A CASE FOR THE FREE-STANDING SEMINARY

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THE UNITED STATES bishops' *Program of priestly formation* (1981) mentions three seminary models of formation: the freestanding (traditional) model, the *supplemental* model, and the *collaborative* model. Each meets the criteria of the bishops, but they differ on the location of the various elements of formation (community, academics, pastoral and spiritual). Despite their differences, however, all three models are variations on a basic paradigm in which community-living serves as the anchor for the spiritual, pastoral and academic programmes. What distinguishes the free-standing model is its stress on a fairly large *residential community* and the *single programme* of formation.

Before making the case for this type of formation, we need to state the kinds of criticisms some raise about this model. A moderate group of critics accepts the strengths of the free-standing model, but finds fault with the quality of seminarians or the effectiveness of the various formation programmes. They want to improve the model by tightening up admissions, raising standards in programmes and, in general, trying to assure that the seminary does its job well.

The more radical critics of the free-standing seminary do not accept the model because of what they regard as its ministerial, psychological, educational and economic problems. By training priests in the seminary, they say, it promotes an outdated understanding of ministry in the Church. By forming priests in a large residential community, it creates an unhealthy atmosphere that breeds dependency and passivity. By attempting to provide all the ingredients in formation, it over-reaches itself educationally. And, by over-reaching itself in programming, it creates economic difficulties.

Free-standing seminaries are aware of such charges and have tried to meet them, to some degree, by 1) incorporating some lay and religious students in the academic programme, 2) strengthening pastoral field education, 3) diversifying faculty, 4) co-operating with the local Church and with the ecumenical community, and 5) improving financial analysis, controls and development. However, the 'root criticism' here of the free-

standing seminary seems to be its community-structure. The basic assumption is that a residential community is not a good place to form priests. Other difficulties with the model flow from this one or are subordinate to it.

A context for evaluation

Before offering a case for the free-standing model, some preliminary remarks will provide a broad context for our evaluation of it.

First, some research on protestant seminaries now suggests that a lack of clarity about the nature of ordained ministry tends to inflate expectations about the newly-ordained.[1] This results in frustration and disappointment both for the minister and the congregation. The conclusion is that developing clear *standards of practice* for the newly-ordained will improve the morale of the first assignment, and also help the seminary improve its contribution to formation. This protestant experience is true for catholic seminaries as well. Being at the mercy of everyone's expectations does not help the seminary or the newly-ordained priest. As things now stand, the rhetoric of priestly ideals, not precise canons of practice, typify the guidelines against which the seminary is asked to measure itself. If this were corrected, and if behavioural standards were developed for the newly-ordained regarding specific priestly competencies, the seminary could bring more precision to its own task.

Second, the free-standing seminary's track record over the last twenty years has been, on balance, moderately successful. It has proved to be a far more adaptable institution than either its advocates or critics once thought possible. Since Vatican II, virtually every aspect of this model has been revised and even the model itself has been altered. It has modified its formation programme, community schedule, academics and pastoral education, and, over the same period, introduced new governance arrangements and achieved professional accreditation. These accomplishments were often bought at the price of intentionally destabilizing an older institution, and they were gained in a period of great unrest within the Church and within culture. In evaluating the free-standing seminary, then, we must keep in mind the progress it has made in the volatile circumstances of the previous two decades.[2]

Third, another perspective for evaluating the free-standing model comes again from the protestant context. A study on 'futures' of protestant seminaries recognizes the values of diverse seminary models for the Churches.[3] Currently, Protestantism has six types: free-standing denominational for larger Churches, free-standing denominational for smaller Churches, free-standing interdenomin-

ational, college-based theological schools, university-based denominational seminaries, and university-based divinity schools. In 1970 an experimental seminary model called Inter/Met was developed in Washington, D.C. It favoured parish-based formation over seminary as a better context for training ministers. It closed in 1977. The protestant experience testifies to the long-term strength of the free-standing model, especially if the denomination is firmly behind it. But it also indicates that other models, normally based at a college or university, are possible. There is, to date, not much evidence that a parish-based model has the depth of resources or the staying power to compete with these other seminary models.

Fourth, in another respect, the protestant experience is also instructive for Catholics. There is a trend now in protestant seminaries to give greater attention to spiritual formation and liturgy than was previously the case. In the past, seminaries cultivated the 'scholar-pastor' model of ministry. Today, the recognition of the importance of the sacrament, as well as the word, and the need for spiritual leadership have created a different emphasis in ministry and, therefore, in the task of the seminary. Catholic free-standing seminaries have a long tradition in connecting theological and spiritual formation. In some respects, then, they represent a possible future modification for the protestant tradition.

Finally, everyone has always recognized that the free-standing seminary provides a formation context that is different from the parochial or diocesan context. For twenty years, the seminary has developed specific programmes to compensate for this difference (e.g. field education, pastoral year, etc.). But it has not often been said that, in some respects, the difference between the seminary and the parish is really a compensation for the limits of the parish itself. The seminary experience compensates for the pastoral immediacy of the parish by providing an understanding of tradition and the historical efficacy of ideas. It compensates for the exteriorized life of service by providing a lengthy time to develop habits of prayer and reflection. And, it compensates for the specificity of the diocesan context by providing a regional or national sense of the Church.

All liberal education conducts itself as a 'step back' from immediacy in order to develop what Lonergan called 'differentiated consciousness'.[4] The free-standing seminary differentiates consciousness spiritually, traditionally, theologically and communally. Selectively during the seminary years, and even more afterwards, the parish differentiates seminary consciousness more practically, socially and locally. We need to respect these differences bearing them in mind as complementary emphases and strengths.

Value biases of the free-standing model

The free-standing seminary serves the Church as one of its mediating institutions. It mediates between a personal call and an ecclesial sense of ministry, between theological reflection and pastoral service, between a private sense of God and the Church's articulation of faith. It negotiates transitions in consciousness, understanding and skills for parish priesthood.

By definition, a mediating institution attempts to connect two worlds separated from one another. The biases of the seminary exist to make possible certain distinct transitions and to offset the inherent limits of the pastoral context itself. The seminary is not an end, but a means toward effective priestly service. To accomplish this, it has certain 'value-biases' incorporated into its very structure. By this I mean that the model offers a structural slope inclining it to some 'forms of life' and the indirect benefits they offer for ministry. These can be set forth briefly as follows:

1 *The house or residential community*

The free-standing seminary's basic form of life is the large residential community or 'house'. The building is an architectural statement of formation in community. It contains a chapel, a library, a dining room, classrooms, recreational spaces and private living quarters. In some respects it looks like a university, in some like a religious community, in others like a novitiate. By mixing all these types, it gains something each of them lacks. But that also explains the enduring confusion over the model itself.

The first purpose of the free-standing seminary is to contextualize personal religious consciousness through the community itself. All communes do this. They highlight the common good in order to develop a socially-conscious community servant. The goal of the seminary is to form a public minister in the Church, so the community serves as a symbolic reminder of the transcendence of the 'body of Christ' as a whole over the individual members, of the presbyterate over the individual priest, of the local Church over the ministry.

2 *Time and space*

The free-standing seminary community needs a spatio-temporal rhythm which is both symbolic and functional. It is symbolic in accenting certain religious, intellectual and communal gestures as its priorities. But it is functional in organizing schedules that take account of diverse needs in the community. The patterns by which the community orders itself are extremely important since they determine in advance where and when people interact, how often,

and what for. A rhythm of community living must take account of the need for private time, informal time and formal community time, and this happens best by custom instead of law.

A communal rhythm essentially militates against the secularization of time by sacralizing certain times and places and by symbolizing the community for itself. The residence is not a neutral container (a building) in which individuals work out for themselves the dialectic of the sacred and profane. Rather, it is a house structured consciously by this dialectic. In each generation, the free-standing seminary needs to determine how best to develop its symbolic community life.

3 *An integrated programme*

The free-standing seminary can arrange all of its programmes (community, spiritual, academic, pastoral) so that they form a whole, have a certain balance, and reinforce one another. The whole programme serves as a value-statement by defining priorities objectively and by integrating the various elements of formation in advance of the student's task of appropriation of them. *Integration* here is the objective pole of formation; *appropriation* is the subjective acquisition of an integrated programme.

The bias of the free-standing model, then, is its objective arrangement of the elements of formation to provide personal appropriation and development with clear priorities and multiple connection-points between faith, theology and pastoral action.

4 *Formation by faculty models*

The free-standing model sees faculty members as first models of priesthood (and ministry) for the students. This is basically an issue of lifestyle and embodied values about *being* a priest, before it is the transmission of ideas and skills about *doing* ministry. The identity of the faculty member, while including professional competency and credentials, is anchored in the ecclesial nature of priesthood (or ministry) and in participation in the community.

Because faculty members in today's free-standing seminaries are actively involved in the local Church, they also provide good models of co-operating with the magisterium and service to the wider community.

5 *Peer formation*

The moderate size and diversity of the members of the free-standing seminary allow for students to form each other, for a seminary tradition to develop over time, and for an organic transmission of formational values. The classes in the seminary

are smaller community groupings in which each student can measure himself against his peers. With today's older students, seminary communities have become healthier in terms of age, experience and temperament. Thus they are better locations than they once were for peer formation. Likewise, the growing ethnic and racial diversity, if it continues in the seminary, will provide a valuable cross-cultural context for priestly formation. The presence of laypersons, men and women, in the seminary adds an important pastoral realism to the free-standing seminary. Finally, the formation and evaluation of individuals, in and against the background of a larger community of peers, sharpen the criteria of suitability and readiness the faculty needs in evaluating students.

These are the primary 'value biases' of the free-standing seminary model. By and large, they focus on the potentials and 'spin off' effects generated by a community for formation. Often, the potentials are unrealized, and various weaknesses inherent in this model may sometimes impede its effectiveness.

Weaknesses in the model

Because free-standing seminaries put a high value on the community, deviations in the reality of community may occur. If the seminary is too small and self-centred, it may become an 'enclave community' or simply break down further into smaller and smaller groupings. Seminaries which admit marginal personalities may become 'therapeutic communities' shifting their emphasis from formation to therapy and counselling.[5]

The rhythm of the free-standing community's life can become unreal and artificial, or it can crowd out private time and space, or introduce too many regulations. In such a setting, people may easily become passive and fail to develop an internalized life rhythm which they can transfer into parish ministry.

An integrated programme can make too many connections for the students and unwittingly form mere consumers of its programmes instead of self-motivated and active learners.

Faculty members may become more like novice-masters or 'university-type' seminary professors and in either case not provide a balanced image of parish priesthood for the students.

Seminaries may admit unqualified students whose individual problems will become community problems in time, spoiling the formational environment itself which is so critical for this seminary model.

Finally, a seminary may not sufficiently compensate for its biases, and fail to deal with pastoral experience, with the socialization of seminarians into the diocesan priesthood and with how theological

and spiritual understandings are 'transferable' to the common-sense pastoral context.

All of these weaknesses can be satisfactorily addressed by the free-standing seminary, if it appreciates the importance of its own 'value biases' and develops specific compensating structures for them.

Future of the free-standing seminary

I believe that the future of the free-standing seminary model is dependent on a number of factors, some not directly under its control. A primary environmental factor here is the quality and number of vocations, for this directly impacts the quality of the formational community itself. On this single variable many other things depend. The latest research on seminarians nationally is more positive than anything in the past fifteen years on this point.[6]

Free-standing seminaries surely need to develop long-range planning in programming and financing if they are to remain viable. The Cara/Lilly studies have been a great help in fostering such planning. The July 1983 workshop of bishops and seminary rectors and its follow-up have also contributed a broad national perspective on the status of all seminary models. These developments augur well for greater collaboration among free-standing seminaries in improving their own model of formation.

Some things that can be done to improve the effectiveness of the free-standing seminary would be the following:

The next edition of the *Program of priestly formation* should develop concrete and clear expectations of the newly-ordained, and indicate how seminary formation relates to the first five or ten years of continuing formation in priesthood. It will not do merely to reiterate priestly ideals as the goal of seminary formation; we need practical canons of competency and virtue as the criteria for seminary formation.

Free-standing seminaries will need to take more advantage of their biases by developing better admissions standards and formation-evaluation models for the future. They are in a very good position to encourage communal educational processes—not just programmes—which enable students to learn skills to interpret and apply theological wisdom to everyday life situations. Because free-standing seminaries are normally closer to the local Church and the parish world than university centres are, they should concentrate their efforts more on elaborating models of pastoral theology supported by appropriate theoretical sophistication.[7]

The residential community life of the free-standing seminary presents distinct advantages for continuing formation of priests

and other ministers, provided that this respects the integrity of the seminary programme and helps it attain its specific formational goals.

In sum, the free-standing seminary is a tested church institution whose potential for the initial formation of priests and their continuing formation is considerable. Much of the proverbial 'bathwater' has washed off this institution from its more monastic days. We now need to build more consciously on its natural biases, launder the therapeutic emphases it picked up in the 1970s, and consciously situate it to meet the developing needs of the Church and priesthood in the next twenty years.

NOTES

[1] Clark, Margaret Fletcher: *We need people who: an exploration of criteria for ordained ministries in the Episcopal Church*, a report from the Board for Theological Education, 1982.

[2] Hemrick, Eugene: 'The Church in the United States', *Seminaries in dialogue*, no 12 (November 1985), pp 20–21. The *Final report* of the 1985 Synod makes the same point about post-Vatican II developments in the Church.

[3] Fletcher, John C.: *The futures of protestant seminaries* (The Alban Institute, Washington D.C., 1983).

[4] Lonergan, Bernard: *Method in theology*.

[5] See *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in american life*, by Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, (University of California Press, 1985).

[6] Potvin, Raymond H.: *Seminarians of the eighties: a national survey* (National Catholic Educational Association, 1985). See also, Eugene F. Hemrick and Dean R. Hoge, *Seminarians in theology: a national profile*, (United States Catholic Conference, 1986).

[7] See, for example, the excellent theoretical model for pastoral theology developed in Donald Capps, *Pastoral care and hermeneutics*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1984).