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SEMINARY FORMATION: ADDRESSING CLERICALISM AND SEXUALITY

Katarina Schuth, OSF[♦]

St Paul Seminary School of Divinity, Minnesota

Abstract

During the past two decades, Church leaders throughout the world have grown increasingly concerned about the causes and context of clergy sexual abuse of minors. For many centuries, the Church issued no universal documents requiring seminaries to adapt formation programs in response to religious and cultural changes. The connection between sexual abuse and clericalism has surfaced only recently. A review of seminary practices indicates that administrators and faculty have made progress in amending some areas of formation, especially human formation, introduced in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* in 1992 by St Pope John Paul II. Even so, seminary leaders consider necessary many more improvements. The situation requires giving more attention to the development of affective maturity in seminarians in all areas of formation, especially by evaluating and correcting behaviours in pastoral settings that exhibit an attitude of clericalism. The Vatican's

♦ **Sister Katarina Schuth, OSF**, has been a member of the Sisters of St Francis in Rochester, Minnesota, since 1960. She has held the Endowed Chair for the Social Scientific Study of Religion at The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity, University of St Thomas in Minnesota for 26 years, where she taught seminary classes in Pastoral Ministry and undergraduate courses in World and American Religion. Her primary interests are Catholic seminary education and the relationship between the Church and culture. Along with many articles and book chapters, she has written five books on seminary education and ministry, most recently, *Seminary Formation: Recent History – Current Circumstances – New Directions* (2016). Other books include *Educating Leaders for Ministry* (2005); *Priestly Ministry in Multiple Parishes* (2006); and two surveys of seminaries in the U.S.: *Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of Church Ministry: An Analysis of Trends and Transitions* (1999), and *Reason for the Hope: The Futures of Roman Catholic Theologates* (1989). In 1970, she spent eight months studying literacy in villages surrounding Bangalore. Email: KMSCHUTH@stthomas.edu

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2016 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* affirms these directions.

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This article has to do with how seminaries have dealt with matters related to clericalism and sexuality. In some sense, these institutions have addressed the meaning of sexuality in the context of celibacy in helpful ways for centuries, but seldom have they spoken about clericalism. The purpose of this paper is to assess the current status of practices and procedures related to these topics in seminary formation. It examines ways to change attitudes and behaviours of seminarians regarding clericalism and to deepen understanding of healthy sexuality as it is to be manifested in the life of priests. It begins with a brief historical overview of seminary formation and then offers definitions of the two topics under consideration. The focus of the article is on Human Formation, the area most closely related to these concerns, and also it considers spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. At this point, insight about celibacy and sexuality continues to be required and instruction about overcoming clericalism is beginning to be understood as a necessary part of seminary programs.

1. Brief History of Seminary Formation and Definitions of Clericalism and Sexuality

1.1. Historical Overview

The research of church historians, especially Maryanne Confoy and John O'Malley, are important sources for understanding trends in preparing priests for ministry.¹ They identify critical turning points in formation, beginning with a description of the three years Jesus spent with his disciples. During the following ten centuries, few references to formal programs were recorded, though St Augustine called for priestly training that included scripture, preaching, understanding church laws, and promoting *upright personal behaviour*. Toward the end of this period, priestly formation in episcopal (cathedral) and monastic schools began. By the twelfth century, seeds of present formation were sown in university programs to overcome the lack of a solid and well-balanced intellectual and *moral foundation* and practical preparation for ministry. Residential life with a rigid

¹Maryanne Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Perfectae Caritatis, Optatam Totius, Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008, and John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008, and *Trent: What Happened at the Council*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013.

regimen and demanding asceticism was required to correct *the sorry moral condition of the clergy*.

At the Council of Trent, the *Decree on Seminaries* (1563) mandated major reform to regularize diverse and inconsistent programs. Every diocese was to establish an institution solely for priestly training. The *Decree* was the starting point of the seminary system as it existed at the dawn of Vatican II. In 1965 it was replaced by *Optatam Totius* (OT), Vatican II's *Decree on Priestly Training*. No other major documents on seminaries had been promulgated during the intervening 400 years. OT is one of the three documents that still has a dominant effect on seminary formation, another being Pope St John Paul II's 1992 *Pastores dabo Vobis* (PDV), *I Will Give You Shepherds*. Notably, the brief but far-reaching directives in OT stipulated that each episcopal conference was to issue a "program of priestly formation" (later referenced as "PPF"). These documents, intended for use on a national scale, were "to permeate formation so that seminarians are prepared to serve the needs of all in all circumstances" (OT, Section I). The third universal document most recently revised in 2016, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*² (commonly abbreviated as "*the Ratio*"), establishes general norms for seminary formation that are to be applied in different cultural contexts, according to the reality of each country.

PDV continues to be most powerfully influential mainly because of its significant new requirement of "Human Formation." This change proved to be most notable in addressing sexuality, but still it said nothing about clericalism.³ Human Formation was mandated to include sexual education for those called to celibacy, development of affective maturity, and formation of moral conscience. Summarizing the points, PDV states, "Applicants must give evidence of an overall personal balance, good moral character, a love for the truth, and proper motivation. This includes the requisite human, moral, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and psychological qualities for priestly ministry" (PDV #44).

1.2. Definitions of Clericalism and Sexuality

Clericalism is commonly defined as a type of exceptionalism, a form of elitism, and, in the words of Pope Francis, an attitude embraced by priests and bishops in which they see themselves as special or superior

²*The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* was published by the Congregation for the Clergy, most recently in 2016. The first edition, published in 1970, was revised in 1985.

³The lack of attention to clericalism no doubt contributed to its absence in seminary formation until the present, when the relationship between sexuality and clericalism was recognized and resulted in an unrelenting demand that the latter become part of all seminary formation programs.

to others. Those who believe they are entitled to this elevated status claim certain prerogatives and feel exempted from accountability for their behaviour. In parish life, priests exhibit clericalism by ignoring, putting down, and excluding laypeople, especially those with whom they minister. Clerical attitudes often are directed toward women and toward children in the form of sexual abuse.

Pope Francis has repeatedly denounced clericalism, referring to it as an ugly perversion of the Church, an evil, a really awful thing, and an abuse of power. In the *Ratio*, he asserted: “future priests should be educated so that they do not become prey to ‘clericalism’, nor yield to the temptation of modelling their lives on the search for popular consensus” (*Ratio* 33). Referring to 1 Peter 5:3, he says that ordination should not lead the future priest to “lord it over” the flock but should result in a spirit of service (*Ratio* 34).

The failure to include the topic in formation is partly responsible for seminaries being blamed for the ongoing presence of clericalism in seminaries. Intensified by clergy sexual abuse, commentators have strongly criticized formators for their failure to deter clericalism.⁴ Most seminaries have not yet formulated policies nor developed a curriculum on the issues, but because of outside pressure it is anticipated they will do so in the next several years.

Sexuality has received greater attention in formation, largely because of its connection to celibacy. PDV states, “In virginity and celibacy, chastity retains its original meaning, that is, of human sexuality lived as a genuine sign of and precious service to the love of communion and gift of self to others” (PDV 29). Reflecting on the impact of cultural change, it warns that education for sexuality is more difficult but also more urgent. The widespread social and cultural atmosphere “largely reduces human sexuality to the level of something commonplace, since it interprets and lives it in a reductive and impoverished way by linking it solely with the body and with selfish pleasure” (PDV 44).

After extensive reports by 2002 of clergy sexual abuse in the U.S., the 2005 PPF broadened norms and policies on sexuality and celibacy.⁵ It said that sexuality affects all aspects of the human person

⁴C. Colt Anderson and Christopher M. Bellitto, “Scarlet Fever: To Combat Clericalism, Reform Seminaries,” *Commonweal Magazine*, April 12, 2019. They point out negative aspects of seminary programs: “Seminarians are fed a consistent message: their role is to rule over the laity and the religious as a result of their ontological change at ordination, not as a result of their virtue, knowledge, or model behavior. They are being trained to be autocratic bosses, not servant leaders,” 13.

⁵Authorized by the USCCB, researchers from the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York prepared two studies: *The Nature and Scope of Sexual Abuse of*

and is connected with celibacy and affectivity (PPF V 44). It reinforced the physiological and psychological aspects of human sexuality, including authentic ideals of sexual maturity (PPF V 79). Sexuality was to be integrated into all dimensions of formation, with Human Formation bearing the greatest responsibility for presenting the material.

2. Addressing Sexuality and Clericalism in Seminary Formation

Of relevance to this discussion is how seminaries have dealt with sexuality and clericalism in the past and how they have changed because of sexual abuse. As noted, directives on celibacy and sexuality are abundant in church documents and seminary leaders have incorporated instruction on these areas into formation programs for many years, but clericalism seldom has been included. What follows is an overview of the content and practices of seminaries in each area of formation relative to these topics before and after the abuse crisis, as well as recommendations for enhancements to be adopted in the future.

2.1. Human Formation in Seminaries Relating to Sexuality and Clericalism

When PDV added *Human Formation*, seminary programs covered issues related to sexuality more directly and thoroughly than before.⁶ Formators enumerated goals and norms that were to foster growth in moral character and moral conscience and help seminarians develop habits and skills to live a celibate commitment. Previously, priestly formation in most countries took into account only minimally the topic of celibacy and even less its relationship to sexuality. In some cases, the response of seminaries to the new guidelines is still limited, even though the 2016 *Ratio* reaffirmed these concepts.

In the past few years, many formation faculty have undertaken extensive programming in Human Formation by focusing on development and evaluation of goals, strategies, and outcomes pertaining to sexuality and maturity. Seminarians are to grow in

Minors by Catholic Priests and Deacons in the United States, 1950-2002, (February 2004), and *The Causes and Context of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Catholic Priests in the United States, 1950-2010*, (March, 2011). Official actions approved at annual meetings of the USCCB included: promulgation of “*Five Principles*” to Guide the Response of Bishops (1992); development of the *Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People* (2002); creation of the “Office for Children and Youth Protection” (2002); and directives to establish the National Review Board and Diocesan/Eparchial Review Boards (2002).

⁶Discussed in later sections are the role of spiritual, academic, and pastoral applications. In all cases, goals are to be achieved through class-level, all-school, and rector’s conferences, faith sharing and support groups, and workshops on related topics.

these areas: self-knowledge and personal integration, affective and relational maturity, and personal appropriation of moral virtues and spiritual values indicative of priestly identity. Also, they are to be able to recognize and articulate feelings about these values in ministry and other life situations, and resolve to make a lifelong commitment to chaste celibacy.⁷

Of particular relevance is development of affective maturity. Among psychologists who have studied the topic, McGlone and Sperry apply the concept directly to its role in the exercise of priestly ministry.⁸ Their definition is: “the ability to know what one feels, express those feelings, and manage them appropriately through the psychological phases and/or stages from adolescence into adulthood.”⁹ They state: “It is in a sense a maturity (developmental growth process) of affects (emotions) that can and must be seen intellectually, humanly, spiritually, and pastorally.”¹⁰ It involves dealing well with authority, coping with stress and conflict, managing their own power as a constructive authority figure, and integrating affective behaviour with thoughts and values.¹¹

These features contribute to a healthy sexuality and can help overcome manifestations of clericalism. Seminarians who are prepared to minister will be able to understand the needs and values of the people they serve, including their physical, psychological, and moral wellbeing. In some seminaries, formation faculty and others, lay and clerical, have designed beneficial academic and practical experiences that promote maturity, integrity, morality, and responsibility. These ideals are fostered during formation, but may not necessarily be fully embraced by seminarians by the time they are ordained.¹²

In the future, development of Human Formation programs needs to include a more thorough preparation of faculty for their advisory role in the seminary. All faculty, including those whose main role is

⁷As an example, see Appendix for details about the treatment of celibacy in the five editions of the U.S. programs of priestly formation (PPFs).

⁸Gerard J. McGlone and Len Sperry, *The Inner Life of Priests*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012.

⁹McGlone and Sperry, *The Inner Life of Priests*, 85.

¹⁰McGlone and Sperry, *The Inner Life of Priests*, 87.

¹¹McGlone and Sperry, *The Inner Life of Priests*, 87.

¹²Formators realize that the achievement of affective maturity is a lifelong process challenged by heavy workloads, difficult pastoral assignments, and absence of supportive persons and structures. It is facilitated by a balanced life of prayer, work, and leisure, by cooperative co-workers, and by priestly fraternity and healthy friendships. An ongoing concern is how to maintain these principles to a higher degree after ordination.

in the academic area, must be attuned to signs of overall psycho-sexual-spiritual maturity in seminarians. They need to be able to identify and refer those who are loners, who have exclusive preference for working with children or teenagers or are unable to relate or fearful of them, and who are unable to relate to peers/older adults. When they develop their understanding of sexuality and clericalism from a wide range of perspectives, including cross-culturally, they can help eliminate clericalism in relationships among students, staff, faculty, and others who exercise authority.

2.2. Spiritual, Intellectual, and Pastoral Formation in Seminaries Relating to Sexuality and Clericalism

Spiritual Formation has always been a fundamental component of seminary programs. Until the late 1990s, it covered a wide range of topics that emphasized the personal spiritual life of seminarians, their understanding of celibacy, and their growth in other obligations relating to external behaviours as a priest, such as an ability to lead the faithful in prayer. When Human Formation was introduced, many of these topics were transferred to its purview. In most cases, spiritual formators now dedicate time to being spiritual directors, making presentations on the spiritual life, and maintaining oversight of spiritual exercises. Trust, openness, and respect are required for spiritual directors to deal with internal matters such as personal prayer and behaviours related to celibacy and sexuality, and other topics of a confidential nature. Spiritual Formation programs vary considerably, depending on the preparation of formators, that is, whether they are educated in the spiritual and psychological disciplines or are assigned to the task without preparation. Since seminarians are not always amenable to examining their inner life, qualified formators are more likely to reach them both through individual direction and in group encounters.

From a different angle, spiritual growth in seminarians also is required for the sake of their becoming spiritual leaders in the future. In exercising ministry in modern parishes, a difficult problem is the somewhat monastic-like settings of most seminaries. When only a few or no laity—students or faculty—are present, the range of perspectives on the character of spirituality are limited and often not adequate for the requirements of being a pastor. Moreover, in a restricted environment, classroom exchanges are narrowed and attitudes of superiority about the role of the ordained may be unchallenged, reinforcing attitudes may promote clericalism.

In response to these concerns, seminaries must prepare spiritual formators for their particular role so that they are able to demonstrate

an understanding of the expansive nature of their responsibilities and the range of issues to be addressed regarding celibate chastity, sexuality and sexual abuse. They need to assess the overall spiritual environment of the seminary and ensure availability of a broad range of experiences that take into account concerns about sexuality and clericalism as they discuss these topics with seminarians.

Intellectual Formation undertakes a distinctive role in educating seminarians about sexuality, celibacy, and clericalism. A variety of courses provide objective, wide-ranging information about the scriptural, moral, legal, and practical aspects of these topics. Among the Moral Theology courses dealing with sexuality and celibacy, Fundamental Moral Theology enunciates the principles and foundations and Sexual Morality covers teachings on the human person, love, sexuality and self-giving. Virtue Ethics examines personal moral norms and their pastoral application and courses on social Issues investigate similar areas from a societal perspective. Knowledge of these areas is essential for effective ministry.

Pastoral Theology/Skills, Pastoral Psychology, Homiletics, and Canon Law courses add to an awareness of appropriate behaviours and legal requirements relating to sexuality and clericalism. In preaching, the seminarian is to become “widely knowledgeable about the human condition, deeply engaged in a process of understanding divine revelation, and adequately skilled in communicating his knowledge to as many people as possible” (PPF, #138). Pastoral Psychology courses address relational issues, including prevention of abuse and effective responses to those who have suffered from all forms of it. A common problem with academic studies is the failure of faculty to emphasize the behavioural and practical applications of principles to ministry.

In the future, faculty who are mainly responsible for academic formation need to develop an understanding of human, psychological, and legal aspects of sexual issues as they apply to the future ministry of seminarians. Presentations and other forms of education about sexuality and clericalism designed for formators also must be more available to academic faculty. When curricular deficiencies on sexuality and clericalism are recognized, or if faculty are inadequately or unsatisfactorily prepared, changes should be made. Examples of reform might include applying the church’s moral tradition and church law to respond to pastoral situations and also preparing seminarians to preach on sensitive issues related to sexual abuse and clericalism relevant to parishioners.

Pastoral Formation is inherently associated with sexuality and clericalism. While pastoral topics are studied in the classroom,

supervised ministry placements (field education) also are a valuable part of pastoral preparation. In recent years, ministerial experiences have been elevated in prominence so as to expose seminarians to the reality of parishioners' lives. It requires them to interact with people of all ages, including women who may be their supervisors. Early along, OT explained that the purpose of formation is pastoral: "The whole training of the students should have as its object to make them true shepherds of souls after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd" (Section VI).

The *Ratio* reinforces the importance of goals that prepare seminarians for ministry as "men of communion" who listen to concerns, carefully discern proper responses to pastoral situations, and cooperate with others in their ministries (*Ratio* 119). Pope Francis affirms that admonition: "the psycho-affective formation of seminarians needs to be improved, and families need to be more involved in formation for ministry."¹³ Pastoral placements have the distinct advantage of providing, first-hand, situations where seminarians can grow in understanding the centrality of sexuality in the lives of all persons. Then they can develop skills to offer useful, pastorally appropriate guidance in areas of human sexuality, marriage, and family life.

Given the range of ethical issues priests encounter and the need for ministerial integrity, pastoral field education must include raising awareness in seminarians about violations of sexual boundaries, sexual abuse, paedophilia, the seduction of the internet/cybersex, and other cases of illicit acting out in ministry. Seminarians must understand and be sensitive to attitudes and behaviours that are inappropriate, such as sexual harassment and unsuitable language and inappropriate jokes. Interaction between parish leaders and seminary faculty are necessary so that changes in culture, social life, and demographics of the local situation are taken into consideration in pastoral preparation.

Conclusion

Concerns about clericalism and sexuality have not always been foremost in the minds of church leaders responsible for determining how to prepare men for priestly life and ministry. Attention to seminary formation intensified when the Church as a whole, and also individual countries, attempted to cope with aspects of modern

¹³Website accessed on July 25, 2019: Pertaining to *Amoris Laetitia*, Chapter Six: "Some pastoral perspectives" (199-258). <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/04/08/160408b.html>

culture, especially the effects of sexual impropriety and misconduct. To correct the situation of clergy sexual abuse, church officials have recently issued many more directives and guidelines on requirements for ordination. When seminaries added Human Formation to programs, some doing so in more depth than others, seminarians gained improved opportunities for growth in understanding the role of sexuality in their ministry. An added challenge was to curb clericalism, since its relationship to sexual abuse is now widely recognized.

As for the future, greater attention to the proper role of sexuality in the life of priests is essential. The rejection of clericalism has just begun, and must continue by educating seminarians about respectful and appropriate attitudes and behaviours toward others. Commentators stress the solidarity of all baptized Christians and insist that seminarians discard any sense of being in a privileged and distinct clerical caste. Rules and standards of formation should not exempt them from criticism or accountability. Steps should be taken to include laity – women and men – in the evaluation and approval of seminarians for ordination and to encourage lay students to take classes with seminarians. Pastoral formation experiences should involve lay ministers, as well as priests. More radically, some suggest that priestly formation be removed from “quasi-monastic seclusion” so as to expose seminarians to the realities of parish ministry.¹⁴

Numerous reports of clergy sexual abuse and other misconduct exemplified the damaging behaviour brought on by unchecked clericalism. Pope Francis has enlarged the vision of the Church and its unparalleled capacity to bring the presence and activity of God alive in the world. He explains that this growth will happen more surely by raising awareness of the evils of sexual abuse and clericalism. The future depends on trusting in God’s presence among us, and, of course bringing about transformation that engages more fully the many people who are willing to participate in the noble work of preparing those who will minister in the Church. It also requires seminarians who are willing to respond enthusiastically and generously to their calling, and hundreds of thousands of priests who continue to fill the world with hope and peace through their ministry.

¹⁴Richard Gaillardetz and Chad Pecknold, Panelists at “Catholic U Considers Role of Clericalism, Sexuality in Abuse Crisis: Healing the Breach of Trust,” The Catholic University of America, March 26, 2019, expanded on many possibilities for change. Accessed on July 29, 2019 at <https://communications.catholic.edu/news/2019/03/healing-the-breach.html>. See also on Twitter: @DennisSadowski.