

SAINT MARY OF THE LAKE SEMINARY
MUNDELEIN, ILLINOIS 60060

ORIENTATION ADDRESS: FIRST THEOLOGY AND NEW STUDENTS

Wednesday, September 25, 1974 8:00pm

Reverend Thomas Murphy

Tonight it is my privilege to welcome you as the 51st group of young men who are beginning the study of theology at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary. Tonight is the first step in a four year experience which is the final stage of your preparation for the priesthood of Jesus Christ in the Roman Catholic Church.

For many of you, this is the final phase of an experience that has been yours since first year high school; for others, it is the continuation of an experience begun at Niles College in first year or even later; for others, it marks the beginning of the formal process of personal investment in a seminary educational process. Whatever your status, you all share a unique identity this evening. An identity which marks you as men who have chosen freely and willingly to begin the study of theology and the development of your own formation in preparation to be ordained a Roman Catholic priest.

For some, you begin this evening a re-entry process into seminary education. But all of you are beginning it this evening at this time in history and at this place we call St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Illinois.

For men entering theology this year, we chose to have a brief orientation process. We recognize and acknowledge full well the decision required of men to take a gigantic leap of faith and commitment that is involved in entering theology. In the past we have merely begun the school year, either with the academic courses themselves or with a retreat. From experience, we believe as a result of dialogue and discussion with other groups of men that an orientation process would be helpful and essential so that the goals of seminary education can be achieved in the best way possible. Between tonight and all day tomorrow we hope to share with you our expectations, our ideals, our hopes, our dreams with the consequent dialogue and discussion that should accompany any enunciation of dreams and visions.

For myself, this is still a new experience. The whole idea of being rector at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary is a reality that I personally try to understand each day that I am here. My Irish conscience forces me at times to take the task far too serious than it demands. But the same conscience prompts me to face the reality of the responsibility and reality which we share as seminary community in providing leadership for the Church in the years to come.

The document regarding seminary education, the writings on the subject, the very reality of the seminary itself strongly suggests that whoever holds the position of rector must set a tone, a climate for the experience of seminary by the entire community. It is a description of that style, or tone of leadership that I would like to share with you this evening.

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How do I see the seminary? What are my expectations?

First and foremost, regarding seminary education, I would ask that you share with me the experience of learning. If there is anything I have gained over the past three years in various responsibilities that have been mine, I have appreciated more and more the fact that I do not have all the answers, I do not have a corner on the market of new ideas, I do not have a solution to every problem. Over the past few years, I have really learned to appreciate the joy of learning. The joy of learning in the whole experience of what it means to be a priest, the experience of dealing with people in the experience of working with others, in the experience of opening my mind to new ideas and development of thought as a result of study and reading, and ever hope for greater depth to what I call a spiritual life.

As a result, life for myself these past few years has been anything but boring. It has been an experience of growth, of maturing, of development in all dimensions, hopefully, in my life. If there is anything I would ask of a group of men beginning the experience of St. Mary of the Lake it would be to open yourself up to the experience of learning - and by learning, I do not mean only the academic dimension of our lives, but the total learning experience of life itself. Once we close our minds or our lives to learning experiences, we have built walls which not only keep people and ideas out, but, likewise, keep us in - confined to the world that we have created and permits entrance only to the narrowness of our own perspective and vision.

Within this context of a openness to learning, I share with you what I list as the fundamental objectives of formations within a seminary experience. These objectives are the objectives of the program for priestly formation, which are at the heart of every seminary program in the United States of America. These objectives are as follows:

- #1 a deepening of one's personal Christian experience 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 the growing understanding of the faith through critical theological reflection
- #4 an awareness of the ~~redemptive~~ nature of the redemptive sacramental priesthood and a stronger conviction of the call to share in it
- #5 a vital integration of our theological understanding in our life in Christ

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When we look at these objectives of seminary education, what do they really mean?

First, what is the deepening of one's personal Christian experience and commitment to service? I believe it is the development of one's self as a man of faith, as a man involved in spiritual growth, which is the whole dimension of the formations program here at the seminary. I believe the formation program must have a high priority in each of your lives. This program ranges from involvement with your Cam in meetings and prayer experiences to your involvement with a spiritual director to your total involvement with the community in formational events.

Secondly, what does a more vivid awareness of the contemporary world in which God's saving presence is at work through men mean?

I believe it means we must touch the total world in developing the ministry in which we are aiming for as a result of priesthood ordination. This is offered through the field education program and the field education program really suggests that a man not limit his experience to one group of people, to one experience of ministry within the Church today. The Church of Chicago and elsewhere is made up of more than just the poor or rich, black or white, Spanish or Italian. The Church of Chicago is multi-faceted and the more varied the experience can be, the more aware we will be of the contemporary world.

Thirdly, what does a growing understanding of the faith through critical theological reflection mean? It means, as far as I am concerned, that theology is the tool through which men serve people as ordained priests. A man will not last long within priesthood if the only depth he has is a warm handshake and a smile and is not able to give people a sense of the gospel message through a theological awareness that is integrated into himself. It means that as far as you men are concerned, beginning theology or returning to it after some lapse of time, that you must demand and insist from us only the best as far as the challenge is concerned. Theology must have a priority in your lives in order to appreciate the strongest asset which is yours as a professional (in the best sense of the word) man in the Roman Catholic Church.

Fourthly, what does an awareness of the nature of the redemptive sacramental priesthood and a stronger conviction of the call to share in it mean?

It means that the demands of priesthood within a sacramental system is not a reality to be lived out in the future. It means that sacramental life for each of us must be lived now in the experience of the Eucharist, daily if possible, in the experience of sacramental penance. The consequence of the experience now in the sacramental life of the Church will help to develop our own convictions that in a period of time we become the dispensers of God's grace and God's love to people in a parish setting. It helps to develop our own vocational awareness and strengthens our conviction and our response to God's call to each of us.

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Finally, what does it mean by a vital integration of one's theological understanding and one's life in Christ?

The answer to that, basically, is the total objective of the seminary - that academics, formation, field education, spiritual direction, are not isolated compartments in any of our lives, but rather, the hope that we can achieve the integrated dimension, the total Christian experience.

Who is involved in the experience called seminary education?

First of all, there is the faculty, composed of ~~the priests~~ men and women whose prime dedication is to share with you the purpose of seminary education. These men and women are investing their lives in the future...and that future is yourself.

The other dimension of seminary education is yourself. The assumptions, as far as we are concerned, are that you are a mature and responsible adult. This presumption is spelled out in the formation handbook. This presumption, I believe, is valid, because you are young men of 22 years of age or older, whose peers and contemporaries have serious responsibilities and obligations. Some have wives, children, jobs, careers, which likewise presume maturity and responsibility. ~~This~~ With this maturity and responsibility, there is no need for a spelling out of what we could term in the past as "rules". There is, however, the need for enunciated expectations in seminary education. Are these expectations infallible, subject never to change? The answer is No. I, myself, believe that the policy of the seminary is an open agenda policy, which calls for dialogue, which calls for discussion, which calls for trust, which calls for openness. I would encourage such dialogue, discussion, trust and openness. At the same time, when decisions have to be made, these decisions might not be agreeable to all and consequently, hostility and anger can arise. I would ask, then, in those cases, for your patience and tolerance with the hope and conviction that men who are asked to make decisions are acting as mature and responsible people.

In the whole process of seminary education, here at St. Mary of the Lake, we have many resources. The prime resource we have, I believe, is people. People who will be your Cam Deans, your Spiritual Directors, your teachers, etc.. Buildings can be built and can be torn down. A place of residence can be transferred from one location to another. But people are the constant in the seminary ~~educatio~~ experience of education. Consequently, I ask you to tap the resources of the people here on campus, whose lives are dedicated to you as human beings and as people who will be leaders in the Church tomorrow.

All that I share with you this evening is based on one firm conviction and belief. This conviction and belief is the validity of priesthood itself. I enjoy being a priest. I have enjoyed it from the moment I have been ordained til now...and hope to continue to enjoy it til the day I die. When one enjoys an experience so much, I believe, a measure of that enjoyment is determined by the willingness to share that experience with others. That is my prime motivation for my own position here at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary -- the desire to share the fantastic, tremendous experience of being a priest with others.

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St. Mary of the Lake Seminary is geographically located in Mundelein, Illinois. But I believe St. Mary of the Lake Seminary is not a geographic location, but a climate, an experience of growth and development. You are part of that experience now and I feel you have a responsibility in trying to make this climate the best one possible.

Please feel free, always, to express yourself, to share your opinion, to offer suggestions. My own office will always be open to you for anything you would request or ask. I consider it a privilege to be working with you this coming year. I hope that together we can help form and shape and give direction to a Church ever renewing itself to serve the modern world. A key element in the renewal process will be the priest of tomorrow -- and that's where you come in and where we come in, because we both are sharing in this creation which is truly fantastic.