



CONGREGATIO  
DE INSTITUTIONE CATHOLICA  
(DE SEMINARIIS ATQUE STUDIORUM INSTITUTIS)

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*(Hic numerus in responsione referatur.)*

*To the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, and Major Superiors of the United States of America, with responsibility for diocesan seminaries and religious houses of priestly formation.*

At the conclusion of the Apostolic Visitation of the American seminaries and houses of priestly formation, the Congregation for Catholic Education (for Seminaries and Educational Institutions) begins by thanking you for your heartfelt collaboration with this fraternal undertaking, which was intended as an act aimed at providing assistance to you, the U.S. Church leaders, in your mission of ensuring a correct priestly formation for your candidates to Holy Orders.

It was decided early on in the process to give the Apostolic Visitation a rather broad focus, while omitting some issues of a secondary nature, such as the seminaries' finances, library holdings, the state of the physical plants, etc. The categories that were eventually included in the *Instrumentum laboris* all had a direct bearing on priestly formation. A seminary without a proper concept of the priesthood is starting off entirely on the wrong foot. A seminary with weak governance, or unclear lines of authority, cannot properly control what is going on within its walls. The value of examining the admissions policies is obvious, as is the impression made by the seminarians. Human formation and spiritual formation need to be strong – *inter al.*, so that the candidates can lead a celibate life in tranquility of mind. In intellectual formation, clear ethical and moral principles must be taught. Pastoral formation examines how, in the here and now, the candidates interact with others outside the confines of the seminary. The ongoing formation reviews, prior to the conferral of Holy Orders, are of the utmost importance in ensuring that only suitable men enter the sacred ministry. Even post-ordination formation is important, for it helps the candidates to stay committed to their vocation.

The Congregation hopes that the recommendations made by the Visitation reports will be of assistance in improving the formation offered by the individual American seminaries. However, clearly and consistently throughout the Visitation, the U.S. bishops and religious Superiors have been told – and we repeat it now – that

an Apostolic Visitation is a blunt instrument and by no means an infallible one. If a seminary is visited on March 1-7, 2006, then the Visitation report will show the general state of the seminary *only on those days*. It is a snapshot. Indeed, we cannot claim that the Visitation will have unearthed all the problems that may be present. What is more, we have repeatedly underscored that the responsibility for your seminaries rests with you, the bishops and major superiors. The Holy See has carried out this Visitation as a help for you, like an outside eye on the situation. However, in no way does the Visitation supplant, substitute for, or override the ordinary and immediate jurisdiction of the local U.S. authorities, who alone can develop, over time, a proper picture of the state of these formative institutions. To your credit, you, the bishops and major superiors, accept all this, and have assured the Congregation that you will continue to oversee the proper running of your seminaries and houses of formation.

The remainder of this letter is divided into three parts: (1) a summary of the organization of the Visitation; (2) the conclusions, category by category, following the outline provided by the Visitation's *Instrumentum laboris*, and (3) a short, general conclusion.

## I. Organization of the Visitation

Following the conclusions of the April 2002 meeting between the Servant of God Pope John Paul II and representatives of the Roman Curia, on the one hand, and the American Cardinals and Presidency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), on the other, the Congregation for Catholic Education contacted the USCCB in late 2002, with the aim of establishing a framework for a new Apostolic Visitation of the American seminaries and religious houses of priestly formation. In 2003, two interdicasterial meetings were organized, involving representatives from the Congregation for Catholic Education, for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, for the Oriental Churches, and for the Clergy. To the second meeting, representatives from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments were also invited.

The Dicasteries gave great attention to the drafting of the *Instrumentum laboris* (i.e., the instructions to the Apostolic Visitors on how to carry out the Visitation) and drawing up the list of Apostolic Visitors.

For the *Instrumentum laboris*, the involved Congregations created a sub-commission to work on the document, under the chairmanship of the Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and which was comprised of representatives of the Congregations for Catholic Education, for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and for the Clergy. After the sub-commission had approved a draft text, this was submitted for

observations to the Prefects of all involved Dicasteries. The USCCB and the United States Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) were also invited to give their observations on the text.

The list of Apostolic Visitors was drawn up from suggestions of the various Dicasteries, of the USCCB and of the CMSM. The names thus proposed were then submitted for approval to the Secretariat of State, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Apostolic Nunciature in Washington DC. The Congregation for Bishops cleared the names of the Bishop Visitors, while the Congregations for the Clergy and for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life did the same for Visitors who were members respectively of religious congregations or the secular clergy.

At the end of 2004, the Congregation for Catholic Education asked the Congregations for the Oriental Churches and for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to give their delegation, so that the Congregation for Catholic Education could arrange the Visitations also of the Institutes under their respective jurisdictions. This delegation was duly given.

It had been proposed to appoint a Prelate in the United States to prepare and coordinate, from a practical point of view, the individual Apostolic Visitations of the various seminaries and religious houses. With the delegation of the Congregations for the Oriental Church and for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, the Congregation appointed Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, then Archbishop for the Military Services, to this crucial role.

At the beginning of 2005, this Congregation wrote to those proposed for the role of Apostolic Visitor. Most of the bishops and priests contacted expressed themselves willing to undertake this important office. Those who thus rendered themselves available received a copy of the *Instrumentum laboris* and were invited to an orientation meeting, held in Baltimore in September 2005, over which Archbishop O'Brien presided.

On the fervent request of the US bishops, some lay persons were attached to each team of Visitors. These lay persons, not being true Apostolic Visitors, were not appointed by the Holy See and were not called "Apostolic Visitors" but rather "resource persons". They examined the documentation presented by the various seminaries, accompanied the Visitors to the visited institutes, and offered their advice to the same Visitors. They neither participated in the confidential meetings of the Visitors, nor had a direct voice in the drawing up of the reports. They did not sign the reports.

The calendar of the individual Visits took place from September 2005 to May 2006, with a single institute visited in July 2006. The Holy See processed the reports, when they arrived, in the following way:

- For diocesan seminaries (including those run by religious congregations), the Congregation sent a letter for Catholic Education to the bishop concerned. For the one *de iure* interdiocesan seminary in the United States, all the bishops concerned received a copy of the letter.

- For religious seminaries, the Congregation for Catholic Education sent to the respective major superior a letter on the *intellectual formation* given, with a copy of this letter sent to the local bishop for his information. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, then, received a copy of the Visitors' complete report as well as a copy of the letter sent to the major superior concerned.

- For academic centers of priestly formation, this Congregation sent the major superior(s) a letter concerning the entire institute, and sent a copy to the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life for its records.

- For Eastern-rite seminaries, this Congregation examined the report and then sent all the documentation for action to the Congregation for Oriental Churches.

- For the sole seminary in the United States where the liturgical books of 1962 are used, this Congregation sent its letter to the Superior General, to the local diocesan Ordinary and to the Pontifical Commission "Ecclesia Dei".

## II. General Conclusions of the Apostolic Visitation

In presenting the conclusions of the Visitation, the Congregation follows the categories of the *Instrumentum laboris* that was used by the Visitors in carrying out their task. Unless otherwise stated below, for the sake of simplicity the terms "seminary" and "seminarians" are used to indicate institutes and candidates for both the diocesan and religious priesthood.

### 1. *Concept of the priesthood*

A proper and full understanding of the priesthood, as taught by the Church, is the *sine qua non* of all priestly formation and of a correct running of the seminary. We are pleased, therefore, that in the great majority of diocesan seminaries, the doctrine on the priesthood is well taught. The faculty and seminarians follow the teaching of the Magisterium on the subject, and make an appropriate study of the various documents of the Holy See on the priesthood, particularly *Pastores dabo vobis*.

In some institutes, however, one has the impression that the students, while not denying any point of doctrine on the priesthood, have an incomplete grasp of the full breadth of the Church's teaching in this area. The students have an idea of priestly service, but teachings such as on the character impressed by the Sacrament of Orders, on the nature of *sacra potestas*, on the *tria munera*, etc., are not so well known. This leads to a theologically poor, functionalistic image of the priesthood. Seminary faculty, therefore, need to ensure that the students are well versed in all points of Catholic doctrine on the priesthood (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1536-1600).

In a few seminaries, the clear distinction between the common priesthood and the ministerial, hierarchical priesthood needs to be emphasized more. Problems can also arise when the seminary aims at offering a theological education to all – seminarians and laity – for, unless proper safeguards are put in place, the seminary can lose much of its finality, which is to offer a specifically *priestly* formation to men chosen by the Church to embark on the path to Holy Orders.

Religious institutes of men, of course, have their own forms of formation, whose prior focus is on formation for religious life. Indeed, not all such religious are on the path to Holy Orders. While formation in their respective charisms is not found lacking, at times the concept of specifically priestly formation is submerged in the formation for the religious life. That is to say, more attention needs to be devoted to the idea of the priesthood in itself, as opposed to priesthood being *de facto* part of religious life.

It was also noted that, in some academic centers run by religious, there is a certain reticence, on the part of both students and teachers, to discuss the priestly ministry. Instead, there is a preference for discussing simply “ministry” – in the broad sense, including also the various apostolates of the laity – in part, perhaps, as a mistaken attempt not to offend those who judge the reservation of the Sacrament of Orders to men alone as discriminatory.

## 2. *The government of the seminary*

The ultimate governors of the seminaries, both diocesan and religious, are, of course, the respective bishops and major superiors. We are pleased, therefore, that, almost universally, the Visitation showed bishops and major superiors to be interested in and supportive of their seminaries, visiting them often and getting to know the students. Understandably, the bishops of very large dioceses and the religious superiors of sizeable provinces find it more difficult to spend time in their seminaries. Yet, the Congregation would encourage them to be as present as they can in the seminaries under their jurisdiction, as there is no institute more important

in the diocese or province than the center for priestly and religious formation. Let us remember, in this regard, the Directory for the Ministry and Life of Bishops *Apostolorum Successores* (Congregation for Bishops, 22 February 2004): “Among diocesan institutions, the bishop should consider the seminary to have primacy of place, and he should make it the object of his most intense and assiduous pastoral care, because it is largely on seminaries that the continuity and fruitfulness of the Church’s priestly ministry depends” (n. 84); and *Optatam totius*: “all priests are to look on the seminary as the heart of the diocese” (n. 5).

We are aware that criticisms have, at times, been leveled at how the U.S. seminaries are run. Therefore, one of the most encouraging results of the Visitation was the conclusion that most seminary superiors (rectors, vice rectors, etc.) are good and holy men, dedicated to their special apostolate, and who genuinely are doing all they can to prepare men well for the priesthood. This Congregation commends their hard work and personal sacrifice. Rectors, in particular, have an irreplaceable role in the life of the seminary. As Blessed John XXIII once remarked: “Like a good family father, [the rector] is the center of the different branches of the ordered life of the seminary and it is on his circumspection that the efficiency of the institution in its manifold activities depends” (*Discourse of Blessed John XXIII to Seminary Rectors, July 28, 1961*). The Visitation clearly underscored the fact that where the rector gives strong, attentive and caring leadership, faculty and students are united in vision and the seminary generally works well. Conversely, where the rector is weak, then an unraveling of the fabric of seminary life is the unfortunate consequence. Bishops and major superiors need to bear this in mind when appointing rectors: it is not enough for the man to be an exemplary priest (and religious), but he must also be a leader, comfortable making difficult decisions.

Another point – although not specifically raised by the Visitation – was the presence of the rector in the seminary. It has not escaped the Congregation’s notice that sometimes rectors travel frequently, for fundraising purposes and the like. Excessive absence of the rector is not good for the life of the educating institution. Were rectors to represent the seminary effectively *ad extra*, without having to leave the seminary community too often, the Congregation would be very pleased.

Dedicated seminary faculty members perform a remarkable service to the Church, training her future sacred ministers. Most carry out their duties with professionalism, in a spirit of service. They are owed a debt of thanks.

Faculty members can be divided into two categories: formation faculty members (rector, vice rector, spiritual director, pastoral director, and so on), who reside in the seminary and more closely accompany the candidates on the path to Holy Orders, and teaching faculty members. Formation faculty members must be priests, while teaching faculty can include suitable religious and lay people (cf.

*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 66), even as the majority of the teaching faculty should be made up of priests (cf. *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, n. 33).

An issue that surfaced in several Visitation reports was the lack of stability of the faculty. This point is raised by *Pastores dabo vobis* (n. 66), which says, “the body of formation personnel [...] should enjoy a certain stability”. In fact, frequent changes of faculty are not good for a seminary. When bishops and major superiors plan ahead for the staffing of their centers of formation and avoid situations of continual comings-and-goings within the faculty, the seminarians’ formation is strengthened.

A related difficulty is finding a sufficient number of qualified formation faculty and teachers; the Visitation concluded that this is often a problem. With a lack of faculty, the faculty members often have too many duties, including duties outside the seminary, which detract from the time and effort that they can give to the seminarians’ formation. Such educators, while commendably doing their best, in their overcommitment, cannot give their all to the work of priestly formation. The quality of the priestly formation thus suffers.

The Congregation was pleased to note that the faculties of most diocesan seminaries show a remarkable amount of unity and harmony. This unity of vision is almost always due to the sound leadership from the rector and senior management, who are the fulcra of seminary life. A lack of harmony, on the other hand, is almost always due to one or more educators being less than faithful to the Magisterium of the Church. These people, therefore, are out of kilter with the rest of the faculty and with the seminarians themselves. In centers of priestly formation with an atmosphere of more widespread dissent – which is the case particularly in centers run by religious – there can be no possibility of a unity of direction.

Quite often, the Visitation discovered one or more faculty members who, although not speaking openly against Church teaching, let the students understand – through hints, off-the-cuff remarks, etc. – their disapproval of some articles of Magisterial teaching. In a few institutes, one even found the occasional non-Catholic teaching the seminarians.

Generally, however, but not always, the norm of canon 833, 6°, is respected, regarding the profession of faith to which rectors and teachers in the seminary are held. In almost all the places, there are procedures for removing a superior or teacher who fails in his or her duties. Nevertheless, in consideration of various problems in respect to doctrinal teaching, it appears that these procedures are not invoked as often as they should be.

Many seminaries are also involved in the theological education of the laity. Most institutes concerned try to separate the two study paths. Nevertheless, a clear

distinction between the essential activity of the seminary – the formation of candidates for the priesthood – and other peripheral activities – principally, the theological formation of the laity – is sometimes made difficult either because of a lack of theological clarity about the distinction between the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, or else because of the high number of lay students frequenting the institute. The Congregation is firm on this point: seminaries exist for the formation of candidates for the priesthood (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 61). Thus, the laity should not routinely be admitted to share the seminarians' classes or their living spaces (their dining area, the chapel, the library, and especially not the living quarters). If circumstances require the seminary to educate the laity (which really ought to take place elsewhere), it must arrange to do so in such a way that the integrity of the seminary is not compromised. Otherwise, the seminary loses much of its necessary priestly characteristic.

“Where it is possible and expedient, there is to be a major seminary in every diocese; otherwise, the students who are preparing for the sacred ministries are to be entrusted to another seminary, or an interdiocesan seminary is to be erected” (CIC, canon 237 § 1). This Congregation interprets “expedient” as meaning that the necessary resources are at hand for the seminary, and that sufficient numbers of properly qualified faculty members and teachers are available to staff it.

In the past, on several occasions, various American bishops, as well as the presidency of the USCCB, have asked this Congregation to examine whether there are too many seminaries in the U.S., and whether resources are spread too thinly. The Congregation thinks these questions worth asking. However, it is also convinced that the proper forum for them to find an answer is within the USCCB. It is our recommendation, therefore, that an Episcopal Commission be charged with making suitable proposals on this matter to the U.S. bishops.

### 3. *Criteria for the admission of candidates*

A principal focus of the Visitation was the admissions criteria. Naturally, to admit a candidate to the seminary is merely to affirm that he has the *potential* to be ordained, whereas only the subsequent years of scrutiny can ascertain whether the candidate *can* be ordained. Nevertheless, admissions criteria are extremely important. It was therefore gratifying for the Congregation to note the almost universal approval of the criteria used by the various institutes in this regard – which is not to ignore the recommendations how these criteria could be sharpened.



For diocesan candidates in the United States of America, almost nowhere is there a propedeutic period in the sense foreseen by n. 62 of *Pastores dabo vobis*. This is a major area for review by the American bishops, who will want to examine the experiences of other countries in this regard.

Religious candidates, of course, before embarking on their studies for ordination, will have completed a period of pre-notiviate and notiviate, which include elements of human, spiritual and pastoral formation. Prior to and following these stages, there are evaluations by staff members and subsequently sent on to Administrations, who decide on the candidate's suitability for continuing his formation.

Philosophical formation usually takes place in a College Seminary, for those without an undergraduate degree, or in a pre-theology program, for graduates. College seminaries fulfil a vital service for the Church in the US. Most of them are good. Their work is to be encouraged.

It is important to remember that College Seminaries are fully seminaries, and not simply "propedeutic" to the theologate. Seminary formation, according to universal Church norms, lasts a full six years, which includes the philosophical biennium. During these years, the candidate is fully a seminarian, subject to the full scrutiny of the Church as to his fitness for ordination. Instead, in the United States, it appears that the rigorous standards that the Church requires of seminaries are sometimes only applied fully in the theologate. This dynamic is, in fact, a reversal of the expectation of the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, which states that "as time goes on and the maturity and sense of duty of the students increases, the rules should gradually be diminished so that the men may learn, as they go along, to be their own guides" (n. 26). It follows that the Rule of Life of the College Seminary and pre-theology course should be more, not less, exacting than that of the theologate. Nor should the rector and other superiors of the College Seminary hesitate to ask a student to leave who is obviously unsuitable for Holy Orders.

As regards the pre-theology program, followed by candidates who are already graduates, the major issue has been, in some places, the excessive compression of studies. To fulfil the requirement of canon 250 – and thus to guarantee that the candidates receive a proper philosophical education, and to ensure that the Church has enough time (i.e. six years) to gauge the suitability of the candidate – the American bishops have laudably expanded the minimum time-period of the pre-theology program to two years. In fact, one of the surest ways of screening out problem candidates is a suitably prolonged period of formation, which allows the educators enough time to notice irregularities in behavior.

Bishops sometimes seem to delegate too much responsibility for the acceptance of diocesan candidates to their subordinates, especially the vocation directors. This is unfortunate, as it is the bishop who will ultimately have to call, or not call, the candidate to orders.

Diocesan candidates for seminary are usually scrutinized twice: first by the diocese, and then by the seminary itself. This was one of the conclusions resulting from the Visitation conducted in the 1980s. It is a good system, which doubles the chances of catching problems. Seminaries, therefore, should continue to insist on performing their own screening procedures, and not simply rely on those conducted by dioceses.

It is important that seminaries receive, in a timely manner, the entire relevant documentation on individual candidates from the sponsoring dioceses or religious congregations. The Visitation pointed out occasions when this has not been the case, leading to problems in discernment.

It is also important that the various dioceses and congregations that use a particular seminary apply, as much as possible, the same criteria for accepting or rejecting students. This Dicastery wishes to underscore the need for dioceses and religious congregations to investigate thoroughly at this point whether the candidate has an impediment or irregularity for Holy Orders.

The seminaries emphasize what, for them, are the appropriate criteria for admissions, and they rigorously apply these criteria. In particular, the prescriptions of canon 241 § 3 and of the Instruction of this Congregation on the admission of ex-seminarians and ex-religious seem well observed.<sup>1</sup> Much space is given to psychological testing in the admissions process; however, it is not always clear who has the right to see the results of these tests. Almost universally, the Visitors judged the criteria for the admission of candidates positively.

Worrisome were the cases where seminaries have been pressured to accept obviously unsuitable candidates, or to unduly abbreviate a candidate's course of formation, to hurry him on to ordination. Clearly, in some places, lack of vocations has caused some lowering of standards. Such a strategy risks possible wretched consequences. Seminary rectors, in conscience, must always keep the barriers to ordination high.

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<sup>1</sup> CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction to the Episcopal Conferences on the Admission to Seminary of Candidates Coming from Other Seminaries or Religious Families* (1996)

#### 4. *The seminarians*

Almost universally, the candidates – both diocesan and religious – received great praise from the Apostolic Visitors. The candidates are generous, intelligent, full of zeal, pious, and faithful to prayer. They are demonstrably loyal to the Church's Magisterium. They are signs of great hope for the Church in the U.S.

Yet, the candidates often also evince some of the problems of our time. Not infrequently, they come from broken families, or from backgrounds with little faith experience or knowledge of Catholic doctrine. They may be weighed down by their past, which also complicates the work of formation.

The candidates come from many different cultures and ethnic backgrounds. This enriches the life of the seminary and better reflects the Church in the U.S., but it also requires that the work of formation incorporate various cultural expectations. The variety is good. In particular, celebrating spiritual devotions dear to various ethnic groups is an enrichment for all in the seminary. The Visitation also noted that such cultural variety allows the seminary community to develop a more "catholic" spirit. At the same time, the cultural variety requires of the educators a certain level of sensitivity and awareness.

The Apostolic Visit was obliged to point out the difficulties, in the area of morality, that some seminaries had suffered in past decades. Usually, but not exclusively, this meant homosexual behavior. Nevertheless, in almost all the institutes where such problems existed, at least in the diocesan seminaries, the appointment of better superiors (especially rectors) has ensured that such difficulties have been overcome. Of course, here and there some case or other of immorality – again, usually homosexual behavior – continues to show up. However, in the main, the superiors now deal with these issues promptly and appropriately. Nevertheless, there are still some places – usually centers of formation for religious – where ambiguity vis-à-vis homosexuality persists. In this context, the Congregation underscores the importance of its 2005 *Instruction concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders*.

Regrettably, in not a few seminaries, a laxity of discipline means that the educators are not always aware of what the seminarians are doing off campus. This lack of oversight invites trouble. The seminaries of the Neocatechumenal Way aim to avoid dangers in this area by means of the traditional *regula socii*. Other seminaries will need to examine how they ensure the good behavior of their students outside the seminary building.

## 5. *Human formation*

Almost all seminaries place great emphasis on human formation. In fact, the intuition of *Pastores dabo vobis* – and its reception – that “the whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation” (n. 43) has been one of the great steps forward in priestly formation in recent times. It certainly has been taken to heart in the U.S.

To facilitate the candidates’ human formation, U.S. seminaries have typically introduced the figure of the “formation advisor”, who acts somewhat like a spiritual director but in the external forum. The advisor follows the candidate, including by means of frequent dialogues, helping him integrate the four dimensions (human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral) of priestly formation. The dialogues are not secret; what is said can be brought to the attention of the rector and other superiors. The fifth edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation* (n. 328) rightly emphasizes the priestly nature of formation advising.

Americans involved in diocesan priestly formation have praised the formation-advisor system as the royal road to ensuring that seminarians interiorize their formation and are held accountable. Indeed, the benefits of the system are obvious. Nevertheless, sometimes there are aspects of the system that invite ambiguity. At times, students need more direction in learning how to distinguish between formation advising and spiritual direction. There have been occasions when, during their formation advising sessions, students have felt obliged to divulge matter that belongs to the internal forum. There have also been cases of formation advisors invading the internal forum, asking about matters of sin.

In light of the Visitation’s results, many seminaries will want to revise their respective Rules of Life, in order to make them more demanding. This will help the seminarians to take on a more priestly and ascetic character, and shed a worldly style of life. Issues to be included in the Rule include the appropriate use of alcohol, when the seminarians need permission in order to be absent from the seminary, the curfew, the areas of the seminary that are off-limits to guests, etc.

Seminaries face extra challenges today, as compared to recent years. Among these is how to monitor the students’ use of the Internet. In order to prevent problems occurring, most U.S. seminaries have sensibly invested in Internet-filtering programs. Some have restricted Internet use to public places within the seminary.

One of the prime duties of the seminary is to develop the candidate’s sense of maturity to the point that he takes proper responsibility for his actions. U.S. seminaries are generally attentive to this point: they entrust various duties to the candidates while allowing a certain amount of freedom (yet consistent with the Rule

of Life) and examine how the men react. The Visitors discovered no glaring problems in this area.

Yet, educating to responsibility is such an important aspect of the seminary's purpose that it is always worthwhile increasing attention to it. First of all, seminaries will continue screening out candidates whose psychological problems impede responsible action. For the other candidates, as they progress, the "rules should gradually be diminished so that the men may learn, as they go along, to be their own guides" (*Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, n. 26). This allows the faculty to observe how the more senior candidates use their freedom and see whether the candidates have interiorized their formation, in other words, whether they follow a personal Rule of Life. As Blessed John XXIII remarked in an address to spiritual directors, "the young [seminarian] will never know how to exercise self-control, if he has not learned to observe and love a strict rule, which trains him for mortification and for mastering his will. Otherwise, in the full exercise of the ministry, he will not be ready to obey his bishop fully and joyfully" (*AAS 54 [1962], p. 676*). This places an onus on the superiors to keep a close watch on these older candidates, to see whether their formation has taken root.

Diocesan seminaries typically follow the standard academic year, which means fairly long summer vacation periods. If the diocesan seminarian, away from his center of formation, does not comport himself as if he were in the seminary, it shows that he has not interiorized his formation. Hence the importance of seminary authorities being involved in how the seminarian spends his summers. The Visitation revealed that often the diocesan seminary has little or no voice over this area. Bishops and seminary rectors, therefore, are asked to collaborate in drawing up summer plans for the students, thus ensuring that formation is harmoniously continuous and not interrupted every year for several months.

## 6. *Spiritual Formation*

The seminaries normally cultivate an atmosphere of prayer, which is such an important part of priestly formation. In the diocesan seminaries, the liturgical norms are generally obeyed, but this not always the case in liturgies celebrated at religious centers of formation.

As a rule, the spiritual formation is of a priestly nature, and is not simply generic. Some seminaries, however, need to do more to educate the students in the classical forms and writings of Catholic spirituality. It is not always easy to know whether the seminarians are dedicating enough time to personal prayer, because, regrettably very few seminaries fix periods of time for prayer.

Almost every seminary has daily Mass, at least from Monday to Friday. Hitherto, the Visitation revealed, some seminaries have not celebrated community Mass at the weekends, the priests and seminarians instead participating at Mass in various parishes. The pedagogical reasons for this practice may have been sound. However, with the new fifth edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation* (cf. n. 116), all seminaries should now organize Mass every day in the seminary, including Sundays. In addition, all seminaries will want to celebrate Lauds and Vespers daily (cf. *Program of Priestly Formation*, fifth edition, n. 117), which has until now been the common, if not universal, practice.

It seems that most seminarians are in the practice of confessing at least monthly. It should be asked whether twice monthly would not be better. Seminaries need to ensure regular opportunities for confessions with ordinary and extraordinary confessors.

It is profoundly regrettable that many seminaries do not include traditional acts of piety in their *horarium*. Many make the excuse that they prefer to leave such acts of piety to the free choice of the students. Some institutes even have an atmosphere that discourages traditional acts of Catholic piety – which begs the question as to whether the faculty’s ideas of spirituality are consonant with Church teaching and tradition. Unless a great many seminaries introduce regular recitation of the rosary, novenas, litanies, Stations of the Cross, and so on, the seminarians will lack an education in the sacramentals and will be unprepared for ministry in the Church, which greatly treasures these practices.

The internal forum needs to be better safeguarded. There is confusion, in places, as to what the internal forum is (it covers only sacramental confession and spiritual direction; psychological counseling may be confidential, but it is not internal forum). In places, seminarians are being asked to reveal (in formation advising, in psychological counseling, in public confessions of faults, etc.) matters of sin, which belong instead to the internal forum. Other seminaries dilute the confidential nature of the internal forum: the spiritual directors and students are presented with a list of “exceptions” to the confidentiality of spiritual direction (even if it is always emphasized that the seal of confession is inviolable).

It was most encouraging to see how much time and energy the seminaries put into teaching theology of celibacy as lived for the Kingdom. In general, the Visitors judged the formation to celibate chastity to be adequate, even if some wise Visitors noted the difficulty of ascertaining, in the external forum, whether each individual seminarian is interiorizing his formation. In addition, faculty members questioning its value or its link with the priesthood undermine true formation for celibacy. The seminary cannot, on the one hand, aim to assist the students to lead a life of celibacy

while, on the other hand, some faculty members are sowing doubts in the seminarians' minds as to celibacy's beauty and worth.

The Congregation now asks each and every seminary to continue to do the maximum, so as to ensure that the students can live celibate chastity generously and faithfully.

### 7. *Intellectual formation*

There are different forms in which American seminarians can receive their intellectual formation. Some study in the seminary itself; others frequent nearby universities or schools of theology. Religious congregations often wisely pool resources in this area. Some courses of study are affiliated with ecclesiastical faculties of philosophy or theology; most are accredited by secular accrediting bodies. In general, the academic standards of U.S. seminaries are laudably high. What is more, the students are well disposed toward their studies. They work hard, and seem ready to dialogue with contemporary society.

In fact, the Visitation confirmed that U.S. seminaries, as well as the students themselves, see studies as being very important. Many resources, both human and financial, are given over to the academic programs. The U.S. Church, therefore, can be justly proud of what it does to favor intellectual endeavor among the clergy. And, of course, this preparation is not only to the benefit of the Church in America: the influence of academically well-qualified clergy is global.

The seminarians' teachers are usually academically well qualified. Nevertheless, many lack the proper qualifications from an institute recognized by the Holy See. Moreover, in some centers of formation, there are simply not enough teachers, and, as a result, faculty members teach outside their areas of expertise and do not have enough time to keep up to date in their disciplines. Alternatively, essential course material may be omitted or telescoped.

Courses in philosophy are covered in one of two ways. Young seminarians attend a College Seminary, and complete a four-year program of philosophy and other subjects. In times past, the expectation was that the seminarian would complete a Philosophy Major; although this requirement no longer holds, there is now a requirement for a minimum of thirty credits in philosophy. Some seminaries laudably expect an even greater number of credits in philosophy.

The philosophical programs are usually good, and some are truly excellent, with the seminarians learning about the Church's rich patrimony of philosophical

thought. In such programs, the students critically examine contemporary issues, drawing inspiration from magisterial texts such as *Fides et ratio* and *Veritatis splendor*.

A few programs use community colleges to teach philosophy. It is highly unlikely that such programs can be presenting properly Catholic philosophy that is useful for the study of theology and that is taught by Catholic teachers with ecclesiastical degrees.

Some seminaries offer truly remarkable levels of theological teaching. The work done by academic deans and theology professors must be acknowledged and applauded. During the Visitation, the students themselves often mentioned how pleased they were with their studies and that they recognized the high standard of their academic formation. (Being shrewd and Internet-aware, today's students can easily compare what they are receiving from their own formation with what is being offered elsewhere.)

The programs of theology are usually well thought-out. Yet, nearly all Visitation reports noted lacunae in the programs. Mariology and Patristics were frequently mentioned as being among these lacunae. In some schools of theology, students may select from a wide range of electives and thus omit large sections of basic teachings. The Congregation recognizes that it is sometimes not easy to fit all required disciplines into the seminary schedule with its many demands, or to find qualified teachers for each and every discipline (especially when the seminary is not the evident responsibility of one diocese or religious congregation). Nonetheless, all candidates for the priesthood must have a solid, basic grasp of the main branches of theology. If, to allow for this fundamental teaching, it should be necessary to prune away some in-depth specialized courses or electives, or to limit the seminarians' pastoral experiences, then this should be done. It is, unfortunately, rare for American seminarians to have a proper grounding in Latin, which, as well as being of use for the liturgy, is indispensable if students are to have the ability to consult primary theological sources.

Even in the best seminaries, there can be some theology teachers who show reservations about areas of magisterial teaching. This is particularly true in the field of moral theology. Other points of Church teaching, such as ordination being restricted to men alone, are also questioned. Such lack of *sentire cum Ecclesia* is often not overt, but the students receive the message clearly nevertheless. In a few seminaries, and particularly in some schools of theology run by religious, dissent is widespread.

Without doubt, the most contested area of theology today is moral theology. It is also one of the most useful in pastoral ministry: without a sound grasp of moral



principals, the priest will fail in his duties as a preacher and confessor. While most diocesan seminaries treat the subject fairly well, it is not rare in religious institutes to find basic tenets of Catholic moral doctrine being called into question. All centers of formation need to ensure that the richness of Catholic teaching on moral issues is presented to the students, so that all basic areas are covered. In a special way, the same goes for bioethical and medical questions.

Most programs aim to present the unity of theological thought; however, this goal is difficult to attain unless the faculty members are of one mind and heart. For the candidates' general formation, theology and spirituality cannot be divorced. Although teachers are not expected to "spiritualize" their subjects, they ought not to shy away from spiritual and pastoral questions should these arise naturally in class. That seminary academics ought not to be disconnected from priestly spirituality and pastoral practice is one of the main reasons why seminarians' theological formation cannot be indistinct from the intellectual formation of the laity.

#### 8. *Pastoral formation*

The Visitation raised few serious concerns about pastoral formation in the U.S. Most seminaries have a well thought-out program, which is appropriately structured and evaluated.

It is the firm conviction of this Congregation that seminarians need mentoring in their pastoral formation by a priest who is wise and experienced in this area. Non-ordained persons – although they may be intelligent, insightful and full of love for the Church – can never have had that pastoral experience which is proper to the priest, especially as regards the administration of the sacraments. That is why programs of pastoral formation should be under the direction of a priest (c.f. *Program of Priestly Formation*, fifth edition, n. 340), who can assist the seminarians in their theological reflections. This, of course, does not exclude well-disposed and well-qualified religious or lay people assisting in the planning and organization of the students' pastoral experiences.

In a small number of cases, seminarians have been sent to pastoral experiences that have proved to be incompatible with Catholic pastoral practice. The seminaries have tended to eliminate such experiences from their programs when their deficient nature is brought to light. Yet, it remains incumbent on centers of priestly formation to scrutinize any situations being considered for seminarians' pastoral experiences *before* the seminarians are sent to participate in them.

Almost without exception, the seminarians show authentic apostolic zeal and possess a "Catholic" vision of Church life. They tend to enjoy their pastoral

experiences. The Congregation was pleased to learn how many demanding pastoral settings the seminarians attend, including such apostolates as missionary work abroad. At the same time, pastoral experiences should occupy a proportionate amount of the seminary's schedule, to enhance and to enlighten the spiritual and academic programs.

#### 9. *Promotion to Holy Orders*

Every year, seminary superiors evaluate the progress of the seminarians, and these evaluations seem quite rigorous. However, as mentioned above, the impression was given that seminarians are only seriously evaluated during the theology *quadriennium*; in the College Seminary and in pre-theology these evaluations seem less focused.

In a few seminaries, non-ordained and even non-Catholic faculty members can vote – as opposed to simply expressing their opinion – on the worthiness of individual seminarians to proceed to Holy Orders. The Congregation has made it clear that such practices are to cease.

In a few seminaries, the mechanisms of the seminarians' evaluations were regarded as being opaque. In a very few seminaries, suspicions were voiced that the evaluations are sometimes used to "punish" seminarians. Although no-one has a right to ordination, charity and justice demand that the seminarians not be evaluated arbitrarily; that, insofar as possible, evident problems be nipped in the bud before they become "evaluation issues"; and that students who are denied promotion to the next year, or to ministries or orders, receive an explanation as to the superiors' reasons for their decision.

Following communications from the Apostolic Penitentiary, this Congregation has instructed seminaries to check their candidates for irregularities and impediments for orders at the start of formation, in order to avoid problems later.<sup>2</sup> We use this opportunity to repeat this injunction.

The bishop, according to canon 1052, must have moral certainty that "positive arguments have proved" the candidate's suitability for Holy Orders before he proceeds to ordain him. Doubt about a candidate's worthiness for ordination must always be settled in favor of the Church. At times, candidates have been ordained in the face of reasoned opposition from seminary superiors. Let the admonition be

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, Circular Letter of 27 July 1992, Prot. N. 1560/90/18, and Circular Letter of 2 February 1999, Prot. N. 1560/90/33.

remembered: "Do not lay hands too readily on anyone, and do not share in another's sins" (1 Timothy 5, 22).

#### 10. *Service of the Seminary to the Newly Ordained*

Whenever the seminary serves principally one diocese or province, it usually offers some form of ongoing formation for the newly ordained. This, of course, is not an essential part of the seminary's mission, nor is it of obligation, but it is certainly laudable (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 79). If, on the other hand, the seminary accepts students from many different dioceses or congregations that are spread out geographically, then it understandably becomes difficult to provide such a regular service in this field.

### III. General Conclusion

There is no doubt that, in recent decades, U.S. seminaries, along with seminaries throughout much of the Western world, were in flux. This led to a breakdown in structures, which had a negative impact on priestly formation. A false sense of freedom was sometimes cultivated, which led to the throwing off of centuries of acquired wisdom in priestly formation.

However, this Visitation has demonstrated that, since the 1990s, a greater sense of stability now prevails in the U.S. seminaries. The appointment, over time, of rectors who are wise and faithful to the Church has meant a gradual improvement, at least in diocesan seminaries. In fact, the Visitors often remarked that what they were communicating in their reports was not news to the seminary superiors, who have often been trying to resolve the remaining long-standing difficulties in their respective institutions (including the long-standing presence of some problematic faculty members).

The general conclusion, therefore, of the Visitation was positive. While there are some institutes that continue to be inadequate, the diocesan seminaries are, in general, healthy. Let bishops, major superiors and rectors, as well as all who are involved in running the nations' seminaries and religious houses of formation, take comfort in the notable improvements that have taken place, and spare no effort in ensuring that those generous young men who offer themselves today for the priesthood – whether diocesan or religious – receive a formation that is equal to the generosity they are showing.

We take this opportunity to express to you all our sentiments of highest personal esteem, remaining

Sincerely yours in Christ,

*Henry Coe. Fuchsler, Prof.*  
*+ Jean Louis Buzoni of . 19.*