

POST #14 - INTERNAL FORUM AND FINAL REMARKS

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

MSGR DANIEL TRAPP



Staying in Your Lane

The internal forum is a wonderful place in which to serve. Very often, spiritual directors are able to accompany souls in very sacred places. Often, we are given to understand behaviors or attitudes which are very opaque and off-putting to others in day-to-day life; or we are privy to knowledge about the deep wells of charity and faith that a seminarian may have, knowledge that others do not have. Conversely, we sometimes know the depth of unhealed wounds, the frequency of turns toward sin. Often, our priest brothers in the external forum are not given access to such places, to such understandings or knowledge; they make their decisions about a man's advancement based on the wisdom that God gives them and on what they see.

When a man has difficulties in communication with his external formators, it is important that we, as spiritual directors, listen empathetically. It is also important to remember that we are hearing one side of the story. Sometimes, though, in our own private judgment, we may believe that the man has not been treated fairly or that he has not been understood adequately. What do we do?

First, if the man is very angry, the director listens to his anger and allows him to express himself. However, if the anger turns to rage or becomes otherwise unhealthy, the director should lead him back to the Lord. It can be helpful to take a few minutes to pray quietly, encouraging the man to bring the pain (which gives rise to the anger) to the Lord. Often, old wounds are triggered by experiences with authority figures in the seminary. As the director, my role is to assist the man to bring his wounds for healing or his just anger to the Lord. It is not, primarily, to provide a place for him to vent.

Secondly, the seminarian is the one who needs to communicate with his formator, with the vice rector, or with the rector. As directors, we assist him best by helping him to pray and to formulate how he will respond to his formators. It can be helpful to assist the man in formulating his concerns in a way that makes them more likely to be heard. For example, if he is angry, ask him to identify the specific injustice that he perceives. Does the perception seem real, or does it seem freighted with other past experiences? What is the best way to speak about it? If he is hurt, how can he bring that forward and not be emotionally overly vulnerable? What language is disclosive and safe at the same time?

At times, the seminarian may be convinced that further communication would not be helpful. That perception may be true, or it may be true that he is simply unfamiliar with how to bring his anger and perceptions of injustice into conversation in an adult manner. Spending time in spiritual direction reviewing options can be a valuable assistance.

Occasionally, I have seen newer directors, empathic listeners, who immediately assume that the seminarian's point of view in a conflict with authority is completely accurate. The directors may become too emotionally involved and take the position of the internal forum being in opposition to the external formation. Such a position does not assist the man.

The seminarians are our spiritual sons, and sons need to grow to full stature as men. They need our assistance in that project more than they need our sympathy—or our taking sides with them against a perceived enemy.

What do you do if you believe that there is a serious injustice or that trust has been seriously abused, and, in addition, that the man is not in a position to deal with it? Because there are so many variables in this situation, I suggest a few principles: 1) the seminarian is the principle communicator with the external formation; 2) when you are not sure about the course of action, begin by taking it to the Lord; 3) if possible, discuss the matter with your supervisor; 4) with the man's permission, discuss the matter with the director of spiritual formation in your seminary. Again, it is only with the man's permission that you would bring something out of the internal forum into the external forum with the director of spiritual formation.

Grave, Immediate, or Mortal Danger

There are, of course, situations recognized by the *Program of Priestly Formation* in which the spiritual director assists the seminarian to bring matters to the rector. In speaking of confidentiality, PPF 134 directs us, "The only possible exception to this standard of confidentiality would be the case of grave, immediate, or mortal danger involving the directee or another person." In such a case, if the information comes up in confession, the seal cannot be broken and the information cannot be shared. If, however, the information comes up in the spiritual direction session apart from confession, the man should be accompanied by the spiritual director to speak with the rector. If the man is incapable of doing so, the spiritual director himself should bring the matter to the rector.

Such difficult situations are rare, and most of our ministry is a simple joy. However, there are times when we encounter the reality that something is not right in the spiritual direction relationship or in the man's relationship with the external forum. By bringing these encounters to the Lord, we begin receiving the light we need to serve Him, the men, and the Church.

Conclusion

We who get to be in the life of a seminary have continual new chances to take a break, look again, pick up the pieces, and walk anew with Christ. I have been incredibly blessed by the Lord who has given me new life over and over again in the Holy Spirit. Despite my many infidelities, I have seen His love shine anew on countless days when I had no right to that love. To have accompanied men for twenty-five years as a seminary spiritual director has allowed me to see the shining Light of Christ heal old wounds and open up new life—over and over again.