

# FORMATION AT A SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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**I**N THE MIDDLE of February of this year we received some papal visitors here at the Weston School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. For three and a half days a six-man team examined the administrative, academic, pastoral and community life aspects of this national Jesuit School and the formation programmes of the three religious communities which currently send men to Weston for theological and ministerial preparation for the priesthood (the Jesuits, Franciscans and the LaSalettes). The basic concern of the visiting team echoed the one expressed by Pope John Paul II when he mandated the visitation of all United States seminaries, schools of theology and seminary colleges. How well are these institutions preparing men for priesthood in the post-Vatican II Church?

Preparation for the papal visitation allowed the people responsible for the health and growth of Weston and of its associated religious communities to step back and take stock on how well things were going. In writing the documentation which explained the various programmes and the rationale for them, administrators and religious superiors were able to assess how much things have changed since 1968.

Eighteen years ago Weston College moved from the countryside to Cambridge. Until 1968 Weston was a philosophate and theologate belonging to the New England Province and devoted exclusively to preparing jesuit scholastics<sup>1</sup> for the priesthood. The move to Cambridge involved more than a change of location. At first other religious communities such as the Oblates of Mary Immaculate contributed faculty to and enrolled students in Weston. Jesuits from other parts of the country joined the student body and the faculty. Then some lay and religious women joined the ranks of students and Weston turned even more decisively in the direction of becoming a school of theology. Another major feature of the move involved the separation of school and jesuit community administratively, geographically and financially, while Weston remained a thoroughly jesuit enterprise and a single legal corporation.

At the present time there are some seventy-three Jesuits in the

three years of theology leading to ordination and an additional fifteen studying in fourth-year for an S.T.L. or Th.M. degree. Seven men of other religious communities are preparing for priesthood as well. In addition, forty laymen and women and fifteen women religious are studying for the three year Master of Divinity or two year Master of Theological Studies degree.

This simple recounting of Weston's recent history and the present composition of its student community indicates how extensive the evolution has been. Some of the differences between jesuit formation now and twenty years ago are traceable to the decision to change Weston from a theologate for Jesuits to a school of theology (or, to use the phrase Fr Pedro Arrupe formed, a 'theological centre' involving both a school and its associated jesuit community). Other changes are traceable to the renewal of religious life sparked by Vatican Council II and by the thirty-first and thirty-second General Congregations of the Society of Jesus. Both the internal and external contexts of formation have undergone serious change.

#### *The internal context of formation*

What strikes me first of all when I compare the experience of formation in theology now with my own time at Woodstock College, Maryland from 1965-1968 is the intensity of the process and the depth of it. Scholastics now see their rector minimally three or four times in the school year for the account of conscience. This account, which forms the heart of a Jesuit's relationship with a superior, involves sharing with him his graces, hopes, struggles, temptations so that the superior can help the individual in his growth as a jesuit apostle. When I was a student of theology by contrast, it seemed that you went to the rector only if you were in trouble! Scholastics meet with their spiritual directors every two or three weeks for conversation focussed on the relationship between their prayer and their life-experience. Annually, the men meet with their peers in the same province to discuss issues of priesthood and apostolate. The directed retreat now forms an important element in the scholastic's life with God.

Another dramatic difference lies in the living arrangements. Instead of living, as one formerly did, in one enormous building with perhaps two hundred and fifty fellow Jesuits, members of the Weston Jesuit community in Cambridge live in thirteen residences in groups of five to fourteen. There are priests and scholastics in each house, and the rector is the superior of all of the houses while living only in one. An elected house co-ordinator provides liaison between each of the sub-communities and the central office.

Weston's sister institution, the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, shares this model of jesuit governance, which is unusual because there is no resident superior in each house. Much of the formation goes on among the members of the sub-communities in their day-to-day living, as well as in their interaction with their fellow students at the school.

Each sub-community meets on a regular basis to discuss life-style, common concerns regarding priesthood and future ministry. Members of the small communities show their care for each other in taking turns cooking and performing various house jobs. And when the time comes to apply for ordination, they show their letter of petition to the members of their sub-community for their comments. Eucharist is celebrated in the small communities except for the weekly all-community and all-school masses. On Sunday scholastics are encouraged to celebrate with the people of God in the parishes.

Because of the 'diaspora' character of the community, the rector regularly gathers the members of the community in small meetings (by years, or as permanent community members). The image of community which operates in the minds of most people is that of small community, and the unity of the entire community of one hundred and forty becomes concrete only at the major liturgical celebrations during the year, or when the rector addresses the whole community.

In the consciousness of most scholastics, ordination is both a long-awaited goal of their more than ten years of formation and the further development of themselves as jesuit apostles. Many of the major investments and struggles for identity occur in the earlier years of formation in that process of incorporation into the Society. In this respect jesuit students for the priesthood are very different from diocesan candidates studying for priesthood. While diocesan seminarians begin their explicitly formational programme with full concentration on parish ministry, the jesuit scholastics focus first on being incorporated into a *community* of apostolic companions. To be sure, movement to ordination involves a major decision to become a public representative of the Church through the ministry of word and sacrament, but the movement is a further expression of jesuit identity.

The 'becoming a priest' has changed in an important way for Jesuits, however. Whereas twenty-five years ago the practice and theory of priesthood in the Society of Jesus allowed an ordained Jesuit to celebrate Mass in a side chapel with (at most) a server present, and with some involvement in a parish by way of 'supply' on weekends, the contemporary jesuit scholastic has to look at

priesthood as more than the 'rounding off' of his identity as jesuit apostle. He must ask himself several basic questions: do I want to minister to a community or communities through word and sacrament? Do I want to foster that relationship to Church in a regular, public fashion, letting my ministry as teacher, retreat director or social justice minister come to moments of public celebration in that word and sacrament? This ordained ministry, as understood in the post-Vatican II Church, challenges scholastics to become more explicitly men of the larger Church beyond the Society of Jesus. The contemporary scholastic is called to choose priesthood as a new step in the Lord's service and to do so recognizing that at the present time priesthood, as part of a larger web of church ministry, is undergoing major shifts and changes and he will need to keep alert to the import of those changes for himself and the Church.

### *The external context*

Reflecting on this division I am making between internal and external contexts is very instructive of itself. In the past, when writing about a theologate, the line of division would have been much clearer. What was jesuit, 'in-house' on the one hand and the world of 'external' on the other would be easily distinguished. But in our present situation at Weston things do not line up the same way. The school and community form one theological centre, one jesuit apostolate, one formational location for Jesuits. But the school, while jesuit as to leadership, financing and most of its staffing, is not an 'in-house' entity. It exists principally to educate Jesuits moving to priesthood but it also—and in substantial ways—exists to prepare other than Jesuits for ordained and non-ordained ministries. In the consensus of scholastics the community and school are not identical. One 'lives in' the community and 'goes to' the school. The school is not 'ours', they sense, the way the community is 'ours'. Superiors hope that scholastics will experience the school as a most important part of the internal context of formation, but too often it is the most significant external component in their thought and sensibility.

Even with this ambivalence, most scholastics would agree with the Provincials' decision to locate the theological education of young Jesuits in an urban, ecumenical setting which encourages peer-ship between men and women and between lay people and religious seeking ordination. The wisdom of this decision has been borne out again and again as Jesuits and their classmates have learned to study, minister and pray together, developing habits of collaboration which are urgently needed in the american Church.

As the rector of the community and because of my nine years as a full-time member of the Weston faculty, I am very concerned that the scholastics become friends with the non-jesuit members of their class and, indeed, of the whole school. At other periods of the course of formation they studied and worked with peers who were not Jesuits, but only when they come to theology do they find themselves in class with men and women, lay and religious who are explicitly moving, like themselves, toward public ministry. This new situation means that the scholastics will be invited to enter into experiences of the Church often quite different from their own, and to acknowledge issues which are not spontaneously their own. It comes as a bit of a shock, for example, when one meets a lay man or woman of similar age as oneself who must work full-time for the financial support needed to go through the three-year Master of Divinity programme. After all, the scholastic by contrast studies his way through Weston on what amounts to a full-time scholarship. Even more upsetting and challenging is the call from women to scholastics to suffer with them (compassion) in the pain of their experience of a male-oriented Church.

It is essential that our men study theology in a context such as Weston's. Any differences between Jesuits and non-Jesuits in academic background (particularly in such areas as philosophy) have to be viewed in the light of the actual experience of students at Weston. School administrators are satisfied that the quality of students is uniformly high even with the variety of backgrounds.

The M.Div. has always been strong academically and recently both the pastoral section and the field-education programmes have been strengthened considerably. Efforts to integrate these two dimensions of a theological education continue, and in this struggle Weston is like all her sister institutions around the country.

A further strength is the presence of continuing-education students, priests and women religious well seasoned in ministry who add a much needed dimension of experience to the student community. Membership in the nine-school Boston Theological Institute, especially the neighbouring Episcopal Divinity School (whose facilities we rent) and the Harvard Divinity School provide many additional options for courses for our students. The Church in Boston provides opportunities to be of pastoral service and living in ordinary neighbourhoods helps keep us real.

All in all, the advantages far outweigh any disadvantages in Weston as a School of Theology and Theological Centre. We needed to learn to live more simply, to enter more deeply into the experience of women and the poor, to reflect more solidly on jesuit priesthood for the 'eighties and 'nineties, to foster more adult

forms of learning, to let the pastoral affect the academic more vitally, and vice versa. But these are good, healthy issues to continue to address, and we live and study and pray in basically healthy contexts in which to address them.

The papal visitors said the very same thing.

#### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> A jesuit candidate for the priesthood in the period between the end of his novitiate and his ordination is commonly known as a 'scholastic'.