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Spiritual Formation for Ministry

EUGENE I. VAN ANTWERP

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Dimitri Shostakovich has described his Fifth Symphony (D Major, Opus 47), composed just 30 years ago, as "the assertion of personality. It is man with all his emotions and experiences that I saw as the focus of design in this work."

Spiritual formation, in the Roman Catholic tradition, is somewhat like that Fifth Symphony: at times a little cacophonous, sometimes a single aspect of man stands out like a single instrument, sometimes (like the contrast between the first and second movements) a little polar or paradoxical thinking ("unless the grain of wheat dies . . ."), sometimes as though the orchestra has escaped the control of the conductor when the instruments make new muted sounds—but ultimately everything is resolved: the emotions and experiences forming the personality under the controlling hands of the conductor. Spiritual formation is the attempt, by each human person, to integrate his personality and all that goes into forming it, as a human being, a Christian, and (in our case) as a priestly servant of God and the people of God. Such formation is essential to ministry—not merely for the sake of personal development, not merely as an eschatological sign, nor as evidence of living faith, but for effective ministry in the church and world today. (When I first wrote the last phrase, I realized that I had capitalized "Church," but not "world," so then I capitalized both; but finally I put both into lower case.)

I'd like to share my thoughts with you in three areas: human development in its full sense, aware Christianity, and ministerial preparation. This is not an attempt to trichotomize man, but simply an arrangement by which I can marshal my thoughts a little better.

The quest for identity, man's constant search for his place in the life situation, is highly personal. Fundamentally, we can do nothing real unless we have come to some understanding of ourselves, of who and what and where we are. Even the simplest of statements, like "I love God," is meaningless unless we know who that "I" is. In a cerebral fashion, we can learn the meaning of "love" and of "God" and make that statement in a cold clarity; but to make the statement itself become a human action, an act of love by its very uttering, the "I" must be involved in more than cerebral fashion. Just as the striving for knowledge is more than a striving for facts, so the development of the individual is not mere formal education, but the whole human growth of mind and body and emotions, of reactions and situational responses, of strivings beyond the simple tasks we did yesterday.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on.

— J. Keats, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*.

Man needs to go on and beyond, to see and to dream, to experience and to imagine, to live and to grow, to stretch his

wings like Daedalus, to see things as they might be and ask, "Why not?" We human beings, and especially we ministers of the Gospel, need not only the awareness of the past and the joy of the present but the happy wonder of what is to come. This centers, in large measure, on how truly human (in all its implications) we really are.

They tell the story of the little girl who was bothering her father on a rainy day, so he scissored a map of the world into small pieces and told her to put it together again. She was done in five minutes instead of the hour he had hoped for, and he asked how she could have done it so fast. "Easy," she said, "the other side had a picture of a man, and I knew that if the man was put together right, the world would be right, so I got the man right first."

This self-identity must lead to an understanding of self, but also to genuine acceptance of self. Sam Keen says:

If we lose the self, we lose the other; if we lose the body, we lose the world... love of both neighbor and cosmos rests upon love of self.¹

The Lonerganian journey culminates here too, for Lonergan goes from the experience of things and people to understanding, to judgment, to decision, and ultimately to conversion of the person. Or, as Karl Rahner would say: Man is a person when he

accepts the dialogical character of life ordered to mystery, accepts freedom, duty, responsibility, unrepressed sinfulness, his neighbour's ineffable individuality, pain,

and death. Complete personality is rooted in the genius of the heart, not of the intellect.²

Our understanding of man, however, has a mystery ingredient. Tertullian's phrase *anima naturaliter christiana* sums it up; we are Christians, and we have as a portion of our being a relationship to God through Christ. "For you have called us out of darkness into your own wonderful light" (Preface, new *Order of Mass*), and as committed Christians we are committed to a life of being "caught in the act," the act of living as Christians, of attempting to become better Christians. "Do not fool yourself by just listening to His Word. Instead, put it into practice" (James 1:22). Each of us, in process terminology, has moved beyond alpha, but only to beta stage, and we are yet a long way from Chardin's Omega Point. Or as Camus phrased it (Jean Pierre Camus, not Albert Camus):

He who believes himself to be far advanced in the spiritual life has not even made a good beginning.—*The Spirit of St. Francis de Sales*, 13, 5.

The seminary is a proper place for such growth in understanding of our faith and our relationship with Christ. Bishop Thomas Grady, chairman of the Bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation, said recently:

There are many parallels between Christ's relationship with his apostles and modern seminary techniques: the importance of small groups, the importance of personal contact with faculty members, the importance of field education, the importance of on-the-job training, the need for super-

¹ *To a Dancing God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), p. 150.

² *Theological Dictionary* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), p. 354.

vision, for correction, for support, for advanced explanation, for periods of quiet and extended reflection and so on . . . [but] . . . the training of the apostles . . . was basically a deepening of their relationship with Jesus, their active acceptance of a call, a commission, a mission, and authority from Christ, a deepening of their union with Him. If somehow you filter out Christ, then for the apostles there is nothing left. No matter how well trained they are, no matter how efficient, without Christ they are nothing: they are branches without a vine, withered and dead. Unless they preach the Good News, they preach no news.

He went on to add:

The seminary should be a model community of faith and trust and love—or, rather, of faithful, trusting, loving people. The seminary should be a group of people truly at one with each other in God, united in truth and in justice and in peace. Its liturgy should not be something extra, or “another thing,” but should be the authentic and joyous expression of a community of faith and love. The seminarians should be ready to serve mankind in the name of the Lord Jesus, because they have had the *experience* of church, the experience of mutual respect and service, the daily experience of sharing life in Christ. The seminary should not be just a center of learning or of training; it should be a center of Christian experience.³

It is lived faith that brings us deeper into the knowledge of God; “It is Thy grace which enables us to endure Thy presence” (Cardinal Newman). And to really know God, imagination is of more value than

³ Bishop Grady made these remarks when speaking to the Seminary Department of the National Catholic Educational Association meeting in Atlantic City, N. J., April 2, 1970.

conceptual thought; art, more than science; prophecy, than history; love, than fear; community, than solitude; faith, than knowledge.

This faith-commitment of the individual to the Christian life was expressed by the Second Vatican Council:

The mystery of salvation should be so proposed that the students perceive the meaning, order and pastoral end of their studies. At the same time, they should be helped to establish and penetrate their personal lives with faith, and be strengthened in embracing their vocation with a personal dedication and a joyful heart.

—*Decree on Priestly Formation*, n. 14.

The third area of spiritual formation is that of direct ministerial preparation, preparation for a special role of service within the people of God, a preparation which must be personal as well as professional, which should change the man as well as the world. Cardinal Dearden, speaking to the Roman Catholic bishops of the United States in April, said:

Our call and our insertion into the people of God come through Baptism. Upon each one of us it confers basic privileges and rights and duties. It establishes our relationship with one another and, through Christ, with our heavenly Father. It gives us title to participation in the life and activities of the church.

Within that church there are given, through the will of Christ, special charges and responsibilities. . . .

A concern for the total life and growth and development of the church is central in the bishop's responsibility. At the call of Christ, through the church, he accepts burdens and crosses that are heavy, and opportunities that are challenging and full of hope.

Ministerial preparation assumes many things and ignores others. It assumes a thorough theological education today, based on a general liberal education; it assumes the theory and practice of authentic liturgy; it assumes a knowledge of community dynamics, etc. It totally ignores prestige and wealth ("not many of you are wise, not many powerful"). Some of the things I think a young man should have in order to present himself to the church for ordination are as follows:

1. He should have an understanding of Christian ministry as portrayed in the New Testament, as lived by the great men of the past and present, and the possibilities of multiminity in the near future.
2. He should have made the vital synthesis of personal faith and life, through conviction and the acceptance of the experiences of his life.
3. He should have a vivid awareness of the contemporary world, its problems and hopes for solution, and especially the world's willing acceptance of the absence of God.
4. He should have developed a commitment of service to the people of God.
5. He should have already accepted the fact that to follow Christ is to move through the desert, past rejection and into the Passion before the glory of Easter, and he must be prepared to accept apathy as well as disappointment and pain.

The formation of a spiritual life, properly understood, is the action of the Holy Spirit manifested in all human activity. Through His action the Spirit aims to form all men into the unity of God's people and thus lead them back to the Father. Prayer, therefore, in its widest sense, is all that men do whereby they are open and responsive to the Spirit. As such, prayer

pervades the total activity of Christian men and the Christian community. We are now in an era heralded by men whose words have been sometimes wise and sometimes foolish, but whose words have contributed to the strengthening of the Spirit in our day.

In a more strict sense, prayer is understood as those moments of immediate recognition and acceptance of this action of the Spirit and the loving surrender to God through the power of the same Spirit. For both individual and community, some forms and structure of prayer are necessary. Without them the life of faith cannot easily be sustained; yet for effectiveness, both individual and community must be free to be constantly creative in renewing, forming, and changing the forms to the needs of the life and tasks at hand. Just as the seminarians' demand for relevance in the curriculum and the faculty's demand for excellence are neither contradictory nor mutually exclusive, so denominational structures of prayer and individual or community needs are compatible.

The specific goals of spiritual formation were well stated in the prospectus for this series of talks:

Included in that term "style of life" among many other aspects are: academic and intellectual competence; the ability and willingness for ministry; the development of character, personality and the ability to relate helpfully to others; a growing relationship with God; growth in holiness of life, including both obedience in personal life and in the wide range of Christian mission; and the recognition of the Christian brotherhood and of both the acceptance of responsibility and the ability to edify.

With all our strictures about love of

neighbor as one of the two great commandments; our understanding the Lord's words about the Last Judgment: "When you did it to the least of My brethren"; our awareness that today "the words of the prophet are written on subway walls and tenement halls"; yet, Augustine phrases for us the ultimate goal of all spiritual formation:

What do I love when I love Thee?

Not beauty of body, nor the fair harmony of time,
nor the brightness of the light so glad-
some to our eyes,
nor sweet melodies of varied songs,
nor the fragrant smell of flowers, and
ointments, and spices,
not manna and honey,
not limbs that carnal love embraces,

None of these do I love when I love my
God.

And yet—I love a kind of light and
melody,
and fragrance, and meat, and embrace-
ment;

When I love my God

light, melody, fragrance, meat, embrace-
ment of my inner man—

What space cannot contain shineth into
my soul,

and there sounds what time bears not
away,

and I smell what breathing does not
disperse,

and I taste what eating does not di-
minish,

and I cling to what satiety cannot di-
vorce.

This is that which I love, when I love my
God.

Washington, D. C.