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SEMINARIES AND NUMBERS

It is somewhat mind-boggling for myself to be standing here this evening before you to mark the beginning of the 1979 NCEA Seminary Department sessions at this 75th Anniversary convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. To be invited to offer the opening address for this convention is indeed an honor. But at this time last year, I fully expected that I would be sitting where you are and listening to someone else offer insights on seminary formation and education which would be challenging yet inspiring, critical but complimentary, candid but hopeful.

My life for five years had been absorbed in the world of seminary education and formation as Rector of a Theologate. The NCEA offered me that rare opportunity to meet with others in this form of priestly ministry and to share with them both realities and dreams, hopes and disappointments, joys and frustrations. I believed that as a result of this experience within seminary education and formation, as a result of the dialogue and conversation with others, that I, along with you, had a unique perspective on the values of seminary formation/education and possible directions which might be considered.

Last August I was suddenly transplanted from the world of seminary formation/education to begin a ministry as Bishop of Eastern Montana, which is a little west of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Suddenly, a whole new perspective was part of my life regarding the question of seminary education and formation. Instead of writing Bishops and Vocation Directors to trust and believe in the seminary program for which I was responsible, I was now receiving similar letters from high schools, college seminaries and theologates throughout the country. It is amazing how different positions change perspectives. But eight months later, after prayer, reflection, and dialogue with many people, I find it interesting that the same concerns regarding seminary formation/education I had as Rector of a seminary, I also have as Bishop of a Diocese. These concerns are focused on the topic for consideration this evening - a concern for Seminaries and numbers, the number of seminaries in our country today, and the number of priesthood candidates in our seminaries today. Both concerns are of increasing importance for all of us and of even more importance for the Church which men are ordained to serve. Both concerns must be looked at in light of ecclesiology and the virtue of justice.

In many ways, to address these concerns is to address issues which have really been part of the NCEA Seminary Department agenda for many years. These agenda items may well not have been part of the formal program schedules, but they have been the agenda items over breakfast, in brief elevator conversations, and in various dialogues with others in seminary ministry throughout the country.

We all have become accustomed to the reports on the decreasing number of seminary programs at all levels of seminary formation/education as well as the drastic reduction in the number of candidates for priesthood. We anxiously look forward to the release of the CARA REPORT and a sudden glimmer of hope is

offered when a Diocese announces that it has doubled the number of ordinations this past year, only to find out later that this meant an increase from one priesthood candidate to two, and reality really hits home when that same diocese reports the next candidate for priesthood is entering first year college. I admit this is an extreme case, but it serves well as an example regarding the use of statistics. However, when a slight percentage of increase is recorded in the number of candidates for priesthood at any level of formation/education, there is great rejoicing, but there are also the questions asked regarding the quality of the candidates involved.

It is a difficult time to be involved in seminary formation/education, but before I express my own personal insights into the questions asked, let me offer my gratitude to you for the ministry you are sharing with the Church in the United States today. In your hands is the future of the ordained leadership of the American Church for the next century. As priests, sisters, and laity, yours is one of the most important and significant responsibilities in the Church today. Thank you for exercising that ministry.

I. NUMBER OF SEMINARIES IN OUR COUNTRY TODAY

To appreciate and understand the position in which we now find ourselves regarding the number of seminaries in our country today, I believe it is worth considering history and ecclesiology. History points out the wisdom of the founding generation of the Church in our country which recognized immediately the need for leadership at the local level within the Christian community. That leadership was seen exclusively in terms of priesthood and ordained ministry. One of the real signs of maturity in the life of a diocese would be the announcement that the Diocese was planning to open a seminary to prepare young men for priesthood within the diocese. This was but a response to the encouragement of Canon Law at a time when vocations were in abundance. Cost factors were also minimal at that time, and seminary education at the high school, college or theologate level was very structured and determined.

Suddenly all this changed. Cost factors increased; vocations dropped; specialization and new programs with new skills and aptitudes became necessary; seminary education and formation found itself in a whole new world of questions without any answers available. A student body once taken for granted at the high school, college or theologate level of seminary formation/education became a prize to be sought after. Recruitment officers became a part of the seminary administration, not only to encourage vocations, but to fulfill the need for an adequate student body which would justify the investment of personnel and money.

At various meetings of seminary personnel throughout the country, word would filter out that this seminary or that seminary would be closing at the end of the year. Sympathy would be expressed, but those involved in still viable seminary communities would realize that maybe the same fate would also occur to them. A new word entered into the vocabulary of seminary administrators and faculty members. The word was spoken softly at first, but it has registered new decibels in recent years. The word was "amalgamation" or "consolidation." But so often the response to the word would be a question: "Well, who would like to amalgamate or consolidate with us?"

No word seems to have aroused so much uncertainty or paradoxically so much enthusiasm in seminary vocabulary today as has this word "amalgamation" or "consolidation." This applies to all levels of seminary education/formation, whether at a high school, college, or theologate level. The reasons for the interest in the word and the reality is the growing realization that better preparation for priesthood might occur if there was a consolidation of faculty and resources to relate to a much smaller student community than in years past. Moreover, the ever increasing financial costs to offer quality preparation at the high school, college or theologate level make it more and more difficult to raise the need funds to justify the expenditure of such funds for a relatively small group of people when similar programs and opportunities are available relatively nearby. The great fear in speaking about any form of amalgamation is the loss of a local seminary in a diocese or within a religious community that has become such a symbol of life within that diocese or religious community.

Some would believe that the quickest and best way to face this problem would be for regions in the country to choose central locations, combine faculties, libraries, and student bodies, and begin anew with a "seminary conglomerate" which would serve a portion of the Church in our country. This easy solution could well prompt a speaker at a convention such as this to ask the question five years from now: "Why did they do that?"

The question of amalgamation or consolidation of seminaries, the question of the number of seminaries in our country today, has much deeper issues involved. One cannot speak about combining resources, sharing faculties, or gathering together student candidates for priesthood in central locations without looking at much deeper issues involved with seminary preparation, formation, and education today. How do we look at and examine these issues today? I would like to do so in the light of the objectives of the NCCB Program of Priestly Formation and the lived ecclesiology of the Church today.

At the high school level, the objectives of the PPF Program are listed in the following way:

1. To embark upon and grow in the life of faith, while learning the experience of prayer and the dimension of service;
2. To grow in his understanding of priesthood, both on academic and experiential levels;
3. To grow and mature in his personality in tune with what is expected for healthy adolescent development;
4. To obtain a good secondary school education that will equip him both for higher education and for later experiences in life;
5. To integrate through counselling all the aspects of his development.

At the college level, the objectives of college formation are succinctly expressed:

The immediate aim of the college level formation for the candidate for the priesthood is to help him mature as a liberally educated human person, committed to Christ and to service of his neighbor. Moreover, this is ordered to the ultimate aim which is priesthood.

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And finally at the theologate level, the objectives are stated:

The goal of the seminary is to form true pastors of the People of God, after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest, and shepherd...

1. A deepening of his personal faith experiences and commitment to service;
2. A more vivid awareness of the contemporary world in which God's saving presence is at work through men;
3. A growing understanding of the faith through critical theological reflection in the light of the magisterium of the Church;
4. An awareness of the nature of the redemptive sacramental priesthood and a strong conviction of the call to share in it;
5. A vital integration of his theological understanding and his life in Christ.

These objectives should be fulfilled in the context of the Church today, in the lived experience of the People of God within that Church. Sometimes people conceive of seminaries as real life imitations of "Fantasy Island" with even Ricardo Montalban as Rector where young men spend a certain period of time, and then return to reality as an ordained priest. The fulfillment of any of these objectives at any level of seminary education must be accomplished within the Church as it exists and is experienced today. Throughout these objectives, the candidate for priesthood is seen as a human being developing and growing in awareness and appreciation of his humanity, his faith, and his understanding of priesthood. Most of all the candidate for priesthood is seen as a member of the Church as lived and experienced today.

How does the Church exist and live today in relationship to the preparation of young men for ordained priesthood? I believe a description of the Church today relating to this question would have to include the following three characteristics among many others.

First, I believe today the Church is helping all people become more aware of the universal call to ministry which we possess as baptized Christians. More and more, people who are not ordained are fulfilling ministerial roles which belonged exclusively to the priest in the past. Many people today in the Church, men and women, young and old, see themselves as "ministers" within the Christian community. Though married or single, whether as a religious woman or as a religious brother, many lay people are living a life of ministry on a full time basis in our dioceses and parishes throughout the country. Furthermore, many lay people are involved in educational and formational programs to help them become qualified and credible ministers for the Christian community. The future would seem to hold the challenge for the priest of tomorrow to become a minister to ministers. His ministry will take shape and form as he models himself after the Lord Jesus as teacher, priest and shepherd - but often enough with other ministers who will share with him the proclamation of the Good News. The priest of tomorrow must fulfill an "episcopal" role and responsibility of calling others to ministry.

Secondly, the Church today exists at many levels. It exists in a magnificent way on an international level where we are conscious of our identity as members of a Roman Catholic Church in relationship to the millions of people who share and live our faith with us in Europe, Asia, Australia, and South America. The Church exists within our nation as a visible witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The existence of the Church at an international and national level are important elements within our faith tradition. These elements must be maintained and nurtured.

But we also know that it is within a Diocese, within a religious community, that we live out the challenge of Jesus and His Church. Over and over again, the Council documents speak about the importance of the local diocesan Church, of the local Bishop and the responsibilities of the local Church in achieving Christian community.

A person ordained for a diocese or a religious community is ordained to serve that Diocese or to work for the purposes of a particular religious community. It would seem that the preparation for priesthood must not be separated or isolated from the "local Church" or religious community in which a person will live out the priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, the Church today is calling people to live out and to be a faith community. The Church is asked to be an environment, an experience where people are able to find meaning for their lives. Priests are expected to offer leadership in a Christian community whereby people will have a positive, wholesome, and worthwhile experience of Church.

These three qualities of the Church today as it lives and exists in our world and in our country should have a profound influence on seminary formation and education. Amalgamation or consolidation of seminaries might occur miraculously overnight with the unbelievable agreement that regional seminaries or inter-regional seminaries would become a reality. Faculties would be brought together, libraries combined, financial costs drastically reduced, and a student body in such large numbers that it would bring back memories of the late fifties and sixties. And yet amalgamation or consolidation would fail if seminary education and formation did not integrate into any new structures the awareness of the qualities of the Church today which are mentioned above,

Seminary formation and education at all levels must realize that the priest is not the only minister in the Church community today. Fr. Nathan Mitchell, O.S.B., a young brilliant professor at St. Meinrad's, once expressed it well by saying: "Ordination presumes ministry; ministry does not demand ordination." If the priest of today and tomorrow must become a minister to ministers, are we allowed the luxury of having our ministry of priestly formation and education separated and isolated exclusively at all times from the preparation, education and formation of ministers - ordained and non-ordained - within the Christian community? Do I mean by this that all preparation, education and formation of ministers - ordained and non-ordained - should follow the same pattern and share the same experiences? Far from it! However, I do believe that in the preparation for priesthood, there should be some points of convergence, meeting places where people preparing for priesthood share academic and formational experiences with others who will minister within the Christian community.

At the same time, continued stress and importance should be placed on opportunities for priesthood candidates to develop a spirituality and faith life that will be a source of sustenance for himself, for others, and for the Church. Moreover, as Archbishop Jadot stated last year in his opening address to us, "it is more essential than ever that the priesthood candidate operate from a firm and clear theological base, well rooted in Catholic tradition." Preparation for ministry - ordained and non-ordained - must not become an egalitarian democratic experience where all ministry in the Church is the same and ministry - ordained and non-ordained - would become an amorphous non-identifiable reality. The expectations of seminary

formation and education at all levels must be more demanding today than ever. At the same time, it must face the reality of a Church which calls all its people to ministry. Therefore, it must involve the priesthood candidates in a vocational response of structured and planned programs of involvement and development in a sense and experience of shared ministry as part of that preparation.

Secondly, the Church today takes hopefully its most concrete form and reality within the local diocesan Church community or within the religious community organized for service to the Church. For many local Churches, or dioceses without seminaries within their own Christian community, or even within Dioceses or religious communities who operate and maintain seminary programs, candidates for priesthood at times become isolated from that reality and experience of Church or religious community. That is tragic. Even now, it is good to realize that in the course of a year, a seminary deals with a priesthood candidate for approximately 32 weeks a year; the candidate hopefully lives in and relates to the local Church or religious community during the other 20 weeks of the year.

The candidate for priesthood is sometimes viewed as a commodity, a very precious commodity today. The Vocation Director and the Bishop become like human brokers searching for the right commodity exchange or seminary in which to place this candidate for priesthood. During summers, and finally at the conclusion of the seminary program, the local Church or religious community welcomes the candidate back for what is termed "internship." For some, this commitment or involvement at this stage is too little, too late.

Somehow or other, it would seem to me that ecclesiology today would ask for more involvement on the part of the local Church or religious community in the preparation of candidates for priesthood. Distance and other factors prevent candidates for priesthood in many cases to gain field education credits within their own local Church community. In most cases today, the candidate fulfills his field education requirements in other local Church communities. This would become even more widespread if there really was an amalgamation or consolidation of seminaries if such amalgamation followed established patterns. I believe that ways must be found whereby the local Diocese on an academic level, on a formational level, and on a level of field education or apostolate must share with the seminary the preparation of candidates for priesthood. By such a proposal, I do not mean that academic or formational or field education programs would be watered down or compromised. Rather, I believe they could be strengthened. The whole thrust of seminary education and formation is to offer the candidate an integrated approach, an integrated experience for ordained ministry. How much more challenging and satisfying this could become if it were offered within the community for which the candidate would be ordained to serve. Dioceses and/or religious communities must share with seminaries the responsibility for preparing ordained ministers of tomorrow.

The involvement of the local diocese or religious community in the preparation, formation and education of candidates for priesthood at all levels might well be the incentive for Dioceses to fulfill the expectations and hopes of Canon Law to meet the needs of the Church today. When Canon Law emphasized the desire for a seminary in each Diocese, ministry was the sole exclusive possession of the priest. As ministry itself takes on new forms and involves others to share in the ministry of the Church, a Diocese might well consider the establishment of a "School of Ministry" for the local Diocese. Such a structure or program could well be the catalyst for the development of lay ministries within the Diocese, for the preparation and training of permanent deacons, for the continuing education of the clergy, and for the involvement of the Diocese in the preparation of priesthood candidates.

Finally, ecclesiology today calls for people and ourselves to have good Church experiences if we are to be a people of faith, a Gospel people, a faith community. The seminary should not be the first place where a priesthood candidate has his initial good experience of Church. Often enough this might well be presumed when a candidate relates to a local seminary which might well presume this good experience of Church. However, seminary education and formation of priests for tomorrow who will be asked to share a lived experience of Church with others cannot allow candidates for priesthood even to begin seminary preparation at any level without an extended experience of Church within a parish or diocesan community.

When one looks at the objectives of seminary formation and education in the Program of Priestly Formation by the NCCB, and when one becomes aware of the lived ecclesiology in the Church today, it would seem that the objectives and the ecclesiology best come together when the resources of the seminary world - personnel, finances, libraries, student bodies, etc. - also come together. In doing so, there will be a sense of loss, a death experience on the part of any seminary that would not continue to exist. The local Church or individual religious community would be most conscious of this loss. But this is true only if seminary education and formation for priesthood is seen in the context of a seminary alone. If amalgamation or consolidation were to become a reality, the local diocese or religious community hopefully would still retain an investment in the preparation of candidates for priesthood, and perhaps to an even greater extent than before. For amalgamation or consolidation would also call for a seminary at a regional or inter-regional level to work with, to relate to, and cooperate with the local Diocese or religious community.

Seminary education today must recognize that it responds not only to program models, but to a development of a sense of community. An amalgamation or consolidation of seminaries today could offer models not only of programs for the formation and education of priesthood candidates, but it could also offer the development and experience of community. This experience of community is critical for the priest of today and tomorrow. The ordained person will be asked to fulfill many tasks, but he will be primarily asked and expected to create and maintain a community, a group of people who grow in relationship to one another. With this expectation, the priesthood candidate needs to live and grow in a seminary environment which is broad and diverse enough to reflect the existing Church. A consolidation or amalgamation of seminaries would help to make this possible as would also the involvement and investment of the Diocesan Church or religious community in the preparation for ordained ministry.

How will amalgamation or consolidation occur? I hope and pray it does not occur by default or by accident. In addition to an ecclesiology which affects seminaries today, there is also the virtue of justice. The virtue of justice applies to the people of the Church, to priesthood candidates themselves, to faculty members, and to the financial responsibility and accountability we have as a Church in the world today.

This past year, the National Conference of Diocesan Vocation Directors recommended the serious study of the question of consolidation within the seminary system in the United States today. It passed a resolution requesting the Bishops' Committee on Vocations to propose to the NCCB that a commission including representatives of seminary rectors, vocation directors, and bishops be established to study the feasibility of such a proposal and to make recommendations for seminary consolidation.

This is a time for planning for the future regarding the number of seminaries in our country today. This is the time to grasp, to dream, to hope, to plan for the future. But as we dream and hope and plan, we are asked to do such not in isolation from one another, and especially not in isolation from the lived experience of Church today.

A consolidation of seminaries could well offer a better program of priestly formation, a better opportunity to prepare candidates for priesthood to serve the Church of tomorrow. Such a consolidation could well be a model for our awareness of our existence as a Church within our community on a national level to reflect our shared hope, our shared faith, and our shared dreams. Such a proposal for consolidation or amalgamation should also come from these same shared hopes, dreams, and faith.

II. THE NUMBER OF SEMINARIANS IN OUR SEMINARIES TODAY

A second issue worth considering for a moment is the number of seminarians presently involved in preparation for priesthood. It is not only a question of numbers, but it is also the question of the quality of candidates who are applying for admission to the seminary today.

There should be a concern for the numbers involved in our seminaries today. However, this concern has prompted our previous concern regarding the number of seminaries in our country today, and perhaps this is one of the benefits which comes to the Church as a result of the present number of priesthood candidates today.

We cannot consider the question of the number of priesthood candidates separate from the same values of ecclesiology and justice which helps to determine our response to the number of seminaries today. Any discussion on the number of men preparing for priesthood in our seminaries today must have an ecclesial basis which sees the number of candidates in the context of an understanding of priesthood in the Church today and its development for the Church of tomorrow.

The issue of numbers in our seminaries today should focus in not on the quantity, but rather on the quality of those involved in preparation for ordained ministry. Candidates today must and should reflect a ministry preparation which coincides with the lived reality of Church.

I believe an exclusive focus on the numbers involved in seminary preparation for priesthood might well force us to consider the right issue, but for the wrong reason. As we look at and examine the lived reality of Church today, there is the obvious need for priesthood candidates who will respond to leadership challenges of the Church today and tomorrow. A concern for numbers in our seminaries should not overshadow the far greater need to insure the quality of candidates in preparation for priesthood today.

At the end of March at St. Paul Seminary, I developed an outline of the qualities which should be a part of each candidate for priesthood today in response to the news release on Archbishop Bernadin's comments regarding the strengths and weaknesses of seminarians today. I believe the qualities of the young man preparing for priesthood today should include:

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1. A deep and integrated spirituality which from a lived faith experience;
2. An ability to relate to and to minister to others by calling others to ministry;
3. A perception of one's sexual identity in relationship to the charism of celibacy;
4. An awareness of the responsibility of the priest as the public minister who is competent theologically;
5. A healthy appreciation for the response to and use of authority;
6. A willingness to grow in ministry;
7. A sense of the graciousness of God who enhances and enables the human talents and abilities we possess.

As these qualities are listed, we cannot dismiss the need for an increased number of priesthood candidates in the Church today. No other time in the history of the Church would seem to call for an admission policy that would be far more demanding than in the past, a recruitment effort on the part of dioceses and seminaries and religious communities which is embracive, but paradoxically exclusive.

I believe there are a number^r of young people at all levels of seminary formation and education who are now standing on the sidelines, on the periphery of decision making and vocational commitments. These young people are looking at the Church and looking at you and me as the People of God within that Church. These young people are raising the crucial question of the relevance of priesthood, the meaning of Church as lived in existential reality today, and the direction which their own lives should take.

These questions will not be resolved in the context of a concern for numbers in our seminaries, but in the reality of the conviction of people such as yourselves that ordained ministry in the Church today cannot tolerate mediocrity, is unable to sustain compromise, and is unwilling to support candidates for priesthood who do not reflect and live out the ultimate demands of the Gospel vocation to discipleship. The number of seminarians preparing for priesthood today is a critical question. The response should not be a crisis response, but rather one that is rooted in our twin concerns for ecclesiology and justice.

Priesthood candidates are ordained for service to the Church. The Church of today and tomorrow has a built in inherent dynamic of being a Pilgrim Church, rooted in tradition and faith, but possessing a forward thrust in response to the signs of the times. This Church expects a leadership which cannot compromise the question of numbers for the need for quality of those who are to be its ordained leaders.

In justice we owe an obligation to the Church as the People of God to provide the Christian community with self starting, spiritually grounded mature men of faith. Pope John Paul this past week expressed his thoughts well regarding the qualities of priesthood today in his 1979 Holy Thursday letter to the priests of the world:

"In practical terms the only priest who will always prove necessary to people is the priest who who is conscious of the full meaning of his priesthood; the priest who believes profoundly, who professes his faith with courage, who prays fervently, who teaches with deep conviction, who serves, who puts into practice in his own life the program of the Beatitudes, who knows how to love disinterestedly, who is close to everyone, and especially to those who are most in need."

For those candidates whose personal agendas and limitations do not give them real freedom to minister to people, we owe them in a spirit of justice the encouragement to seek alternate vocations within the Christian community.

Seminaries and numbers - the number of seminaries in our country today and the number of students within those seminaries. These are two crucial issues that need to be addressed, that need planning and dialogue. I think we have not yet reached the point of crisis on both these issues, but we are edging toward the brink. Where are the solutions to these questions? I believe they are present in the Church community gathered here this evening. In a spirit of justice to the Church and to one another, I believe we owe one another a response to the questions raised.

In so many ways, seminary education and formation are at that crossroads which Robert Frost describes. What I propose this evening is that we take the uncharted road of discussion, dialogue, and hopefully some new insights and possible responses to the questions raised. "Yes, two roads diverged in a yellow wood...and I, I took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference."

Taking the less travelled road might well prompt a new beginning a new Spring within the world of seminary education and formation. Though signs of hoped for Spring are reported in many existing seminaries today as well as in the quality of priesthood candidates, it could well be Indian Summer, and we still must survive the harsh crisis of Winter.

However, I hope and pray that as people involved and committed to preparing candidates for ordained ministry, our concern for the questions of seminaries and numbers will be the harbinger for new life, new hope, new faith for all of us, and especially for the Church in its lived experiential reality in our own lives and in the Christian community today. In so many ways, the Church waits for our response. What will it be?

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood...and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
and that has made all the difference!"
- Robert Frost.

April 16, 1979
Most Rev. Thomas J. Murphy
Bishop of Great Falls, Montana

Thomas J. Murphy