Opinion
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by NCR Staff

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In January, NCR began an occasional series on seminary formation in which we attempt to answer how priests are being formed, who is teaching them and if seminaries are adapting to the new wave of abuse crises and condemnation of clericalism from the papacy. We are reviving that series now by publishing letters to the editor responding to the reports. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

In response to "Jesuits in formation fit in with other theology students at Boston College," I did full-time graduate studies in religious education and pastoral ministry at Boston College beginning in 1980. I had a high school education with the Jesuits at St. Francis Xavier's College in Liverpool.

I bumped into a number of the Jesuit scholastics who taught me at St. Francis Xavier when I played sports against them at Heythrop (Jesuit faculty of theology for British Jesuit seminarians) during my time in college. My wife and I spent the first four years of our married life (1970-1974) teaching in Montego Bay, Jamaica, where the chancellor of the diocese was a Boston Jesuit and on moving to Canada, one of my first stops was the Ignatius Jesuit Centre in Guelph, Ontario.



My ongoing involvement with the Jesuits was because of the humanity — they were real people. It was great meeting them during my time at Boston College as "since the 1970s, Jesuits have been formed by taking classes that include lay students. Boston College is different from more traditional seminary programs" but my experience of Jesuits — scholastics and priests — went back at least two decades before that.

The Jesuit preparation involved Jesuit seminarians getting real life experience with honest-to-God-real-life people before beginning their final theological studies and that, I believe, is what makes them approach their theological studies somewhat differently from those whose "training" (as opposed to "education") was conducted "in rural settings, away from the distractions of urban life."

JOHN QUINN

St. Catharines, Ontario

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It was heartening to read of the new paradigm of Jesuit formation.

For many years now, I have thought that all seminary formation should be abolished except for those choosing the monastic life. No one should even be considered for priesthood candidacy until he (she?) has completed at least an undergraduate degree at a coed college. And yes, master's work should indeed be done in a coed school of theology, preferably one that includes interfaith exposure. In our time, it is so very necessary to have a broader view of the spiritual life than was — and maybe still is in some seminaries — available 40 or 50 years ago.

Furthermore, for those who feel called to priestly service, formation would be best pursued in a parish setting. Candidates for that office would most certainly learn a lot about real life issues from the people whom they aspire to serve.

As for canon law, I suppose as a practical matter, it's good to have some acquaintance with legal issues; but for sure, the Gospel is far more important. To get hung up on "jots and tittles" is to miss entirely Jesus' message of healing and mercy.

So, bless those formation directors that adhere to the new paradigm.

BARBARA SCHLOTFELDT

Tacoma, Washington

As a professor at Sacred Heart Major Seminary, I read with interest Peter Feuerherd's article, "Pope Francis' critics at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit are vocal online." The professors mentioned as the critics of Pope Francis are my friends and colleagues, and I respect their right to voice their opinions even if I disagree with them.

It would be wrong, though, to think that most professors at our seminary are critical of Francis. I for one authored or co-authored five articles defending *Amoris Laetitia* in La Stampa's Vatican Insider. I also published two articles in Catholic World

Report defending Francis' teachings against capital punishment.

My colleague Janet Smith is correct that our faculty tries to abide by the profession of faith and the oath of fidelity. Those who are critical of Francis do not carry their criticisms into the classroom. This is most important, especially for future priests. Canon 245.2 of the 1983 CIC tells us that students in priestly formation "are bound by humble and filial charity to the Roman Pontiff." Canon 273 states that "clerics are bound by a special obligation to show reverence and obedience to the Supreme Pontiff and their own ordinary."

I've always tried to be mindful of these canons in my teaching and my publications — whether the pope is St. John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI or Pope Francis. Please pray for us at Sacred Heart Major Seminary. We're not perfect, but we try to be faithful to Christ and his church.

ROBERT FASTIGGI

Detroit, Michigan

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Those critics sound almost exactly like the high priest and pharisees condemning Jesus. How odd. How pitiful. How sad.

BILL LAUDEMAN

Red Bank, Tennessee

"Screening, service, reflection are Mount Angel's antidotes to clericalism" is another example of rearranging the deck chairs. I am a graduate of Mount Angel (1983), ordained for the Seattle Archdiocese (June 1994) and now married (December 2000). I recall my two-plus years at Mount Angel with a mix of fondness and sadness.

I have no solution to the problem of clericalism that I believe to be at the root of so many ills in the Roman Church. But I can't help but think that getting rid of the clerical collar would be a huge step in the right direction. Most seminarians start wearing the collar — a sort of indoctrination into the clerical caste. If you set yourself apart by clothing you are never going to smell like sheep. If you remove yourself for studies that do nothing but whet the appetite for the professional clerical life you're

never going to smell like sheep. If you persist in making yourself "ontologically different" you're never going to smell like sheep.

At one time, priests were trained by other priests, one-on-one in parishes. Maybe that's the solution. Maybe Roman seminarians and priests should be forbidden the collar. It would be interesting to see how that impacts things. Sometimes doing little things to the superficial makes a profound impact in the interior.

BOB RILER

Fircrest, Washington

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Regarding the ongoing clergy sex abuse reports and their impact on priesthood formation processes, the Mount Angel seminarians and seminary representatives appropriately spoke of concern, apology, reparations, honesty, transparency, human frailty, sin, and commitment to service.

However, I did not sense in the quoted comments an awareness of the deeper issues and causes of the abuse crisis, i.e., clericalism and abuse of power and authority. More reflection and creative initiatives by seminary leadership and spiritual directors will be needed to bring about true reform and an end to such horrific abusive behaviors.

MARTY SMITH

North Ridgeville, Ohio

"New report warns against priests placing themselves above laity" makes interesting reading, but misses the point.

The distinction between the laity and the clergy is unrealistic. Drop the term "laity" and clericalism automatically collapses. All members of the church are equal human beings. Our vocation is to grow into the fullness of humanity like Christ.

Structures of superiority support the dominator model of society and dehumanizes people. Rather than write documents about the laity, the urgent need is to start unwinding the hierarchical structures and values. The people of God have different roles, not ranks. Vestiges of this practice are still found in the current liturgy of ordination when the bishop consults the people about the person to be ordained.

Unfortunately, people privilege the ordained paving the way for a hierarchical dispensation. This aberration is strengthened by the current theology which doubles as the ideological tool that maintains the Catholic hierarchy. Hierarchical models are dehumanizing and sinful.

Rather than produce new documents to modify these sinful structures, these sinful structures must be discarded along with the theology that sustains it. "The mysterious ontological change that happens at ordination, a part of the church's doctrine" strengthens this ideology. The need is to restart from the beginning. Difficult, yes; impossible, that is a way of saying that we do not want change!

Take up the challenge of renewal initiated by Vatican II and realize the paradigm shift launched by Jesus.

(Fr.) JOHN THARAKAN, SDB

Ravulapalem, India

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The article states, "The pope has roundly condemned clericalism and, in an earthy image widely quoted, urged priests to be shepherds who take on the smell of their flock." The pope is trying to rid the institution of clericalism, but unfortunately he is perpetuating clericalism by implying that the laity "smell" bad and need shepherding. This not-so-subtle form of clericalism is still allowed and is ingrained into seminarians, perpetuating their feelings of specialness.

Some would argue that the pope's comparison to sheep is based on Jesus' exhortation to Peter to care for his sheep. However well-intentioned this comparison, it is offensive to the modern, thinking Christian: it implies that the minister doesn't smell and is, therefore, more capable than the laity.

We laity don't think of ourselves as sheep any longer. We are thinking adults responsible for finding our own path to God. If the priest can offer some insights or help, it will be because of his own learning or virtue gained through study and practical living, not by his "specialness" or a magical infusion of knowledge or grace at ordination. The so-called ontological change occurring at ordination is an outmoded notion and the report rightly states "The church [has] to pull away from a focus on the ontological changes conferred at ordination," if it expects to have credibility in the modern world.

Jettison the sheep/shepherd image and "ontological change" verbiage and let the ordained walk among the laity as ordinary people who have the function to preside at Mass and traditional Catholic events.

MARY HEINS

Indianapolis, Indiana

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I was glad to see the article on the report from Boston College regarding seminaries. I am among the "older" clergy, being somewhere beyond 70 and am probably a "Vatican II" priest.

The report mentioned should probably be read by all people involved in seminaries and preparation for priesthood. We certainly should see ourselves as part of the community of the faithful and not somehow above and apart from them.

There are danger signs among some of the younger clergy. Some seem too enamored of the trappings of priesthood and seem to have a kind of nostalgia for some "old days" of which they were never a part. There also may be a clinging too much to a sense of being "right" over against all the "wrong" people.

When I was in a parish, I tried to let the people teach me how to be a priest. We are all in this together.

(Fr.) TOM ZELINSKI

Washington, Michigan

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The article on priestly formation, citing the report from the Boston College, "To Serve the People of God" struck a chord with members of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests.

A group of us recently completed a white paper addressing the needs for renewal of priestly formation. In that paper, we raised five issues that we see the Boston College report affirms, namely the need to refocus on principles of Vatican II, promoting priesthood as a way of service, not of domination, encouraging formation in a context where seminarians study with lay students, women and men, improving the psychosexual formation of seminarians with aid of trained professionals and finally focusing on vocation to priesthood as a call from God, discerned by seminarians and faculty.

We were pleased to learn that the writers of the Boston College report had access to our white paper. The similarities bear that out. Our common hope is that bishops and seminary faculties serious consider the proposals that both papers offer.

(Fr.) LOUIS ARCENEAUX, CM

New Orleans, Louisiana

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Thank you for your article on seminary formation. I have been a priest now for 25 years and I work with the worship office of our archdiocese.

For many years now, I have received phone calls from pastors of newly ordained exasperated because they do not know the rites of the church. What were they learning in the seminary all those years? There is an attitude among (some of) the newly ordained that their only "job" is to say Mass each day and then hit the gym.

As far as working with parishioners or developing ministries, they are frequently bereft. I have heard from seminary faculty and administration that they fear correcting seminarians because they will complain to their bishops who then tell the seminary to back off because they have so few vocations. But what is the point of ordaining a man who has no idea how to be a priest?

As the current crisis continues to unfold in the church, it is becoming more and more obvious that it is time for the pope to call a council in order to address this disaster.

On the agenda must be: reexamine how bishops are promoted, reform of the clergy and seminary reform.

(Fr.) THOMAS DENTE

North Caldwell, New Jersey

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I understand that seminarians are seldom guilty of clericalism. I assume most young men come into these studies wanting to serve God and man in his best way and is willing to spend time learning to do just this.

My concern is with priests (infrequently) who become overly concerned with control of his parish. Parishes belong to the parishioners. Parish councils are intended to do much to keep control in the hands of lay people with input from the pastor, but, too often, councils are hand-picked by pastors who control the councils. Surely there should be some kind of lay oversight of parish spending.

JO BEECHER

Blue Grass, Iowa

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As seminaries (not all) became corrupted by accepting and sometimes promoting abuse, pedophilia, and promiscuity, now it is critical to change the education given at seminaries and other Catholic schools. That is 100% right.

It is also critical to involve adult parishioners to teach fidelity to Christ's teachings, the Golden Rule and the 10 Commandments. They are also responsible for holding the hierarchy responsible, for finding out where donations go, and who exactly is being assigned to work in the parish.

Education has to be on all of these issues. Catholic educators have an unparalleled chance to influence the future of the church, in fact perhaps to save it.

PAULA LENCZYCKI

Grayslake, Illinois

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The emphasis in "Seminaries, relatively recent in church history, are still evolving" necessarily belongs on the word "evolving." I haven't had anything to do with seminarian formation, which I am sure is a tough job. However, I find the current crop of young men to be very much in lockstep with their "secular" peers. With regard to sexual formation, they, like others of their generation, have already made their pre-seminary decisions about sexual issues. Their beliefs are often formed with great compassion and with a wonderful sense of inclusion among themselves — all this, without much help from good intentioned "buttinskies."

In my casual and sometimes clinical conversations with many of them, they mostly disregard their seminary's teaching about sexuality. Either the curriculum lacks credibility or they think the church's position does not apply to them. Perhaps, they are on to something. What other profession finds it necessary to instruct candidates about one of the most basic elements of humanity?

Why does the church think it has competence to speak about sexuality? Are we ever going to learn that this appropriation has compromised almost every other positive contribution the church has made to faith and society?

Once, in responding to a call from a local newspaper asking questions about seminary training in sexuality, I said I saw no evidence of a drill on that topic. For my efforts, I got my head handed to me by a bishop who retorted the seminaries were doing a better job on this issue than the Harvard Medical School. That was in the '90s, which of course is supposed to prove the point of your article. Have you seen any progress since then? I haven't.

Like so many other crucial issues in today's church, seminary education needs to be reimagined. I do not believe it is the responsibility of the seminary to teach people how to be people. Candidates need to be grown up before they are accepted. Otherwise, evolution notwithstanding, you will be republishing this article again in 10 years.

(Fr.) EDWARD LAMBRO

Paterson, New Jersey

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While I read with interest Peter Feuerherd's article on seminary education, I was puzzled that he made no reference to the model offered by Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, the largest graduate school of theology in the U.S. While it is certainly not a seminary anywhere like the "classic" model — the students all live off-campus and not all the students are affiliated with religious communities — its contribution to priestly and ministerial formation since the late 1960s shouldn't be overlooked.

I write as a priest of the Society of the Divine Word (ordained 1975) whose own theological formation was at St. Patrick's College in Maynooth, Ireland. We lived off campus in our own community residence but also rented out rooms to two other religious communities and lay students.

Since ordination, I have worked in formation here in Japan and in the United Kingdom, and worked for many years in the education apostolate. At one stage I worked with seminarians who came to Japan on what is known as the "cross-cultural training program." Now my ministry focuses on the resident and migrant foreign worker and exchange student community here in central Japan.

(Fr.) BRENDAN KELLEHER, SVD

Nagoya, Japan

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Just as Servants of the Paraclete founder Fr. Gerald Fitzgerald tried to warn the American bishops of the coming scourge of priestly pedophilia, thanks to your recent series on American seminaries, I discovered a treasure trove of information in Robert Anello's book: *Minor Setback or Major Disaster? The Rise and Demise of Minor Seminaries in the USA, 1958-1983*.

In his review of psychological literature, he cites the research of Benedictine Fr. Thomas Verner Moore, whose "ground-breaking 1936 study on insanity in priests and religious, noted higher incidences of schizophrenia, alcoholism, manic depression, and paranoia in Catholic clergy than in the general population. Six years later, Thomas J. McCarthy 'observed that the average seminarian had a higher neurotic tendency than the average student.' "

No wonder the hierarchy has been so afraid of the social sciences all these years.

CRAIG B. McKEE

Lakeland, Florida

As a former priest who left the active ministry to marry, I find I share many of Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's concerns about the modern seminaries.

Reading his recent article, "The Catholic Church's US seminaries need reform," I would like to offer some further suggestions.

1. Consider using some wise old (or not so old) nuns as spiritual directors in the seminary. As women, they have a different outlook and the young priest needs some insight into the needs of his female parishioners. Actually, I would suggest that many nuns would make better spiritual directors anyway.

2 . Require some specialized training in clinical and counseling psychology for seminarians.

3. Put more emphasis on Scripture and less on canon law.

4. Provide better training in preaching, both in content and delivery of sermons.

Thank you for the quality of your journalism, for the integrity and insight you and Michael Sean Winters bring to your writing, even though I occasionally disagree with you.

BILL KEANE

Leesburg, Florida

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Twenty years ago, when writing on the distinction between holy folly and worldly folly (*Jesus the Holy Fool*), I wrote that when those who see spiritual power as a source of ego-gratification receive Holy Orders, "they not only distort the function of the priesthood, but also alienate those in their care from the church itself and sometimes even from God."

Often fiercely loyal to Rome, they fail to understand that the mystery of priesthood lies in the passionate celebration of life and in the willingness to embrace vulnerability, ambiguity, uncertainty, creativity, truth-speaking and risk-taking. Sadly, many of our seminaries have reduced the spiritual life to book knowledge, producing administrators who, instead of inspiring their flocks, shepherd them into conformity.

As pointed out by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, this situation is unlikely to change as long as the bishops who oversee the seminaries uphold the status quo. The logical conclusion is that it is not only the seminary system that needs overhauling, but also the episcopate. Is a hierarchy really necessary in the 21st century?

True, there is a need for leadership, both globally and locally, but there are alternatives to the pyramid of power — alternatives that involve shared power with the laity, including women, that would be more closely aligned with the vision of Jesus. We need less silk and lace, greater simplicity; more prayer, less intrigue; less magic, more mystery; less exclusiveness, more compassion; less vanity, more humility; less privilege, more servanthood; less "orthodoxy," more imagination.

ELIZABETH-ANNE STEWART

Chicago, Illinois

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