

The Future of Catholic Seminaries: Three Critical Issues

Editor's note: This essay is a summary by Herbert Anderson of an address given by Katarina Schuth, OSF, at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 2017. For almost four decades, Schuth has written extensively about seminaries and pastoral formation in the Roman Catholic Church. She is widely regarded for her thorough research and collaborative engagement with Roman Catholic seminaries and theologates (a theology course of study for priests in training). These remarks are drawn from her most recent book, *Seminary Formation: Recent History—Current Circumstances—New Directions*, published by Liturgical Press in 2016. While the framework for these reflections is the Roman Catholic Church, the response to the challenges facing theological seminaries has broad application. We are grateful to Katarina Schuth for her willingness to include this perspective in this symposium on the future of theological education.
—Herbert Anderson

In the thirty-five years since I began research on seminaries, Catholic seminaries have made significant adjustments in their missions and programs, influenced by factors in the culture and the Church. While the challenges both from within and without the church have changed, the purpose of seminaries remains constant. The main goal of seminary formation is to prepare priests and lay ministers who are both competent and confident in providing pastoral ministry. That goal requires not only intellectual formation but also human, spiritual, and pastoral formation.

The requirements for effective ministry in the Catholic Church in this time include the following: knowledge of Church teaching as it exists presently in the United States (or wherever in the world graduates will be minis-

tering) in order to connect more effectively to the world; a thorough understanding of the secular culture and the role it plays in alienating so many Catholics from the faith of their birth; and skills and attitudes that allow for greater collaboration between lay ministers and priests. The desired outcome is that those who are part of the Church will come to a better understanding of how ministerial preparation might become more effective and suitable for Catholics of today and tomorrow.

CONNECTING THE CHURCH TRADITION WITH COMMON LIFE

To meet the spiritual needs of today's Catholics, church teachings need to be translated into language that is intelligible and relevant to their lives. This aspiration is both more important and more complicated in parishes with new immigrants in which language barriers as well as poverty and lack of education require pastoral understanding. To be formed for ministry for such a context, seminarians need a genuine appreciation of the diversity that marks the Catholic Church as well as the diversity that typifies society generally. In order to prepare ministers who will be able to enculturate Christianity in the United States, seminarians also need to study the history and culture of this country.

To connect the Catholic tradition with daily life requires seminarians to be deeply formed in their own faith, to be able to deal with the complexity of being a leader in the Catholic Church, and to understand the role of conscience in the Christian life. This goal is often complicated by the religious and educational backgrounds of seminarians today who are fearful that they will misrepresent the Church's teaching. Many of these seminarians have practiced their faith minimally or are relatively recent converts, resulting in a faith that might be described as *a mile wide and an inch deep*. Understandably, their desire is to grasp answers that are certain, and they learn by rote as much Catholic doctrine as they can retain.

Others come having practiced their faith in devout Catholic families, sometimes home-schooled, usually in relationships with other young people of like mind who are equally committed and seldom challenged in their faith. At best, this foundation can be a useful beginning for seminary studies, but it may lead to a belief that everything about their faith is clear and flawless, well-defined and sure. If seminarians hold this position, they may feel that there is no need for discussion. Or, more likely, they may hold the

position that discussion is impossible or unnecessary since there is only one way to interpret an issue. In the first instance, resistance comes from seminarians' worries about their own inadequacy, and in the second the problem may be rigidity. Acceptance will be easier for those with both knowledge and heart—compassion and openness to the real lives of people. Those who succeed will have confidence in their ability to converse with parishioners about difficult issues; they will need not only a deep academic understanding of the Catholic faith but also the confidence to engage and be challenged, questioned, and confronted.

Similar to students, faculty differ in education and background, and their vocational composition has changed as well. Some engage subject matter by expanding the learning experience with the goal of instilling understanding and confidence in students so they will take responsibility for their own viewpoints. Others are more comfortable teaching content in a fashion that provides clear answers to students but allows for little discussion or differing interpretations. Only a handful of current seminary faculty were even young adults at the time of Vatican II. New faculty voices bring a wider range of viewpoints and experiences but may lack a deep personal appreciation of Vatican II and its impact on the Church, although they do offer some new approaches in method and more diverse content. This profile makes a difference in the methodologies and approaches of each cohort of a theological seminary, especially in areas of systematic theology, moral theology, and pastoral theology and practice.

In all its different aspects, formation must have a fundamentally pastoral character, preparing people for the ministry of Word, worship, and sanctification and the work of spiritual development. Pope Francis offers advice that would serve well as the agenda for any pastoral formation program: "The preacher also needs to keep his ear to the people and to discover what it is that the faithful need to hear. A preacher has to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people . . . actual people . . . using their language, their signs and symbols, to answer the questions they ask."¹

The call to be pastors of the people of God requires formation that makes future priests experts in the art of pastoral discernment. Pastoral training initiates candidates into the sensitivity of being a shepherd, into the conscious and mature assumption of their responsibilities, and into the interior habit of evaluating problems and establishing priorities and looking

for solutions on the basis of honest motivations of faith and according to the theological demands inherent in pastoral work.²

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

In order to reach and inspire today's Catholics, *a thorough understanding of the secular culture* is demanded of those who will be ministering. Considerations include multicultural dimensions, the impact of globalization and immigration, poverty, and racism, and the role of politics, as well as the pervasive effects of technology and media. Greater knowledge of the sciences and social sciences are necessary components of this theme. On the topic of globalization, T. Howland Sanks has confirmed current understandings about preparing priestly candidates for the globalized world.

Given the religious pluralism of our time, they should be prepared for dialogue with other Christian and non-Christian traditions. An open, ecumenical and collaborative approach to pastoral situations is expected today. Are we preparing them for this? Further, given that our social imaginary is highly scientific and technological, some study of contemporary cosmology and the biological sciences should be included. And the ability to do social and cultural analysis requires some study of sociology and cultural anthropology.³

This need for cultural sensitivity in pastoral formation must flow from and move toward an appreciation of the multifaceted reality of the Church.⁴

The backdrop of formation for a ministry also includes the secular culture that shapes the thinking of every person. In *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Gospel of Joy), as in many of his addresses, Pope Francis speaks of cultural challenges such as secularism, individualism, and globalization that affect our ability to enculturate the faith.⁵ Preparation for ministry needs to take into account the critical concerns of the twenty-first century and the effect these factors have on people's commitment to the Church and their continuing affiliation as Catholics. The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) conducted a study of a random sample of self-identified Catholics, ages eighteen and older, who have left the Church because of the disconnect between religion and science.⁶ The Catholic rate of disaffiliation is greater than the rate for any other faith tradition.

The intellectual dimension of priestly formation is aimed at achieving the capacity to interpret the world accurately as well as a solid competence

in philosophy and theology. Along with a general educational preparation, it is intended to enable seminarians to proclaim the gospel message in a way that is credible and understandable. That form of proclamation of the gospel makes it possible for people to enter into fruitful dialogue with the contemporary world.⁷ In general, the study of theology leads the priest to assent to the Word of God, grow in his spiritual life, and prepare himself to fulfill his pastoral ministry. As a teacher in his community, the priest must be ready to respond competently—with clarity and deep reasoning—to the complex questions posed in modern society and by the Christian faithful.⁸

The ultimate goal of Catholic theological education is to understand the relationship between the Church and the world and to work together to care for those who participate in the Church. To fulfill this purpose, the whole Church needs to examine its current practices, without being self-justifying or self-protective, with the goal of understanding better what seems to have driven so many Catholics from the faith of their birth, especially those of the millennial generation. Is it caused by our materialistic, individualistic secular society, or may it also be related to the qualities of the ministry or of those who minister? What can we learn from other religious groups about how to retain members?

PRIESTS AND LAITY MINISTERING TOGETHER

In order to minister effectively today, priests and lay ministers need to collaborate and *appreciate each other more fully*. The Church is not the clergy nor the hierarchy; it is the whole people of God. Church leaders at all levels, and in particular seminary and theologate leaders, will need to make concerted efforts to change patterns of separation and competition that fail to follow the goals set by the bishops. Since Vatican II, the basic assumption has been that “all priests are in service to the Church and that the Church, in turn, is in service to all humanity.” The document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord* articulates this vision simply and clearly:

An ecclesiology of communion looks upon different gifts and functions not as adversarial but as enriching and complementary. It appreciates the Church’s unity as an expression of the mutual and reciprocal gifts brought into harmony by the Holy Spirit. An ecclesiology of communion recognizes diversity in unity and acknowledges the Spirit as the sources of all the gifts that serve to build up Christ’s Body (1 Cor 12:4–12, 28–30).⁹

For “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor. 12:7 NRSV).

The implementation of this vision of collaboration between priests and lay ministers is a particular challenge for seminaries and theologates. Even when the two groups study at the same time in the same school, they may not be in the same classes or programs. The momentum of the late 1980s to educate seminarians and lay students in a more collaborative environment has been dampened by 2005 changes in the Program of Priestly Formation and recommendations from the Vatican study of seminaries in 2008. Theologates are now more likely to underscore their primary purpose of preparing men for priestly ministry, and the gifts of the laity for ministry are underdeveloped. Schools have begun to issue separate catalogs and other publications for each group, and in some places the integration of students was prohibited. However, other centers for ministry preparation, most notably those operated by religious orders, continue to follow their commitment to and belief in collaborative preparation for ministry.

A frequently asked question is how to resolve the differences in perception and implementation of ministry between senior pastors/priests and young/newly ordained priests. Several issues exacerbate the tension between younger priests (pastors) and lay ecclesial ministers, including the separate program and learning environment and disparities in age, experience, and views of ministry. Moreover, in recent years the newly ordained have been assigned as pastors within three to five years of ordination or less. They encounter older lay ministers who most often have years of experience and on average are twenty to thirty years older. Staff members are particularly vulnerable at times of transition from a seasoned pastor who collaborated well to one who is unaccustomed or even opposed to collaboration. One corrective for the separation during formation is the commitment to pastoral field placements. If seminarians spend enough time in parishes where priests and lay ministers collaborate well, they can learn by example. Some dioceses provide continuing education programs that focus on effective methods for sharing ministry, especially in situations where the priest pastors more than one parish.

CONCLUSION

A question I am frequently asked regarding the future of theological education is whether I still have hope—referring to the title of my first book about seminaries, *Reason for the Hope*.¹⁰ As a person of faith, my answer is always yes, and this positive response is validated for me by the many positive steps forward as seminaries and theologates have refined and improved their programs. This is not to say that new challenges related to the state of the Church and secular society have been adequately addressed.

The most noteworthy change for seminarians is the *human formation program* begun in 1982 by Pope John Paul II. Because the clergy sex-abuse scandals are a primary reason for disaffiliation with the Roman Catholic Church, it is important that the priest mold his human personality in such a way that he becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ.¹¹

The sharper focus on priestly ministry, evident in the mission and vision statements of diocesan theologates, has strengthened some programs and put financial strains on others. The separation from lay students, who continue to enroll in relatively high numbers, will necessitate finding other means to encourage collaboration for the sake of their future ministry.

No one underestimates the challenge posed to seminaries and theologates charged with the task of preparing the Church's future ministers. Nonetheless, I remain hopeful. It is, however, crucial for the future of the Church that students are grounded in the intellectual, liturgical, and spiritual traditions of the Church while at the same being encouraged in the sort of human development that equips them with the ability to "link the message of a biblical text to a human situation, to an experience which cries out for the light of God's word."¹²

NOTES

- 1 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), 154.
- 2 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), paras. 57–58.
- 3 T. Howland Sanks, “Education for Ministry since Vatican II,” *Theological Studies* 45 (September 1984), 481–500.
- 4 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 59.
- 5 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 61–70.
- 6 *Our Sunday Visitor*, Aug. 27, 2016.
- 7 Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 116.
- 8 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 51.
- 9 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord: A Resource for Guiding the Development of Lay Ecclesial Ministry* (Washington, DC: Author, 2005), 20.
- 10 Katarina Schuth, *Reason for the Hope: The Futures of Roman Catholic Theologates* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).
- 11 Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43.
- 12 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 154.