

Discernment and Discovery

In his second talk to the Conference, Archbishop Vincent Nichols reflected on the initial formation required to prepare candidates for ordination.

There is no shortage of exalted words about the vocation and identity of the priest. But that doesn't make us better or superior to others. It is, simply, our identity and vocation. As I said yesterday, the way we live that identity and vocation is the drama of the salvation of each of us. Some days we'll do well. Others not so well. For periods of our lives the gap between what we are in practice and what we are to be can be considerable. And how well I live my identity, my vocation, is not to be confused with how well I perform my public part as a priest. It is possible to lose our awareness of the drama, the uncertainty, the inevitable ambiguity of our personal road to God under a meticulous and dutiful observance of the demands of office. We all know that.

Home Truths About Seminary Formation

Having already looked in my previous talks at issues of on-going formation, let's move to seminary formation. But let's do so on the same grounds, with the same rationale: seeking the identity and vocation of the priest. I would like to begin with some 'Home Truths' about seminary formation.

Firstly, we all have an experience of seminary formation. So we're all experts! Yet that experience varies enormously, both in terms of time and place and in terms of the emotional impact of the memories we have. So the first home truth I'd like to propose is that among the real experts in seminary formation are the present staffs of the seminaries. As a group they work so hard to reflect on their tasks, explore new options, share together and struggle to find the best ways forward. I am reticent about too much easy criticism of all that they do.

Secondly, a key home truth is that nobody ever emerges from, or has ever left a seminary as 'the finished article'. The seminary years are part, a crucial part, of the formation of the priest. He always has much to learn about practically every aspect of his ministry. Of course young priests often struggle and sometimes have crisis moments. But let's not simply look at all the tasks of the priest and force 'training' for them into the seminary years, thereby expecting the new priest to be ready for everything on the day of his ordination.

A third key home truth is that there are hundreds and hundreds of fine, sound and wonderful priests in England and Wales. They – you – are steadfast men, faithful to your calling, provenly capable of adapting to new and very varied challenges, at times given to hidden heroism and still full of enthusiasm. And we are all products of the seminary system. So without going too far down the road of 'because of' or 'in spite of', I would say that we are right to build on the pattern of seminary life that has been evolving in the Church in a continuous way. Change is always under consideration but those who call for a radically different pattern of priestly formation have a demanding case to make. The seminaries have, on the whole, served the Church in England and Wales well.

Discernment – The Seminaries’ Key Task

The key task of the seminary years is to serve the discernment of a vocation to the priesthood and the initial development of the identity of the priest. This is the heart of seminary formation, its crucial issue. What must be developed and tested during those years is the student’s willingness to give himself to Christ, with the whole of his being, in the service of the Church. This is not training, it’s not on-the-job preparation, it’s not the acquisition of professional skills. It is, essentially, formation of the person.

As we are often told today, this task has four key strands: intellectual, spiritual, pastoral and human. The seminaries today work hard at developing these four strands, the balance and relationships between them and their coming together in clear and regular discernment and assessment. No easy task! The central home truth about seminary formation, at least as far as I am concerned, is that it must assist in the formation of that emerging identity of the priest which will shape all the relationships in and through which a priest lives his vocation.

Relationships – The Heart Of Priesthood

Relationships are, of course, at the centre of a priest’s life. That is true of every person. The relationships of a priest have a specific quality (as do that of husband, employee, colleague, or parent) and it is critical that the priest-to-be understands, embraces and lives the specific priestly qualities of those relationships. After all those specific qualities arise from who he is, most profoundly. They are his ‘raison d’etre’ in the Church. They are life-giving for him and his people. Their foundations have to be understood, their sources tapped into, their wisdom gradually acquired.

So, it’s a half truth simply to say that a priest has to be good at relating to a wide range of people. The full truth is that he, as a man, has to be good *as a priest* in those relationships, if he is to be true to himself and to the service of others. So, the seminary years are about the student coming to know himself as one called by God as a priest, formed in an understanding of priesthood, fashioned in the demands of the key relationship to Christ, tested in the context of the seminary, reflective on himself and his own experiences, aware of his need for continuing growth and formation.

Let me take one more dip into *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. It is quite challenging about one of the specific characteristics of the life and relationships of the priest. In paragraph 16 it says this:

“In as much as he represents Christ, the Head and Shepherd and Spouse of the Church, the priest is placed not only in the Church but also in the forefront of the Church.”

This is explained not only in terms of the life of the Church being a total gift of God, but also in terms of an apostolic role being precisely “in the forefront of the Church” as a visible continuation and sacramental sign of Christ in his own position before the Church and the world. Christ is ‘before’ the Church as the enduring and ever-new source of salvation, he “who is Head of the Church, his Body, and is himself its Saviour.” (Eph. 5.23)

The Prominence Of The Servant

The priest then, in a profoundly theological sense, is in a position of prominence. As it was once put to me, in the landscape of the Church the priest is a bit like a chimney

stack - not necessarily the most important, but certainly the most prominent. In stressing this point I do not want to be misunderstood. The evident, prominent role of the priest is rooted in the sacramental nature of Christian life and especially Catholic life. God's enduring presence is mediated in the tangible. The priest's role in this pattern of life, and as one of those signs, gives shape to all his relationships. He is to be visible, prominent, as a key sign of God's enduring love.

Others play a crucial part too, in the survival and developing of faith. You know such people in every parish. They are well-known and looked up to. They are often the saints in our midst. We know that and are constantly exploring ways of affirming and encouraging that leadership. As priests we must work with all those who contribute to the life of faith, and who could do so much more. Yet the contribution of the priest is distinctive and vital.

Another way of making this same point about the role of the priest is to say that an invisible priesthood is largely a contradiction in terms. The priest needs to be visible not only in the Church, but on the streets, in people's houses, in schools, hospitals, prisons, even – or especially – when his presence is a cause of contention, or perhaps hostility. The priest needs to know how to handle this identity and role. He needs to know why it is so and how deeply, totally it is part of him, of who he is. And forming that is a key task for the seminary years.

A Formative Community

The key means, the key dynamic, of this formation is the community of the seminary. The seminary has to be a community of formation, a community that shares its common purpose, that is committed to living together before the Lord, in order to discern and act on his will. It is a community dedicated to the on-going dialogue of vocation in its early and deeply formative years. It is a community focussed on understanding Christ, in prayer and in the living witness of the Church, and on understanding self in the complexities of our human response to the Lord.

For this to be the case the community of the seminary must have certain characteristics. Among them are these:

First of all, the community needs sufficient permanence to be a thorough testing of the motivation, intention, wholeness of the man who aspired to the priesthood. The seminary experience, then, shouldn't be dispersed. It needs a certain intensity and continuity. In this it is not like daily-living; it is a particular experience for a particular purpose. This continuity is crucial if the more hidden parts of ourselves are to come to light. Archbishop Kelly put it like this: "It's only forty-five minutes into the Holy Hour that the atheist in me really comes to the surface." Consequently, if I never stay still long enough, then that atheist never comes clean, but continues to have his say in unconscious, unacknowledged ways.

Seminary formation needs this permanence because it is intended to surface in me the self-seeker; the manipulator, the depressive, the insecure. Only when these aspects are surfaced can they be thoroughly addressed, humanly, spiritually, pastorally and academically. Recently I read, in a parish priest's assessment of a student, the following sentence: "Gradually he – the student – is learning that formation is not about either trying to defend or justify himself, nor about pleasing others." The task

of gaining some real Christian vocational maturity requires a community of formation.

Centred On The Presence Of God

Secondly, that community needs to be centred on the Lord, centred on God's presence, before whom everyone stands. This 'centring' is certainly an indication of the pattern each day should take. But I think it is also indicative of the shape of building that is suitable. It is no harm if the building should help its community to know they all stand – or kneel – together before something, someone, far greater than themselves. The building also needs to be a place that permits, or encourages, community – but a community of discipleship. Such discipleship is, of course, deeply personal and so personal space and time is crucial. Yet it is also profoundly communitarian, within the community of the seminary, yet never losing sight of the community of the Church and the wider society which is to be served. So the seminary needs both familiarity and space. It needs a location which has its own sense of purpose, neither swamped nor isolated. Within the seminary relationships are always important, and indicative of aspects of the process of formation. Yet seminaries are not a form of encounter groups, nor team-building exercises. They are centred on Christ. At the heart of the seminary is the chapel.

Distinct Roles But One Community

Thirdly, an important characteristic of seminary formation concerns the membership and different roles within the community. To take the staff first, being a member of staff is not easy. It requires someone – lay or ordained – who has a clear and shared understanding of the vocation and identity of the priest. A staff that gives out confused or conflicting signals is not going to be helpful. It also requires people who are able to hold the balance between accompanying students, being alongside them before God yet also directing, forming, discerning their process of formation. Maybe in this the seminary is indeed a reflection of the wider Church, which is not egalitarian nor regimental but communitarian, with an order, a distinction of roles.

The students, too, are also members of this community of formation. We need to be realistic in their regard. In my seminary year-group there were eleven or twelve of us. Nine or ten of us were late teenagers or just twenty. Only two had been to university. None had had full-time work experience. It's not so today. For the most part students enter seminary with a far wider experience of life, of relationships, of themselves; as John Armitage has put it, "Not so much under the patronage of St. Teresa of Lisieux, more under the patronage of St. Augustine of Hippo."

So there is much to work through. On the whole seminarians today do not lack the experience of a breadth of relationships. Often the references they have speak of their competence in work, in collaborative efforts. That is not their immediate need. What they do require is a chance to explore in depth the vocation which they have begun to experience, the identity which is to emerge from within them.

Following In The Footsteps Of St. Augustine

In this light the patronage of St Augustine is most appropriate. Recall the words, used in the Divine Office, from his 'Confessions':

When first I knew you, you lifted me up so that I might see that there was something to see, but that I was not yet the man to see it ... And I knew that I

was far from you in the region of unlikeness ...So I set about finding a way to gain the strength that was necessary for joining you. And I couldn't find it until I embraced the mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.

It is in this spirit that, more than ever before, seminary formation requires opportunities for looking at depth into the heart and soul, and acquiring, at depth, the beginnings of a lifelong bond with Christ, one that will be definitely sealed in ordination.

Beginning To Know Oneself

For me this is why the opportunity for a well-structured propedeutic year is so important. It is not, in my mind, the time for 'pastoral experience' or for getting inserted into the diocese. Rather it is a crucial time for beginning to know self, to appreciate the radical distinctiveness of priesthood, to becoming familiar with some of the well-springs of prayer and meditation. I am so glad that Valladolid is developing these possibilities in uniquely suitable circumstances.

These characteristics are important: stability, depth, clarity of purpose, complementarity of roles. Seminaries today are 'worldly-wise' places and the tasks of human formation, assessment, counselling rightly have their more prominent place.

Could I add another characteristic of seminary life today, and do so by means of a contrast. In my first three years in Rome, I was away from that community of formation for a total of three weeks. Today students are away from their College for anything up to 18 weeks each year. That's a lot of time. It is, in theory, still time 'in formation'. But I think we could give much more consideration to how well it is used.

Connecting Seminary Life With The Local Church

In giving that further consideration, it is important to keep in mind another crucial consideration: how does the seminary relate to the wider church, and how the wider church relates to the seminary? This, too, is a much explored and discussed area. For example we hear a great deal about the seminary in Ars which has developed a keen and vibrant relationship with the local, and wider, presbyterate. Extra space in some of our seminaries make this an important consideration. But let's concentrate on the extra time, especially the summer break. How can it best be used as a period of formation, but in a way which complements the term-time work of the seminary?

This year there's been a fruitful development at Oscott. At the end of the academic term two additional weeks were spent on structured visits to the seminary by classes from the top year of Diocesan Junior Schools. It was, I believe, a success, not only from the pupils' point of view – and they have written eloquently of their visits – but importantly as an exercise in formation. This was so because the students had to prepare systematically for the visit of each school group. They came thick and fast. In that preparation, and in the subsequent assessment, they had to work closely with teachers and other professionals. It was real collaboration. Yet more importantly still, the way in which the students were called on to give an account of their personal faith, a testimony, not only in front of the children but also in front of each other was deeply formative. This has been a development on which we can build. It enables the seminary to become, appropriately, a contributor to the life of faith of the diocese, and the people of the diocese to be a challenge to the students. Lots of other similar

ventures exist, I'm sure. They respect the distinctiveness of what needs to be going on in the seminary and contribute to it, too.

Rethinking Pastoral Placements

The customary way of using the summer break is with pastoral placements in parishes, but not, of course, to the exclusion of a holiday. These placements are coupled with pastoral or theological reflection. Much good work has been done. But I'm not fully convinced that this is necessarily the best use of this time for formation purposes. Often parishes are hardly at their most active in those weeks, priests are looking for a break and the schools are on holiday.

A wider range of pastoral placements are sometimes used, and rightly so: placements in which the seminarian can experience a quite different aspect of life and ministry in the Church, different social and economic settings to the ones he has accustomed, supervision by people not so familiar with the ways of priestly ministry would all be good experience.

A voice from overseas is interesting. In the book *Healing Priesthood*¹, I was taken by one of the contributions from a religious sister from East Timor. She speaks about her work in the village of Dare and of how young seminarians are sent to her centre in the countryside to experience her work with the poor, travelling with her young novices for two weeks' pastoral work in remote areas, then reflecting on their experience within her community. Sometimes this kind of pastoral placement abroad has happened with students from this country. An experience in such a setting is deeply enriching, at least according to what they have told me. It opens up links and friendships that can last and it gives a first hand experience of the Church in settings that are so different from our own. Pastoral experience of these kinds can make a vital contribution to the task of priestly formation.

Competing Demands

There is so much more that could be said about each of the four strands of formation in the seminary, and about how they are held together. How can the need for profound Catholic academic formation be maintained without reducing to poor relatives the other important strands of formation? How can the evident need for great care and professionalism in human formation be given its prominence without distorting the balance of life and the role of common sense? How can the different 'fora' in which formation takes place be properly understood and respected? How can the challenge of contemporary culture be brought to bear on the study of theology and the preparation for proclamation when the trend within the seminary is for it to become a world unto itself?

These, and many others, are the questions that seminary staff and governors grapple with today. They were reflected in your own contribution – from the NCP – to the Commission on the seminaries a few years ago. They may, perhaps, occupy your minds later today. I have tried only to give some basic perspectives which I believe are absolutely crucial and must not be lost.

¹ *Healing Priesthood*, ed. Angela Perkins & Verena Wright, London, DLT, 2003

A Charter For Ongoing Formation

One last thought. In many areas of life we are becoming accustomed to the language of our ‘entitlements’, often presented in a ‘Charter’. A hospital may proclaim its best intentions in a ‘Patients’ Charter’ and other public bodies have been tempted or cajoled into doing the same. I’m not sure how much their worth in practice, but it’s an attractive idea.

Could I borrow it for this last thought? I would like to see each newly ordained priest leaving the seminary with a clear statement of his ‘entitlement’ in on-going formation. Its public presentation would make it perfectly clear to all concerned that he has so much more to learn, to appropriate, so many areas in which to grow. The entitlement would need to be quite specific: dates, times, places. And substantial, too, not just an occasional few days which quickly become excusable, if not optional. I think of a number of two- or three-week periods within his first few years, away from the parish, perhaps in Rome or Valladolid, where real stock-taking can take place. Such an entitlement could cover his first five years. It would be, on balance, a reassurance to the new priest. It would also be the transition to a more structured and regular pattern of on-going formation, which so few have made. I hope we can develop something like that.

Formation For Mission

Whether today is a good time to be a priest or not can be endlessly debated. It’s the time – the only time – we’ve got. And it’s given us by the Lord. It is a time of continual discovery, as well as quite dramatic challenge. The two go together. The discovery of the paradigm of *communio* as the key to ecclesiology comes with the inseparable challenge that this *communio* is, of its nature, a sending out, a mission. In our concern for matters within the Church we must never lose sight of our defining mission. To do so is to take the short route to wider irrelevance. The discovery of the fundamental richness of baptism, drawing all into the mission of Christ as priest, king and prophet, comes with the challenge of the radical distance to be maintained between the life-style of the disciple and the life and standards of contemporary society. The more general discovery of ‘spirituality’ and the increasing recognition of the role of faith in public life and of the importance of inter-faith action and dialogue brings with it the challenge of being faithful to the uniqueness of Christ and the richness of Catholic teaching. For these reasons our initial and on-going vocation formation are so important and I’m glad that you give them your attention, not just for these few days, but in the months and years to come.

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