Bons Enfants* became a *seminary*. . . This action by Monsieur Vincent resulted in there really being *two seminaries*: *le Grand*, or the big one, which provided at the Bons Enfants twelve future priests, and *le Petit*, or the small one, situated in Saint-Charles, which was an annexe of Saint-Lazare and where children did their studies *without necessarily intending to proceed to Holy Orders*. Thus THE SEPARATION OF ORDINARY STUDENTS FROM SEMINARIES, *which the French Episcopate had desired for seventeen years*, WAS NOW REALIZED. This took place early in 1642, during the period when M. Olier was founding the seminary of Vaugirard. A DEFINITE FORMULA FOR THE SEMINARY HAD AT LAST BEEN OUTLINED."¹⁴

The antecedents of this providential endeavour can be traced to the spiritual retreats for candidates to Holy Orders, which St. Vincent

¹⁴ Henri Daniel-Rops, *The Church in the Seventeenth Century*, Vol. I. Image Books, New York 1965, p. 45; J. Herrera-V. Pardo, *op. cit.*, pp. 443-444.

started in 1628 upon the inspired request of Mons. Agustin Potier, Bishop of Beauvais. But this plan for the formation of a worthy clergy was utterly insufficient: *three days* of spiritual exercises combined with some hurried lessons on the fundamentals of dogmatic and moral theology with the essentials of liturgical practice and pastoral ministry, were obviously a minimum that could seem acceptable only in the impossibility of doing something more. In 1636 Monsieur Vincent decided to open a *minor* seminary in the *College des Bons Enfants* for boys in whom a seed of priestly vocation could possibly be found. Due to the urgent need of fostering vocations *at an early age*, according to the mind of the Council of Trent, a mistake—at that time quite understandable—crept however in this praiseworthy establishment; for admission it was *not* required that the boys should actually aim at the priesthood. Some eight years after, the harmful effects of such mistake were already felt in the poor results obtained of the *twenty four* seminarians, only *four* showed some hopes to reach the Priesthood. The founder was really disappointed. Taking into account the circumstances of those days he foresaw that such an enterprise could not prosper. Thus he remarked: “The tridentine decree was indeed inspired by the Holy Spirit, and as such deserves all our respect. However, experience manifests that the way the decree is put into practice, with regard to the age of seminarians, *does not succeed neither in France nor in Italy* since some withdraw before due time, others *enter without vocation*, some others seek to join religious communities, and the rest *leave the places which bind them to their (clerical) education, in search of other ventures.*”¹²

In this last phrase we may easily detect the very root of the evil that prevented the success of those *minor seminaries*, nay the cause of their actual failure. As it has been previously noticed the tridentine decree did not *explicitly* reject other ways of reaching the priesthood *outside the Seminary*: mixed priestly training was not *specifically* forbidden, and *Seminary education* was not made obligatory for all those aspiring to the Priesthood. These were the flaws in the text of the Council decree. Thus “in those days, two alternatives were given to the candidates for the priestly ministry: one, *easy and free, amidst the*

¹² J. Herrera- V. Pardo, op. cit., p. 442.

turmoils of University life; the other, subject to discipline and privations, in the Seminary. The former was evidently more alluring, so that *the majority was drawn to it.* More often than not, upon reaching their adolescent years, the boys abandoned the Seminary, and in their desire for greater independence and liberty sought other ways to reach the priesthood."¹⁶

As a consequence of these conditions, the *minor* seminary founded by St. Vincent in 1636 at the *College des Bons Enfants* was obviously doomed to a languid life, if not actually to a complete failure. We have seen it from the results obtained during the first eight years: *four* possible candidates to the priesthood out of *twenty four* students. On the other hand, clerics following the theological course began to flock in the same College. Perhaps the founder sensed the dangers involved in the system of a mixed priestly training, and to forestall them we have seen already the course of action he took. He transferred the students of the *minor* Seminary to the Vincentian House annex called *Saint-Charles*, and left the *Theology seminarians* alone in the *College des Bons Enfants*, which thenceforth was to be reserved *exclusively* for clerics, as a real *Major* seminary.¹⁷ Thus he did not give up the education of boys in view of fostering priestly vocations in a propitious atmosphere such as that of *Saint-Charles* minor Seminary (or rather, Seminary-College), although the hope of success was quite dim, on account of the undesirable mixture of ordinary students with seminarians. But the Saint from that time on concentrated his efforts on the *Major* Seminary of *Bons Enfants* where he succeeded in fully crystallizing the mind of Trent with a clerical education exclusively aimed for candidates to the Priesthood. And it did not take long to notice its good results: in 1645 there were already 45 clerics preparing themselves for the Holy Orders at *Bons Enfants*. The *Major* Seminary, unlike the *minor*, was *effectively* contributing to foster clerical vocations and improving the formation of future priests.

"With such an arrangement the basis for *separate* Major and Minor Seminaries were definitely laid down by St. Vincent de Paul. That made the tridentine institution finally triumph in France"¹⁸ *though not*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

in all the perfection, but only to a certain degree. And this, we repeat, was due to the latent defect of a mixed priestly training which was not totally extirpated, but continued to exercise a detrimental effect upon the *minor* seminaries.

The greatest relevance of the Vincentian reform which *explicitly* brought forth the difference and the convenient or almost necessary separation of the Major and Minor departments in a Seminary (something that was only insinuated by Trent), is in our opinion the fact that it lessened the damaging effects of a mixed priestly training. The Hierarchy sought in vain seventeen years before) was finally attained at least for the clerics of the Major Seminary. The conditions of those times were not favorable to impose such separation in the Minor Seminaries. These remained, in most cases, not according to the authentic pattern set in the Council of Trent, but either as mere College-Seminaries (i.e. Seminaries where boys without any intention to become priests were admitted) or Seminary — Colleges (i. e., Catholic schools where some special efforts were done to promote priestly vocations). St. Vincent de Paul, with the separation of Minor and Major Seminaries (which three centuries later was to be sanctioned by the canons of the universal Church) gave a serious blow to the deep-rooted system of a mixed priestly training.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 443-444.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 443.