

Kevin's Story: Integrating Seminary Formation

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On a cold Sunday morning after the liturgy, I attended a talk by Kevin, a second-year seminarian. I was the liaison from the pastoral (field education) department at Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology. My purpose was not so much to critique him—he was a competent and articulate middle-aged student—but rather to be more aware and supportive of his efforts.

Despite the weather and early hour, I was surprised to see about forty people staying after the liturgy to hear the talk on conversion and reconciliation. Kevin outlined theological and moral principles that shaped his intellectual formation; but he also very candidly shared his pre-seminary conversion struggle with alcohol, marriage, and over-achieving. I could see that the congregants were eager to absorb Kevin's encouragement to seek God's mercy and the peace of an inner life.

Why do I share this? Looking back on that day, I realize that Kevin along with a few others, are among some of the seminarians that I worked with in all four pillars or areas—human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral—in the *Program of Priestly Formation (PPF)*.¹ I ask then: How have these pillars been realistically integrated and what have we/I learned for the future? Kevin's story might correspond to some of the behavioral patterns found in other seminarians as well. In this brief essay, I will: 1) share Kevin's life with parallels to that

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of St. Augustine as the story becomes integrated with the four pillars, 2) refer to the faculty and staff efforts to inculcate the formation program along with desired applications in the four areas, and 3) suggest ways for further post-ordination connections and influence.

KEVIN'S STORY

Turning again to Kevin, I thought that on that Sunday morning I would be able to predict his approach since I had him as an advisee in spiritual/human formation the previous year. Although there was nothing shocking, I did not know him as fully as I presumed. Perhaps because I had been responsible for an evaluation in the spiritual/human formation program within the external forum, he may have been more circumspect about what he initially revealed to me. Nevertheless, during that first year, he gradually became more transparent and shared earlier strategies—not always successful—to off-set my more blunt and probing questions. His honesty—about his failed attempts to distract me—was commendable, but he still faced the queries of a thorough assessment process.

During the second year, I was no longer in the human/spiritual but in the pastoral formation department. Now I could view him from another perspective, i.e., ministerial performance. On that Sunday morning, as part of the parish audience, I had an opportunity to listen to Kevin revealing more of his pre-seminary struggle. He was vulnerable and trusting before all of us in a way I had not witnessed earlier.

Nevertheless, it was in the intellectual area during his fourth year that I was able to get yet another insight into Kevin. Our Foundations in Christian Spirituality class includes assignments that are designed to be “practical directives for the Christian call to perfection”.² Consequently, they require describing personal conversion events while paralleling them with the spiritual classics or wisdom from the saints.

One of Kevin's papers was written through the lens of Augustine's *Confession*. The latter's words were apropos, “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Augustine's insight struck a chord and, upon reflecting on his own life, Kevin stated,

No wonder I could not find happiness, even after I got married. Rather than having a marriage based upon self-giving, I had a marriage based upon a “church approved” vehicle. . . . As time went on, things got worse, and I turned to alcohol. . . . This vicious cycle continued until my wife and I divorced. I moved away and kept searching for peace in worldly goods by working harder on my career. I climbed the corporate ladder at several companies and even owned my own, yet my heart was still restless. I was never satisfied.

During his forays into life’s allurements, Kevin remained at a distance from his family, but it was in dealing with his mother’s death that he began to turn around. Unlike Augustine who had a positive experience with his mother at Ostia prior to her death, Kevin did not say good-bye to his mother since he arrived too late at her deathbed. Nevertheless, Kevin took some comfort in Augustine’s words about his mother, Monica.

I was brought back to my old feelings about your handmaid, recalling her devout attitude to you and her holy gentle and considerate treatment of us, of which I had suddenly deprived myself. I was glad to weep before you about her and for her, about myself and for myself. Now I let flow the tears which I held back so that they ran freely as they wished. My heart rested upon them, and it reclined upon them because it was your ears that were there, not those of some human critic who would put a proud interpretation on my weeping. And now, Lord, I make my confession to you in writing”.³

Kevin relished such lines from the *Confessions* and took his aunt as his new “Monica” for she prayed for him and warned that, if he continued in his lifestyle, he might never see his mother again in the next life. Augustine’s words mirrored Kevin’s inclinations, “Make me chaste, but not yet.” Movement to change was not strong enough.

There was a glimmer of hope when Kevin went on a men’s retreat and was told to reflect on the following passage from the Prodigal Son. “How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! (Luke 15:17, NRSV)”. The shocking thought that Kevin might not see his mother in eternity, if he did not “come to his senses,” moved him to contrition and action. Like Augustine, Kevin found a shift in his thinking with the passage from Paul. “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ,

and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. (Romans 13:13, NRSV)."

Like Augustine's companion, Alypius, a priest-friend on the retreat was deeply affected as well. They both rejoiced in this spiritual breakthrough and the power of grace. Kevin then became involved in church activities and found a refreshing kind of joy. Reflecting on this experience of divine mercy, Kevin now says, "When my heart becomes restless, I go to chapel and sit in front of him and in his presence."

SEMINARY FORMATION EFFORTS AND POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS

Observing Kevin over four years in every area: spiritual, human, intellectual and pastoral, one asks: What does it mean to send him out as a graduate and ordained person? "The seminary program of priestly formation can appropriately be viewed as an initiation to sacramental life, not unlike the process envisioned in the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults".⁴ If the *Confessions* spoke to Kevin's heart, was he also aware of the multiple--but less dramatic--conversions that were necessary for Augustine throughout his life? As we know, Augustine had the desire for a monastic life, but the church of North Africa urged him to ordination and desired his leadership. Kevin, on the other hand, wants to be a parish priest but will he be flexible with unanticipated requests?

Also, Augustine, an erudite scholar and writer, died while the barbarians on the coast were burning books and pillaging the artifacts of Roman culture. Augustine's trust in divine providence and insights from his *City of Man* and *City of God* had to sustain him. Will Kevin be able to withstand the tumultuous times of sexual abuse claims, bankruptcy and loss of ecclesial credibility? Kevin still has ego needs for achievement, advancement and positive feedback. Will Kevin also be able to remain free of any previous inclinations when he is feeling low and the "first fervor" begins to wane? As he walked out the seminary doors he believed that, with God's grace, he could. We--as faculty and staff--blessed him and prayed that he would not falter.

How do we, as faculty, admonish, challenge, and encourage seminar-ians like Kevin? I thought of two critical moments when I was especially attentive to Kevin's choices.

First, he wanted to continue as a volunteer at the parish where he was first assigned. I felt that his academic load was stressful enough and the parish would be an added burden. He disagreed. Perhaps the ministerial

adulation was something he could not give up. He followed through on his choice, but it seemed that his over-burdened situation manifested itself in some impatience with others. It appeared to me that the fruit of his labor was affected by what looked like “burn-out”. I trust that he learned from the experience.

A second incident occurred during his final year when his Pastoral Integrating Seminar paper was presented. Here students are to present a ministerial experience and demonstrate how the four areas of theology—scripture, history\culture, systematic, pastoral—are integrated into the way they perform their ministry. A more critical reception--than Kevin ever expected--was given by an outside facilitator, who was both a long-time Lutheran minister and an excellent psychologist. This facilitator was able to capture elements of Kevin’s superficial thinking in the presentation and attempted to sensitively explain why it appeared to be true. Kevin’s face was filled with confusion and possible anger but he remained silent. Thankfully, Kevin sought solitude in prayer and could return in the evening with insights about his own “messiah” tendencies. Like Augustine, he was learning to be humble in accepting his limitations. He saw that conversion is an on-going process and not a one-time event. Gradually, over the years, greater compliance and trust in the wisdom of the formation team appeared to take hold.

DESIRED APPLICATIONS

What does accompanying seminarians like Kevin mean for those of us who are part of their formation? As is stated in the *PPF*, “The entire seminary staff composed of priest, religious, and laity, constitutes another significant group, who can model collegiality for the seminarians. Ways to foster the unity of this larger circle should also be developed.”⁵ We can briefly consider the four pillars as they apply to our community:

1. Spiritual and Human Formation

There are two objectives for those entrusted with these candidates regardless of their position. First, it is incumbent on the *full* community to realize that they take on the responsibility to “make ourselves available to God’s work of transformation” in a serious way. At our seminary everything closes down on Wednesday before lunch so that the entire community--from the administration to the building custodians—can circle around

the altar as one body. I believe that this spirit of unity has its effect. Often at the Rite of Sending for the graduates, many expressed gratitude for the often-over-looked maintenance department's work. This sense of oneness also bodes well for the seminarians' attentiveness--as future pastors--to those who keep the plant running.

As a faculty person for twenty-nine years, this sacred ministry also stretches my heart and widens my vision even in small ways. Sensing the struggle of students in adjusting to a new schedule or teaching method requires an adjustment not always relished by me either; but adjust we do in the true spirit of community. Also, it seems that Kevin's intermittent non-compliance required some careful listening and patience on my part. Admittedly, I was reminded of my own tendencies to such behavior. Perhaps dealing with Kevin was a grace bringing insight and healing for my own former transgressions. Fortunately, Kevin and I were always able to see that there is a greater power at work in both of us.

Secondly, although seminary formation is basically Christian formation--shared by all of us--there are some characteristics which apply "specifically to the aim of preparation for the priesthood."⁶ Therefore, the seminarian needs to be prayerful and well-grounded psychologically; all of his development must be done within the context of his future ecclesial identity, which is unique to his sacramental call. He is called to the mission of Jesus and not to any type of career-building or ego enhancement.

Is Kevin aware that his identity will be that of a public person and a representative of a larger ecclesial body? We had a chance to discuss the implications of this when a faculty person expressed her discomfort with Kevin's alcohol consumption at an end-of-the-year celebration. Although there was no clear sign of inebriation and Kevin saw no problem with a few extra drinks on such an occasion, he was grateful for the genuine concern expressed on his behalf. Wisely he turned for advice to a faculty member who had successfully dealt with alcoholism and its precursor.

2. Intellectual and Pastoral Formation

Both areas--intellectual and pastoral--require a penetrating knowledge of Jesus through reading and relating. "The first task of intellectual formation is to acquire a personal knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the fullness and completion of God's revelation and the one Teacher."⁷ John Henry Newman's concept of the Unseen Teacher--whose voice becomes more audible with silence--is in harmony with: "Those who aspire to be sent on mis-

sion, as the apostles were, must first acquire the listening and learning heart of the disciples.”⁸

Kevin had ample opportunities to listen to scripture and be sent on mission. Hopefully he and his classmates heard the three admonitions of Jesus and their possible applications:

1. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (Mk 8:34, NRSV).
If you let go of your own defensiveness for my sake, you will grow to full stature. If you protect yourself from change and disappointment while remaining secure in your ridge image of yourself, you will die.
2. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9:35, NRSV).
Welcoming the physically weak, financially or emotionally poor and the non-English speaking people can be a privilege for they have much to teach you.
3. “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mk 10: 43, NRSV).
Places of honor, prestige and titles are in every organization but examine the motivation for accepting them. Is it other-directed or ego-invested?

POST-GRADUATE INFLUENCE AND CONNECTIONS

Lastly, we must consider what happens to Kevin and others after graduation. For the sake of the future “[t]he seminary formation program must be imbued with a vision of life after ordination.”⁹ Although we stay in touch with our graduates through mailings, visits, ordinations and alumni meetings, it is difficult to measure the effects of our stress on the centrality of Jesus as the ultimate foundation. It was encouraging to see Kevin when he flew back from his parish assignment for the funeral of his former spiritual director. We also trust that there are mentors already in their dioceses to provide further wisdom and inspiration.

Yet another source of inspiration comes from our recent popes who model all four of the pillars. There seems to be a special charism uniquely accorded to each of the three. John Paul II, with his wisdom regarding the theology of the body and understanding of John of the Cross’ spiritual admonitions, is apropos in modeling human and spiritual formation. Pope Benedict XVI’s intellectual work, especially evident in his Christology, is a

brilliant model of the academic. Our present Pope Francis--from the first day of being blessed by the crowds and his sensitivity to the poor--is an appropriate model for the pastoral model. How can we be more blessed in models of the four pillars?

CONCLUSION

Today I again look out at the falling snow and remember the cold Sunday morning of long ago. Kevin, like his classmates, is ordained but one does not always hear of their continuing journey. Living out the *Program of Priestly Formation* is the on-going seminary goal but looking at the faces in the corridor pictures makes the task concrete. I often pray for them as I pass on route to my next class. I hope the graduates also pray for us, who try to keep the sacred home-fires burning in the midst of a world that easily grows spiritually cold.

NOTES

- 1 Program of Priestly Formation, Fifth Edition, (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2006).
- 2 PPF, 212.
- 3 Augustine, *Confessions*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 33.
- 4 PPF, 368.
- 5 PPF, 104.
- 6 PPF, 70.
- 7 PPF, 137.
- 8 PPF, 107.
- 9 PPF, 370.