

POST #9 - LIVING AS A CELIBATE

SEMINARY SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

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Living as a Celibate

Spiritual directors should regularly ask the seminarians how they are doing with their celibacy. A simple question such as, “How are you doing with chastity?” will often suffice. Such a quick scan is helpful to keep the men accountable, but directors should be moving their men to ask the more fundamental questions about chastity in terms of intimacy and generativity.

Because of the law of self giving written in each of us, it can be helpful to ask the men how they are dealing with their gift/office for intimacy and their gift/office for generativity. As humans, we have this dual capacity and duty, similar to the *munera* of sacramental life, for loving and for being life-giving. As directors, we can help the men to begin viewing their lives according to the law of the gift.

So, we ask the men about intimacy. A rhetorically awful but incisive way to understand intimacy is through the disclosive and horrible pseudo-homonym INTO-ME-SEE. That is, does anyone “see into” the man? Does anyone know him? When this question is asked about the relationship with God, confusion about feeling God intimately present and being intimate often jumps out. The confusion comes about in the early years of our relationship with the Lord when we assume that spiritual consolation is the same thing as intimacy. Just as married couples have to mature and find their intimacy grow deeper, so do we, celibates. Intimacy often involves, but is not limited to, experiences of feeling close to God. Intimacy often means being awake to God, abiding in God in peace, without much sensible consolation.

Another difficulty that some men face is that all of their efforts are being given to avoiding sin. Many of these men come to spiritual directors after a conversion or, as they say, a reversion. Part of that experience is often the belief they are called to offer to the Lord the possibilities of having romantic relationships and engaging in sexual activity. Some of them arrive having cut off their romantic searching and any sexual activity, but they have not yet learned how to go beyond the negative movement of celibacy, the “just say no.” As ecclesial celibates, our lives are opened up to the Kingdom of God and to a relationship in which God is our other. Directors are often key in helping the seminarian move to open up his life toward intimacy with God and in relationships in the Church.

Directors should frequently ask seminarians the secondary but real question of intimacy with others, particularly in friendship and fraternity. Are they open to friendship and to brotherhood with others? Many seminarians these days are dedicated to forming presbyterates in which fraternity is stronger than what they currently see. Such dedication has to be poked and prodded by the director—is it only a manifestation of fear about future lapses, or does it express itself in mature relationships at this point in formation?

Some men shy away from the openness that friendship demands. As a free gift from God, friendship happens only when a certain degree of self-confidence and ability to trust exists in a man. Some men are so controlled that they never get close enough to others to see if the free gift of friendship develops. Other men have very close friends but limit their close relationships to friendship, to the neglect of fraternity.

Fraternity is the relationship of being a brother to a brother. In the Lord, it is the kind of relationship that calls us beyond the sterile niceness or restrained competitiveness that can mark our relationships when we are young men. As directors, we need to see if the men are building deeper relationships beyond secular tolerance, on the one hand, and that those relationships are not restricted to friendship either. Some seminarians revert to a junior high social order in which there are, “me and my friends” and then, “those other people.” The law of the gift calls us to more.

The second question to ask the men to bring to prayer is, “How am I being life giving?” The *munus* of generativity probably calls for more generosity during our seminary years than in any other time of our service in the Lord. As priests, we easily see that our lives bring new life to others. As a seminary spiritual director, I would have to be blind not to see the life-giving abundance that the Lord pours out through this part of seminary ministry.

Many seminarians see little evidence that their lives are generative; a ten-page paper is a poor substitute for a spiritual son or daughter. Directors can help the men by encouraging them to bring their need and their capacity for generativity to the Lord. Very often, the Lord directs the men to becoming mentors or older brothers to those in formation who are younger than they are. Other times, He moves them to be more attentive to the seminary staff or to the people they meet in their apostolic programs or internships. Just becoming aware of this office and capacity and bringing that awareness to the Lord are great helps toward spiritual maturity.

Taking Care of Business

People take care of a lot of life’s business through their romantic relationships and through having sex. We help the seminarian to make sure that he takes care of business without those romantic relationships and without having sex. Because so many parts of our lives are wired into our sexuality, it is good for the director to be reverent and to have a simple confidence in asking about chastity.

For example, a man who had been dealing with frustrations or anxiety by having sex frequently with his girlfriend or by masturbating needs assistance to see that his problem is not that he just has a high libido. More accurately, he has been dealing with the frustration, anxiety, or need with sex. So, his efforts, in addition to strategies for continence, have to include dealing with frustration, anxiety, or need.

Men come to the seminary desiring to be formed to live a life of chaste celibacy. Men come to contemporary seminaries from a society where confusion about sexuality and the Internet pornography industry have caused grave damage. Seminarians should be encouraged to come with great confidence in the Holy Spirit that they will receive the graces and the formation they need in order to lead lives of perfect continence.

Spiritual directors soon find that special care is needed for those who have a habit of masturbation or of the abuse of pornography. The spiritual directors should begin by encouraging these men to reach out with confidence to God’s vision: chastity is the possible and expected norm for seminarians and priests. Jesus did not call them to the seminary in order to allow them to live in the bondage of sexual sin.

When you receive a new directee or if a man comes to your seminary for the first time, it is good to be very clear about continence. So, if a seminarian has a habit (such as once a week) of masturbation or use of a pornographic Internet site, if this habit has not gone away in the first two months of his time in the seminary,

advise him to bring his difficulty to spiritual direction. Then you, as the director, have the responsibility to give him intensive assistance for this temptation. Within spiritual direction, the intensive assistance may include:

- a. introducing the use of the particular examen of St. Ignatius of Loyola;
- b. introducing the seminarian to focused prayer and fasting as methods to support chastity;
- c. suggesting the man call or contact you as his director or a spiritual friend when he is sorely tempted;
- d. saying the daily rosary;
- e. guiding the seminarian toward healthy recreation and hobbies, legitimate goods or pleasures, which can substitute for destructive pleasures;
- f. encouraging the seminarian to follow through with accomplishments, building sense of self-esteem;
- g. encouraging regular physical exercise;
- h. encouraging focus on times and places of temptation, including attention to the HALT (hungry, angry, lonely, tired) rule.

In addition, if during his first semester, the seminarian has not achieved greater freedom, he should speak with his spiritual director or someone suggested by the spiritual director about additional coaching or counseling, outside of spiritual direction, in order to win further freedom. The seminarian should ask the house spiritual director to identify priests and others who have had success in helping others to chastity.

Further coaching beyond spiritual direction might include the following:

- a. receiving prayer for inner healing;
- b. participating in formation programs such as The Institute for Priestly Formation's Summer Program of Spiritual Formation for Diocesan Seminarians in Omaha, Nebraska or St. Peter's Seminary Summer Spiritual Program for Seminarians in London, Ontario;
- c. meeting with a therapist for psychological counseling;
- d. participating in fraternities of men who meet regularly to encourage each other in chastity;
- e. participating in workshops or centers that are designed to assist with healing associated with sexual matters.

Spiritual directors will normally suggest to a man who has an enduring habit of viewing Internet pornography or masturbating that he find one regular confessor; the shame that arises from a lack of chastity can tempt a man to run to many confessors and keep him from encountering the powerful mercy of God.