

POST #10 - A SACRIFICIAL LIFE AND TALKING ABOUT LOVE

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Students with Same-Sex Attraction

In 2005, the Congregation for Catholic Education issued its Instruction, “Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocation for Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders.”¹ Seminary formation teams work with a man who experiences homosexual tendencies that may be transitory in order to help the man overcome these tendencies so as to help the man achieve what the Instruction calls “affective maturity.”²

Seminary personnel, particularly the spiritual director, should challenge and assist a man with same-sex attractions to work through any healings or maturity issues associated with his same sex attraction. This healing may or may not lead to the complete freedom from same sex attractions, but a man should fundamentally come to experience himself as free, in an ongoing manner, to live out affective maturity, including sexual attraction to women. If a man does not demonstrate sufficient affective maturity and has not sufficiently overcome homosexual tendencies three years before ordination to the diaconate,³ he should be encouraged to work on the needed healing and virtue outside the seminary or in a seminary sponsored formation program, such as a spiritual year. He may be encouraged to apply for readmission at a later date. All of this presupposes that the man has spoken with both his spiritual director and his formation advisor about these matters. The Church has a right to know the candidates who apply for Orders, and the Church has made it clear that sexual orientation or attraction is a matter, that while confidential, is open to the external forum.

A Sacrificial Life That Corresponds to the Eucharistic Sacrifice

Saint John Paul II wrote of pastoral charity:

The essential content of . . . pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the Church, following the example of Christ. “Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate Christ in his self-giving and service. It is not just what we do, but our gift of self, which manifests Christ's love

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education. “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.” (CCDV) *Origins*. 35 (26) 440 D8, 2005.

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20051104_istruzione_en.html.

² “In order to admit a candidate to ordination to the diaconate, the Church must verify, among other things, that the candidate has reached affective maturity (CCDV).” see CCDV, nn. 44 and 50: *AAS* 84 (1992), 733-736 and 746-748. See also Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, “Circular Letter to the Most Reverend Diocesan Bishops and Other Ordinaries with Canonical Faculties to Admit to Sacred Orders Concerning: Scrutinies regarding the Suitability of Candidates for Orders” (10 November 1997): *Notitiae* 33 (1997), 507-518, particularly Enclosure V.

³ “Nevertheless, such tendencies must be clearly overcome at least three years before ordination to the diaconate.” (CCDV).

for his flock. Pastoral charity determines our way of thinking and acting, our way of relating to people. It makes special demands on us. (51)”⁴

Seminarians aspire to this pastoral charity expressed in pastoral service through which God loves the priest and the priest, in turn, loves God back. Since pastoral charity is not just what we do, but the gift of self, seminarians express it while they are still seminarians, or they do not. As directors, we assist the men by encouraging them to open the truth of their lives in front of God, particularly how they are doing in living lives of self-giving.

Early on in their formation, some men aspire to be “walking catechisms,” or perfectly functioning machines at the Liturgy and in pastoral situations. Such aspirations are often initiated by disappointing contact with priests who do not know the Church’s teaching well, or who are sloppy at the Liturgy or befuddled in their pastoring. It is our task to gently and firmly lead seminarians beyond robotic, perfect functionality to pastoral charity that is expressed in ardent, competent service in the Church. There are three particular ways we can do that: 1) encouraging the men to bring to the Lord in prayer how they are doing in love; 2) encouraging the men to acknowledge their desires and bring them to the Lord in prayer; 3) directing the men to pray about self-sacrifice and mortification as a way of opening themselves in love.

Talking about Love

Many seminarians have very sensitive antennae when it comes to speaking about love. They pick up appeals to sentimentality or false descriptions of love; they also are aware that they do not love enough, so they look for helpful directions in opening themselves up to love. I find St. Bernard of Clairvaux a good guide in understanding love.

St. Bernard on Love

St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes lucidly about the Christian experience of love. A basic teaching of St. Bernard is to use Pope Benedict XVI’s words, that our offering of love has to be linked to our receiving of love. We cannot fully love without Christ, without the Holy Spirit infusing our love.

In the law of the gift, God gives us *munera*, that is, capacities and duties for love and for generativity. Whether we are married, celibate, or single, we can and we have to get out of the aloneness-which-is-not-good into intimacy, and we have to be generative, or life giving for others. St. Bernard teaches us that if we pour ourselves out in generative love, if we are to pour forth again, we must return to the source, to Christ. Willful niceness will not last long in seminary life. Most of us can get by with a polite tolerance; but St. Bernard assures us that we do not have to settle for polite tolerance, for strained good manners. As God works with us, He pours the Holy Spirit into us so that we can truly love. The primacy of love is again accented by a comment that St. Bernard makes regarding a profitable reading the Cantic of Canticles. St. Bernard says, “It is Love which speaks here, and if anyone wishes to understand it, let him first love. Otherwise it would be folly to read this song of love, because it is absolutely impossible for a cold heart to grasp the meaning of language so inflamed.”⁵ It would be unfruitful, St. Bernard holds, for one to read the book unless one is actually loving. He does not here distinguish between loving God or loving humans—what

⁴ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992), sec. 23.

⁵ Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs* I, Kalamzoo: Cistercian Publications, 1972, x.

is important is that one loves. One could go on to say that one must love before one will find fruitfulness or before one will be life-giving as a celibate seminarian.

We may become correct in our relations and actions, but being truly life-giving comes with our exercising our gift for love. St. Bernard preaches often that we must be engaged in the pathway of discipleship in order to understand. If we are backsliding, tepid, or in mortal sin, we will not understand. We will look, but not see; listen, but not hear.

St. Bernard comments on Songs 2:13, where the Bridegroom says, “Arise, my friend, my beautiful one and come!” The invitation is to work in the vineyard, where she works and also draws near to the wine of love. St. Bernard says, “When she will have attained to it and become perfect she will celebrate a spiritual marriage; and they shall be two, not in one flesh, but in one spirit, as the apostle says, ‘He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him (I Cor 6:17).’”⁶

St. Bernard writes of the soul as the bride of Christ, in keeping with the patristic writers and most of the mystics of the Eastern and Western Churches. This understanding flows from the Church’s understanding of the Church as the Bride of Christ. Now, most men have to work with this understanding of being “brides of Christ” as much as women have to work with the notion of being “sons in the Son.” The gender dissonance is there, and we need to challenge our seminarians to do their own translating, to benefit from as much of this language as they can.

St. Bernard describes the effects of union with God, one of which is greater charity. In his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, St. Bernard writes that the greatest gift one can give is to share what one knows from being “in the wine cellar.” The wine cellar is the metaphor used to describe the place of union with God, the place of inebriation and joy. St. Bernard writes about being introduced to this wine cellar in his Sermon 23:2, “Even though I alone seem to have been introduced, it is not for my sole advantage.”⁷

There is no need to fear that love of God will distance us from our neighbors. This would be true if we were “running the show.” Instead:

It is characteristic of true and pure contemplation that when the mind is ardently aglo [*sic*] with God’s love, it is sometimes so filled with zeal and the desire to gather to God those who will love him with equal abandon that it gladly foregoes contemplative leisure for the endeavor of preaching.⁸

Here, there is no Martha-Mary dichotomy between service and prayer. St. Bernard holds that it is the nature of Christian contemplation to impel us to service.⁹ He does call us to move beyond selfish love to active love, but recognizes that, in itself, it can give truth to the description of something described “as cold as charity.”

Using another image, Bernard says that selfish love shines; dry love is the result of burning (similar to St. John of the Cross describing a burning log on which fire acts to burn out impurities). St. Bernard comments, “Merely to shine is futile; merely to burn is not enough; to burn and to shine is perfect.”¹⁰

⁶ *On the Song of Songs III*, Sermon 61:1, p. 140-141.

⁷ *On the Song of Songs II*, Sermon 23:2, p. 26.

⁸ *On the Song of Songs III*, Sermon 57.9, p 103.

⁹ *On the Song of Songs*, Sermon 50.4.

¹⁰ In Nat. S. Joan. Bapt., Sermon 3; Migne, P. L., CLXXXIII, 399-b. As quoted in Pope Pius XII, *Doctor Mellifluus* (1953).

God infuses His love in us. This love of God allows us to go on to affective love. St. Bernard notes that burning love, love which is seen actions, is true love. He refers us to 1 John 3:18 “Children, let us love not in word or speech, but in deed and truth.” So, love in action is good, but when Divine Love comes upon us, we truly “taste and see the goodness of the Lord (Psalm 34:8).”¹¹

When the object of our love is Christ, we are opened to affective love. When the object of our love is not yet God, we do not yet have affective charity. So, for example, if a seminarian serves the poor in a soup kitchen, he does a noble action, more noble than serving in a comfortable apostolate; but his coming to love the poor *in Christ* allows for a greater love. In impoverished areas, a good number of people come to care for those less fortunate. Such care is an objective good. Such care is better than being unconcerned, better than being detached from the plight of the poor, but it can also be limited; it can also be a means of exercising one’s own sense of nobility. Directing our love to Christ does not abstract us away from others; it allows us to truly love them. Such love, for example, allows us to love those less fortunate as our brothers and sisters—and not simply as targets of our good will.

Again, St. Bernard teaches us that one fruit of loving and being loved by Christ is that it enables us to love others. St. Bernard writes of the transforming power of love:

But you, if you love the Lord your God with your whole heart, whole mind, whole strength and leaping with ardent feeling beyond that love of love with which active love is satisfied and having received the Spirit in fullness . . . then you will experience as well your own true self, since you perceive that you possess nothing at all for which you love yourself, except insofar as you belong to God: you pour out upon him your whole power of loving.¹²

The accurate understanding of our true self leads to pouring ourselves out in love for others. The final result of this knowledge of self in God is reflected in our love of neighbor: “As for your neighbor whom you are obliged to love as yourself: if you are to experience him as he is, you will actually experience him only as you do yourself: he is what you are.”¹³ When the seminarian knows he is a beloved son, a redeemed sinner, and a temple of the Holy Spirit, he can begin to see his neighbor, and begin to love.

So, as directors, it is good to ask the men to reflect on their own loves. In which loves are they shining, in which burning and in which shining and burning? As young men, they will often equate real love as love which is passionate; they often are suspicious of love that can seem only correct or passionless. It can be of great assistance to them to teach them from St. Bernard: dry love is love, but God wants to give us more. God wants to give us affective, faithful love.

¹¹ *On the Song of Songs*, “Sermon 50,” vol IV, pp. 32-33.

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_24051953_doctor-mellifluus_en.html

¹² *On the Song of Songs III.*, Sermon 50.6, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Sermon 50.7, p. 36.