

Beyond Schooling: Seminaries, Integral Formation, and the Role of Academics

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Few communities of formation and education match the ambition of the Catholic minor and major seminary. Building upon the fruit of the seminarian's family life and over eight years of living in community, praying, studying, and exercising ministry, the church hopes to produce men who are intellectually, emotionally, morally, and spiritually mature. By way of the seminary's fidelity to the processes of integration, a man becomes capacitated for ecclesial service.

In its essence, the seminary is a set of relationships mediating the truth and love who is Christ the priest. This mediation is ordered by way of discreet areas of formation identified as human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. Within these areas of formation, the seminarian is invited to be vulnerable before the love of Christ, a love that carries him to the truth about doctrine, service, academics, and his own self. This encounter with love borne truth is known within the human and transcendent relationships that establish the seminary as a formational community. The seminarian welcomes this love-bearing-truth into his mind, will, and affect and in time becomes configured to Christ.

A seminarian becoming configured to Christ the Priest is the hope of the seminary staff. The location for both this becoming and this integration is the seminarian's very self—his very person. Such a process can be excruciating because of the constitutive condition of man, prone to resist truth and love. Formation is a suffering. In other words, leaving fantasy and entering reality is a suffering.

The genius¹ of the seminary is found in its commitment to be a community that both *mediates integral formation* (conversion) and *supports the seminarian who suffers such*

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integration. Without committing to integrate human maturation, spiritual development, intellectual acuity, and pastoral charity within the man himself, a seminary risks simply being a school. When the entire seminary community dedicates itself to the mission of integration, when it persists as a set of relationships configuring a man to Christ the Priest, then it can gift a mature man to the church. In turn, this new priest leads others through their own integrative conversions in the sacramental and communal life known as the parish.

The new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis, The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, prepared by the Congregation for the Clergy in 2016, prominently advocates the mission of integration at the forefront of a seminary's nature.² However, it is difficult for seminaries to persevere in becoming creative and vibrant cultures of integration. Formators need to be vigilant in resisting one or another component of formation from becoming dominate. The triumph of any one area of formation dominating the others threatens the possibility that true integration can occur within the seminarian. It can be seen, however, that different areas of formation have taken the ascendancy throughout seminary history.³ In more recent history (1970s) it was the pastoral area, but today the new *Ratio* singles out the academic area.

"Successful completion of the requirements of study cannot be the only criterion for determining the length of the formative *iter*

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of the candidate . . . because study . . . is but one aspect of integral formation."⁴ It goes on to state, "Formators shall ensure the cooperation of the professors . . . and shall meet regularly with them, in order to address teaching related matters, so as to promote *more effectively the integral formation* of the seminarians" [Author emphasis].⁵

It is natural for seminaries to emphasize studies because the bulk of the day is spent "in class." An obvious result of completing seminary is the awarding of an academic degree. Also, the academic staff is usually one of the largest in number and hence its influence is weighty. Further, the faculty is accountable to state and private accrediting agencies whose oversight places disproportionate emphasis upon this one area of formation. Finally, academics loom large in the imaginations of seminarians today because so much

of youthful identity is measured by achieving "good grades."

Historically, seminaries did not have an overemphasis on academics: in the not so distant past degrees were not earned. Even after degrees began to be granted, many seminaries eschewed commencement ceremonies, choosing instead to only highlight ordination.

In a commentary on the new *Ratio*, Archbishop Patron Wong more universally contextualizes the caution about academics, perhaps anticipating future cultural shifts that might bring about the dominance of other areas of formation. In universalizing the concern, the archbishop *identifies integral formation as the norm* for a healthy, functioning seminary life.

. . . because the seminary does not intend to form only intellectuals [intellectualism], despite taking the intellectual preparation of the seminarians very seriously. It also does not intend to achieve a monastic type of formation [spiritualism], although it certainly grants a central place to prayer and the sacramental life. It does not intend to form good organizers ["pastoralism"], although it is concerned with offering seminarians the best preparation for pastoral activities. Lastly, it is not concerned with forming only ministers of cult ["liturgism"], although it offers seminarians the best possible liturgical formation. These types of imbalances, often part of the tradition of our seminaries, tend to deform priestly identity.⁶

To remind all that one aspect of formation should not dominate is only fair. However, it would be rare for formation mentors to be the dominating power or for spiritual directors or field education supervisors to hold such a place in U.S. seminaries. These voices are more muted in relation to the voices of academics.

What then, would a more integrated academic program look like as it cooperates with the other three areas of formation in a unified effort not to "deform priestly identity"? Archbishop Patron Wong proposes one organizing principle for such a formation here:

Priestly formation implies a process of configuration to Christ the Head, Shepherd, Servant, and Spouse (Cfr. RFIS, 35), which consists in a mystical identification with the person of Jesus, just as it is presented in the Gospels. This mystical process is a gift from God that will reach fulfillment through priestly ordination. . . . Every mystical gift demands

the counterpart of ascetical practice, which is the human effort that follows the gifts of grace. To affirm the centrality of the formation of the interior man (see *Ratio* 41) means that the soul of . . . the entirety of formation is pastoral charity. It is about forming the heart so that it will internalize the sentiments and ways of acting of the Son, continuously finding itself consoled by the Holy Spirit. This strong interiority, which not only includes his activity, but also his life and his moral conscience, sustains him in the midst of difficulties and is the profound reason for his fidelity.⁷

This description of the seminary is quite remarkable in that it highlights the role of the mystical for the formation of men. Of course, “mystical” is not a reference to extraordinary phenomenon, but is what

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the Church has always taught it to be: a life proceeding from sacramental worship.

Hence in itself, such mysticism integrates all around Him who is truth and love.

This theme of the mystic, along with some others mentioned by Patron Wong, can help us imagine a more integrated academic life in seminary. The Archbishop emphasizes configuration to Christ as Head, Shepherd, Servant, and Spouse. He calls these realities “mystical identifications” with their roots in Scripture. Wong further delineates that a seminarian’s process of configuration to Christ the Priest is a “gift.” If this is true, then one of the guiding missions of the seminary is to teach men how to receive such a gift. It is the ascetical way, the way of self-denial, the way of ego deflation in the face of Christ’s humility, which creates a man who is better able to receive “gifts.” He explains

that seminaries should see the *formation of the interior man as its central work*. In this, I recall an earlier—and much ignored—document from the Congregation for Catholic Education, which promoted a similarly radical idea. It noted that the *seminary’s main task* was to form men *in interior silence*.⁸ Along with asceticism, interiority, and the mystical identities of Christ, interior silence helps seminarians suffer the integration that are the FOUR areas of formation.

The seminary, then, facilitates in men an established life that is more about receiving than accomplishing. It is a life hospitable to the indwelling Spirit, a life saturated in the ways of loving and being loved by Christ. This way of life is deeply mystical and sacramental, and because the self-donation of Christ is at its core, it is a life *marked by gratitude*. Becoming configured to Christ in His mystical identities is indeed Christ’s own gift. Christ changes the seminarian, Christ draws him up into His own mysteries, and the seminarian consents, obeys, surrenders, and renounces sin (asceticism) to facilitate Christ’s reach toward him.

Of course, the academic aspect of seminary formation is also at the service of these mystical identifications. It serves these movements of Christ toward the seminarian by showing hospitality to silence and prayer in the classroom,⁹ by allowing pastoral concerns to integrate with doctrinal and theological reflections, and by noting where the beauty of Catholic anthropological insights more deeply secure theological truths in the imagination. For academics to reach the authentic zenith of service *in a seminary*, it needs to promote the ever-deepening participation of a seminarian in a mystical configuration to Christ. Academics does this most consistently by facilitating reason’s wonder over the depths of Divine Love as revealed by the One who is the way, the truth, and the life.

“It is a fundamental theological conviction that reality itself is grounded in God, whose basic meaning is love. . . . [We] are convinced that rather than a commitment to the truth excluding love, only the presence of real love could be the basis of seeing the truth at all. Love and rationality, therefore . . . must be all of a piece. Reasoning . . . is only reliable when it is grounded in love.”¹⁰

This what the new *Ratio* is driving home as well: “Love and rationality are all of a piece.” We are limited in our ability to create a perfectly integrated system of priestly formation. We can, however, do better

than simply demarcate areas of expertise and affirm each professor as he or she orders study to its proper ends and purposes. To affirm this is to simply affirm

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the modern university. The new *Ratio* was trying to underscore such a view as minimalistic when it invited formators to “ensure the cooperation of the professors . . . and . . . meet regularly with them in order to address teaching related matters *so as to promote more effectively the integral formation of the seminarians*”¹¹ [Author emphasis]. No area of expertise takes the ascendancy and no area of expertise is unrelated to the forming of the whole man into a priest.

It is not uncommon for some seminary faculty to distance themselves from interest in the spiritual, human, and pastoral formation of the seminarian. This allows professors to stay “focused” on their unique skill and contribution. This professorial model lives on the fumes of university theology where the whole person in the form of the student is not the purview of the professors.

Many others on the university campus are interested in the student as a person; the professor is interested in the person *as a student*.

In the new *Ratio*’s vision, the seminary professor is also concerned with the seminarian as person/priest. This view of the professor does not undermine the nature of the academic mission, but accomplishes it by inviting professors to think about their task within their love of the priesthood, the Eucharist, and the pastoral mission of the parish. The reasoning executed in seminary classrooms must be grounded in the love of Holy Orders. It is not a generic theology, one serving its own purposes. Seminary theology is tasked to enter a dialogue with the very vocation it seeks to serve. Seminary theology delves into the truth about God

from within the mission of the Church as she forms men into priests.

In seminary, of course, theology and philosophy have the freedom to achieve their own intrinsic purposes. This must be so; otherwise, questions raised in the pursuit of truth would remain unanswered. But in a seminary, the structures promoting integration take the ascendancy, not the curriculum. Unlike in universities, the academic portion of a seminary is not its sole glory. In seminary, the converted, educated, and virtuous man lying on the cathedral floor is the community’s glory. He becomes that kind of man if all areas of formation cooperate to see him become *interiorly configured to Christ*—the necessary component for a man to be called “Father.” “The concept of integral formation is of the greatest importance, since it is the whole person, with all that he is and all that he possesses, who will be at the Lords service. . . .”¹²

The seminarian enters the ministry of the Lord if he internalizes formation through his appropriation of love and truth. With this internalization, he becomes a free man, no longer mimicking religious practice and moral virtue like a veneer,¹³ but possessing and being possessed by Christ *from within*. The new *Ratio* summarizes this in saying, “day after day he will internalize the spirit of the Gospel, thanks to a constant and personal friendship with Christ.”¹⁴ Again, because *Pastores dabō vobis* described it so well – the seminarian’s imagination is ignited in the service of pastoral charity first and foremost by being with Christ (Mk 3:13). If the seminarian sustains this friendship with Christ *as He labors to integrate His own mysteries within the man*, future parishioners will come to recognize the seminarian as a man who *was called*, who was *with Christ* (Acts 4:13) and who *was sent*.

Frenetic Scheduling

Beyond relativizing academics in favor of the integrating power of all areas of formation there remains another challenge undermining both academics and the mission of integration: the frantic pace of seminary life. A varied yet continual moan comes from seminary staff and students about the pacing of the *horarium*. This pacing needs to be abated in order to honor and promote contemplation in both its spiritual and academic manifestations. Integration will never be suffered deeply within the seminarian if the daily pace remains rapid. Failing to develop a more measured pace assures that future priests will fail to become the

“interior” men envisioned by the new *Ratio*.

One move academics can make in service to slowing the pace is to replace the often-weighty number of book requirements for each class with fewer, more substantial, titles. Fewer books of greater depth can be delved into repeatedly over four years, allowing the content to penetrate. All theologians know and love these kinds of books already. They are opened often, even just for the pleasure of reading their truth-bearing prose. Theologians would want the same for the parish priest as well: dependable sources of wisdom guiding homilies and pastoral counseling. A contemplative seminary produces substantive priests, molded by theology and prayer and equipped to creatively apply such to pastoral ministry. Over twenty years ago, in the first volume of *Seminary Journal*, Msgr. Liddy decried all the “. . . frenetic activity crammed into an academic year. The result of this attempt to develop all skills at once is that none are developed very well, not even the academic skills around which the rest of contemporary seminary training is ordinarily structured.”¹⁵

What if contemplation guided the pace of integration called for by the new *Ratio*? “Contemplation” here is not understood as the grace-filled passive possession of a person by the Spirit, a possession taking one to a place of communion by way of “sleeping” senses. Rather, seminary contemplation is the *prayerful commitment to behold truth* in all its forms and allow it to become *a wound of influence*. Here, contemplation is the mirror that reflects back to the seminarian all that has come to him by way of experience.¹⁶ In academics, such contemplation would be promoted around the beauty of truth; in human formation, around the truth about oneself; in pastoral ministry, compassionately beholding human need; and in spiritual formation, the beauty of Christ, Head, Shepherd, Servant, and Spouse. Such contemplation would need to be practiced in a community where frantic pacing is banished. True mentoring unto priesthood is given in the leisure necessary to facilitate such contemplation settling into the soul of the seminarian.¹⁷ This revolution against busy-ness will be the greatest hurdle for seminaries to ever overcome, even as we marvel at the possibilities in its demise.

As Msgr. Liddy’s meditations imply, it is necessary to imagine a twelve-month seminary and not an academic year. Is this the hope of the new *Ratio* as it promotes a propaedeutic year, a pastoral year, the opening of seminary to families, parish events, and so forth? Under the constraints of the academic year,

all such speculations appear as threats, carrying little promise. The universal protective cry from professors is “I have so much to teach, time is my enemy.” The new *Ratio* promotes ordination as the goal of a completed spiritual journey, not a completed academic degree. “This configuration demands that the seminarian enter profoundly into the contemplation of the person of Jesus Christ . . . [This] stage of *theological studies*, or of configuration, is aimed above all at the spiritual formation proper to the priest”¹⁸ [Author emphasis].

In none of this speculation is there any desire to promote seminaries as pious enclaves of murmuring fountains and prayer. It must be honestly questioned if the busy-ness serves academics’ deepest meaning, the retention of truth unto a man’s intellectual conversion. The jokes all bear some truth. How do you tell what year a priest graduated from seminary? Look at his bookshelf. The real test of a successful academic program is not the transfer of massive quantities of data from professor to seminarian, but the transmission of a love for theology and philosophy from professor to student. How many priests discovered a “favorite” theologian during seminary, read throughout their formation and beyond? If we can *go deep* into fundamental, substantive texts and end the demand for seminarians to conquer huge bibliographies, then perhaps a few more priests will catch the love that professors have for theology. Until the quantity of work is managed, seminarians will feel trapped to do the academic minimum. “Intellectual formation is part of *the integral formation* of the priest. Moreover, it serves his *pastoral ministry* and has an impact upon his *human and spiritual formation*, which draw rich nourishment *from it*. . . . Far from being . . . a means of acquiring more information . . . intellectual formation helps priests to *listen profoundly to the Word*, and also to the ecclesial community . . . to read the signs of the times” [Author emphasis].¹⁹

Having a keen sense of human nature, formators may be concerned that seminarians will become lazy from a “contemplative” schedule. This could happen if the *horarium* is left intact and new calendars are not creatively explored and experimented with. In the name of integration, more opportunities should be afforded for the seminarian to discuss, marvel, and retain theology as he notices its effects upon his prayer life, emotional life, and pastoral life. This means conversations with spiritual directors, mentors, and pastoral theologians will secure the contents of his study even more steadily over four to eight years. “The professors, in sharing and taking upon themselves the Plan of Formation of the Seminary

. . . ought to spur on the seminarians, and help them to make progress both in the area of [academics] and in that of the spiritual life.”²⁰

The End of the M.Div.?

The most dramatic experiment to enter in the pursuit of integration and contemplation in the seminary would be to replace the Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree with a Master of Arts (M.A.) or some equivalent degree.²¹ Of course, the new *Ratio* does not argue for this at all, but such a possibility must be considered. Nothing in canon law prescribes an M.Div. degree for Catholic priests. The *Program for Priestly Formation* notes this degree is the “recognized standard” for ordained ministry, but only seems to note it, not advance it as optimum.²² Pontifical degrees are “encouraged” in the *PPF*, and the M.A. is noted as providing “a deeper understanding.” If the M.Div. degree is not required, could an M.A. degree simply be offered within a four-year period of formation? Noting that such degrees carry around 36 credit hours, the possibilities for constructing formation with “integration” as its true center becomes an attractive and creative reality. Of course, laying the M.Div. degree aside does not mean dispensing with the pastoral components and practicums attached to such. Having no credit hours attached, however, and uncoupling the pastoral, liturgical, and practicums from the same, frees seminaries from accreditation oversight for these areas. The 100 credit hours demanded by an M.Div. degree then become available to seminary administration and staff for planning new ways of being with the Lord and one another.

“The educational endeavor helps seminarians to bring all aspects of their personality to Christ, in this way making them consciously free for God and others. In fact it is only in the crucified and risen Christ that this path of integration finds meaning and completion; all things are *united in him* (Eph 1:10) [29]” [Author emphasis]. Instead of our seeking seminary unity in the pursuit of a 100-credit-hour degree, we can seek seminary unity by integrating studies, human formation, pastoral training, and prayer “*in him*.” Perhaps by envisioning a new way of being together—even year-round—all areas of maturing in Christ can be given their due as the integrative keys to formation. The goal of priestly formation is not tied to time or degrees, but rather to “readiness.” Therefore, formation staff can order seminarians toward nascent expertise in

discernment (43), men able to “see” what God is doing.

Conclusion

New kinds of relationships among formators and how they are arranged between one another and the seminarians *in the daily horarium* will not only yield academic degrees, but the completion of a *genuine spiritual journey* for the seminarian as an integrated man. As our culture moves rapidly to unmoor itself from God, from reason, and from any community built around both of these, it is calling out for such a man. The priest needed today is committed to depth of study (not breadth), silence and contemplation, proclamation of the Gospel to those in need, acceptance of the truth about himself, and a dynamic prayer life intimate enough to not just support a celibate life, but to enflame desire *for it*. Such a man, the integrated man, offers the Western world a figure for contemplation as it races to its demise by its own choice to remain isolated from truth and God. *If* our culture notices such a man, it may have an opportunity to awaken to a new way of being, an invitation to interior peace and happiness. What a gift such a man would be to the Church and culture. The new *Ratio* seems to want to begin a conversation around forming such a man.

“The entire journey of formation must never be reduced to a single aspect to the detriment of others, but it must always be an integrated journey of the disciple called to priesthood.”²³

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Endnotes

- 1 See James Keating, “The Seminary and Western Culture,” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition, 14, no. 4 (2016): 1099–1111.
- 2 Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (8 December 2016).
- 3 See Charles Murphy, *Models of Priestly Formation* (New York: Herder, 2006), for an overview of the historical movements of seminary formation.
- 4 Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. (8 December 2016), 118.
- 5 *Ratio*, 141.
- 6 Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong, “Foundations of Priestly Formation,” Congregation for the Clergy, Accessed March

- 24, 2017, from <http://www.clerus.va/content/clerus/en/notizie/new4.html>.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Congregation for Catholic Education. "Spiritual Formation in Seminaries." I, no. 5 (6 January 1980).
- 9 For an earlier articulation of these ideas see James Keating, *Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian* (Omaha: IPF Publications, 2009).
- 10 Roberta Bondi. *To Pray and To Love*. (MN: Fortress Press, 1991), 36.
- 11 Ratio, 141.
- 12 Ratio, 92.
- 13 Ratio, 41.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Richard Liddy. "Formation: Developing Habits of Mind and Heart." *Seminary Journal*, 1, no. 3 (1995): 21.
- 16 St. Bonaventure. *Works of St. Bonaventure: Itinerarium Mentis Deum*. P. Boehner. (ed.). (New York: Franciscan Institute, 2002), 26.
- 17 Ratio, 46.
- 18 Ratio, 68-69.
- 19 Ratio, 117.
- 20 Ratio, 142.
- 21 Another option would be to retain the M.Div degree but reduce its credit requirement to about 70 credit hours, which the Association of Theological Schools will accept.
- 22 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed., sec. 231 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006).
- 23 Ratio, Intro. 3.