

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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The best way to direct seminarians in their prayer lives is to direct them toward unceasing union with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit. The Second Vatican Council described that union as the goal of seminary spiritual formation, and that union has been put forth repeatedly since then as the goal of seminarians' prayer lives.

To arrive at that purpose and goal, we should be directing seminarians to pray in three times of their lives: liturgical time, private time, and all of the time. That we should pray during *liturgical time* seems obvious, but our efforts there can be the most confounding. Prayer during *private time* can be both richly rewarding and very daunting. *Praying all of the time* is recommended by our Lord and by the first man to describe what being *in the Lord* is like, St. Paul. To many people, it can seem like an unattainable ideal.

Throughout these entries, I will be sharing my reflections about how to assist men to pray in these three times of their lives.

The Seminarians We Direct

The seminarians whom we direct are men who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb. Christ dwells within them. It is essential that we regularly look deeply into the men to see Christ dwelling within them. If we see only their weakness or even their likeableness, we are seeing too superficially. There are levels of the soul that we need to perceive. These men may be nice or they may be difficult to bear. Whoever they are in their personality is fundamentally not important for us. As their directors, we need to be able to see deeply, with Christ, into the reality that these men are created in the image and likeness of God, and that they are redeemed.

In those moments, when we see only "a candidate his diocese is lucky to have" or a man "who never has his act together," we, as spiritual directors need to go to God, confessing our inability to see who these men really are.

It is our job to see deeply into a man and to ask the Lord to cure our blindness. At times, neither the man himself nor we see that he is a beloved son in the Son. The seminarian will often see himself as in a mirror, darkly, but we have to pray continually to see him in his true identity and dignity. As directors who see clearly, we will more surely direct seminarians away from the superficial aspects of their emotional and spiritual life.

How do we know if we see? We see when we treat the men with the respect and love that are their due. In seeing them with the help of grace, we open ourselves up to the spiritual gift of wisdom, which allows us to love. The men are our spiritual sons, but in a way deriving from the Father's primary fatherhood. They are fundamentally sons of the Eternal Father, and there needs to be a certain reverence on our part for them. Because of this reverence, we can give earthy rebukes; we can laugh out loud at their pretenses and poke fun at them when they get a little too sublime. Such rebukes, laughter, and poking are because we respect them and will not stand by when they attempt to create false versions of themselves.

We often see the deeper levels of a man's heart, and because of the Spirit's equipping us for ministry, we have a privileged position. Our brothers in the external forum - whose job it is to look and see that the same man performs his duties without avoiding them, that he holds his classmates in quiet contempt, that he will not take the time he needs to study - these brothers need us to remind them about the deeper levels of who the man is in Christ. It may be that a man has not sufficiently allowed Christ to convert him in order to stay in seminary formation. It may be that the man simply does not have the capacity to advance. Such a lack of conversion or lack of capacity needs to be honestly admitted. It is part of our job as collaborators to make sure that the deeper truths of the seminarians' identities are also recognized and respected.

Now I would like to move onto my first theme of how spiritual directors teach seminarians to pray.

1. *Praying during Liturgical Prayer*

Our men are to pray daily at the Eucharist, and they are to pray regularly the Liturgy of the Hours. Often, the documents on seminary formation direct formators to gradually form habits and exercises of prayer in the seminarians. Regarding the Liturgy, specifically, it is of key importance to recognize that such a gradual introduction is not called for by the Church: the Church calls us to throw our men daily into contact with the Eucharistic Lord at the Eucharistic Celebration.

Many of our men come from cheerful, half-pagan families whose children are raised to tell confessors things like, "We go to Mass when we can, but we are very busy." The Church directs that daily our men are to encounter Christ and the awe-filled/awe-full assembled members of His Body at the Eucharistic celebration. The seminarians are thrown into this encounter; and it is up to us, as directors, to help the men learn the language and the ways of relating in the Liturgy.

Recently, I was at a funeral at which the Communion meditation was an angelic rendition of *Pie Jesu*. I was swept up by the song until the full-volume ringing of a cell phone a few pews back. The elderly gentleman - I looked - who owned the cell phone had a difficult time shutting it off. When he did, his wife scolded him vigorously and loudly until the time the Communion meditation ended. Goodbye, sweeping song. The Liturgy often gives us the opportunity to live, in a more concentrated way, the virtues we need outside the Liturgy.

In these days, some men come to us from parishes where praise and worship songs or vigorous hymnody mark the worship of those parishes. We do praise and worship the Lord in seminary worship, but usually in a different emotional key, often trading metric singing for chant. This change alone can be bewildering for men. Some take to it right away; others do not. Check with your men. If there is a problem, it is best to face the issue head on; it is best to tell the men that, if they choose the Spirit's promptings to love, they will get used to the new ways of singing. They should focus for a while on the text if they find the singing itself uninspiring. Younger men can be tripped up by the changes in the liturgical music styles, and the spiritual director needs to help the men pray, with practical advice about how to do so.

Full, active, and conscious participation is great when we can pray fully, actively, and consciously. We should strive to pray the Mass that way; but sometimes, we will not be able to do so. In those times when we cannot (either through poor choices and sins, or because of the spiritual time we are in), we should acknowledge our poverty in front of the glory of God present in the Liturgy. We should acknowledge our sinfulness and pray in a quieter mode of prayer. This quiet prayer does not mean we do not respond, sing and pay attention to the Liturgy; but we should let the men know that at times, we have a hard time praying fully, actively, and consciously (in the way that those qualities are usually understood).