



ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

10701 South Military Trail ~ Boynton Beach, Florida 33436-4899

Tel: 561.732.4424 ~ Fax: 561.737.2205

OPENING TALK TO THE RETURNING SEMINARIANS

15 August 2012

“Strive for Excellence”

As we begin, please allow me to offer you a warm welcome and express my gratitude for your “yes” to further discern the call of Christ for your life. It is my prayer that many of you will one day serve in our various diocese, and that all of you are the faithful and holy disciples that you are called to be by virtue of Baptism. It is an honor to have been chosen by our bishops to be the twelfth rector of this great seminary. I had the privilege of working for our prior two rectors and learned a great deal from both Monsignors Bosso and Brennan. I have spoken to both of them several times since my arrival, and particularly to Msgr. Brennan I keep thanking him for the condition in which he departed the seminary: fiscally sound, a great faculty and staff, and the largest populace of theologians we have ever had at SVDP in our fifty year history. We are here to make history together for the greater glory of God as we inaugurate the Year of Faith along with the Universal Church beginning October 11 (the 50th anniversary of Vatican II and the 20th anniversary of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). We will have a novena leading up to that day, and cap it off with Major/Minor day, a Eucharistic Procession, and an inspiring discussion on the Shroud of Turin by a NASA scientist that night. What a great focus the “Year of Faith” will be for each of us as we desire to deepen our own relationship with Christ – let us cry out with the man in the Gospel, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” (Mk. 9:24). Increase our faith!

As you know, one of our unique features is that we are one of only two bilingual theologates in our nation, the other being San Antonio, TX. This is an important feature to our program and one in which I pray that you generously open your heart to Christ with a desire to learn and grow in your “pastoral language.” When I arrived at SJV over 20 years ago I spoke no Spanish, but then my heart was enflamed when I learned the importance of reaching out to those of another culture and linguistic background – one-third of US Catholics are Hispanic and this is projected to grow to 50-60% in the next twenty years. This is a reality that each of our bishops want to keep in front of us. Each of us needs to have the facility to be able to celebrate the Sacraments in Spanish and engage somewhat in conversation (don’t be afraid – just dive in). For those who have Spanish as their native tongue, it is so important for you to perfect your English and work on accent reduction so as to be able to communicate effectively the Gospel in the native language of our land. In advance, I thank each of you for immersing yourself in this venture.

What is our ongoing vision at this seminary for you? To be transformed by Christ into the man you are called to be. This is a process of ongoing conversion, prayer, and formation in the four dimensions of our program. Your receptivity and docility to this process determine your future – open wide your hearts to Christ! Our Holy Father recently spoke to the seminarians of his former Archdiocese:

In considering the question – What is the seminary for? What does this time mean? – I am always particularly struck by the account that Saint Mark gives of the birth of the apostolic community in the third chapter of his gospel. Mark says: “And he appointed twelve”. He makes something, he does something, it is a creative act; and he made them, “to be with him, and to be sent out to preach” (Mk 12:14). That is a twofold purpose, which in many respects seems contradictory. “To be with him”; they are to be with him, in order to come to know him, to hear what he says, to be formed by him; they are to go with him, to accompany him on his path, surrounding him and following him. But at the same time they are to be envoys who go out, who take with them what they have learnt, who bring it to others, who are also on a journey – into the margins, into the wide open spaces, even into places far removed from him. And yet this paradox holds together: if they are truly with him, then they are also always journeying towards others, they are searching for the lost sheep; they go out, they must pass on what they have found, they must make it known, they must become envoys. And conversely, if they want to be good envoys, then they must always be with him. [...]

The seminary is therefore a time for training; also of course a time for discernment, for learning; does he want me for this? The mission must be tested, and this includes being in community with others and also of course speaking with your spiritual directors, in order to learn how to discern what his will is. And then learning to trust: if he truly wants this, then I may entrust myself to him. [...]

Will I be able to hold firm with him, as I have promised to do? ... It is a question that demands the testing of the vocation, but then also – the more I recognize that he does indeed want me – it demands trust: if he wants me, then he will also hold me, he will be there in the hour of temptation, in the hour of need, and he will send people to me, he will show me the path, he will hold me. And faithfulness is possible, because he is always there, because he is yesterday, today and tomorrow, because he belongs not only to this time, but he is the future and he can support us at all times. [...]

(Benedict XVI, “Envoys of Christ Who Must Always Be With Him,” Meeting with Seminarians in Freiburg, 24 September 2011 [ORE 28 Sept. 2011]).

“To be with Him!” That is Pope Benedict XVI’s message to each of us as we begin this new year. I invite each of you to reflect on the magnanimity of God’s graciousness to each of you in calling you to this seminary at this point in time. There is no perfect institution, rector, faculty, facility, in fact, look in the mirror and realize that each of us is imperfect and in need of healing and grace. Be grateful to God for the opportunity to be here. Be grateful for the faculty, staff and institution that we have been given and that is entrusted to us to care for – this is your new home! A grateful heart is a contented heart. I was giving a tour to a former parishioner this summer who is a doctor from Puerto Rico, as I was showing him our facilities and then your rooms, apologizing for their size and condition, he said to me “Father, these are extremely nice and in good condition, the men should be grateful for this opportunity and for the education they are receiving.” We do not pay for our education or our housing – what a gift! Be grateful to God for the honor to be here. An attitude of entitlement is an ugly thing in anyone, but it is particularly odious in seminarians and priests. Be grateful!

I have heard from so many of you over the years that you want to be challenged. Well today’s talk takes us a little deeper into our reflection on the concrete reality of living in the seminary community. It is easy to say that I want to be obedient, chaste, and a man of prayer (the three promises of our ordination) but how do we form habits and virtues that will get us there? We are here to allow ourselves to be formed into the image of Christ the Good Shepherd, thus the Icon

outside of St. Mary's Chapel (the image of the Year for Priests for the US). We are to see that icon daily on our way into the Blessed Sacrament Chapel and see in Christ who we are to become – a good shepherd of the faithful; “a bridge not an obstacle” (*PDV* 43) to people so that they might experience the Love of the Trinity through us. As you look into the eyes of Christ, listen to the words of St. Clare of Assisi which we read in the Office of Readings last week. She was writing to one of her sisters regarding the Cross of San Damiano: “Look into this mirror every day [...] and continually examine your face in it.” Thus Christ is to become the mirror, the looking-glass, the icon that we are to become.

We speak of four dimensions of priestly formation as enumerated by Blessed John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. You are to be men of integration, zeal, and love. Fully formed to give yourself as a spouse to the Bride of Christ. Human Formation is meant to help you become the finest Christian Gentlemen you can be; Spiritual Formation is to help you be men of intimate communion with Christ through prayer and ultimately become saints, for that is what the world needs (according to the *Code of Canon Law*, the faithful have a right to us aspiring to sanctity! [cf. *CIC* 276§1]); Academic Formation is to make us scholars who know how to effectively communicate the Gospel to the men and women of our age; and Pastoral Formation is the dimension that helps us become shepherds after the Heart of Christ. The Formation Team and the Spiritual Directors know that “grace builds on nature” – we do not want you to become something that you are not, but to be the best version of yourself. The *Program of Priestly Formation* states it well: “A person of solid moral character with a finely developed moral conscience, a man open to and capable of conversion: a man who demonstrates the human virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance, justice, humility, constancy, sincerity, patience, good manners, truthfulness, and keeping his word, and who also manifests growth in the practice of these virtues” (*PPF* 76). We want you to be happy, healthy, holy, balanced, chaste-celibate men.

We ask that you be open to the guidance of the Priests of the house, the faculty, your field supervisors and the staff. We are here to help you; we want you to succeed, and trust me, no one is out to get you. We are here because the bishops of the State of Florida want us here to help you in every way possible. Please trust us and be attentive to our directives. Fr. Alfaro has a very difficult job as Dean of Men (I did it for three years!), and that means I have his back. Don't make him or your Formation Advisor keep coming to you about the same issue. If you do, as Msgr. Anderson says, “that is a positive sign of a negative vocation.” At the Air Force Academy they use the acronym: SIE – Self Inflicted Elimination (as you know, we can be our own worst enemies). We certainly want to treat you like adults (which you are!), and not adolescents, but adolescence balk at authority – the practice of obedience begins in the seminary. Be attentive to the little things, to the Seminary and Liturgical Handbooks, to being on time, and presenting yourself well because you are training to be a public figure. Beware of small infidelities, carelessness, “seemingly irrelevant actions that lead us away from Christ” (Stephen Rossetti, *Born of the Eucharist* [Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 2009]). Don't just “go through the motions but respond out of love to Love Himself who has called you here. John 15:15 reminds us that we must stay engrafted to the Vine, if we do not remain connected through prayer and daily fidelity we will soon begin to shrivel and die. Jesus urges us as he urged the apostles, “Remain in my Love.” The much revered former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J. said: “Nothing is more practical than finding God, than falling in Love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you do with your evenings, how you spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.”

(1976 Bicentennial Eucharistic Congress). Indeed, “Fall in Love, stay in love, and it will decide everything.” As the *Fishers of Men* video states: “Where there is love, sacrifice is easy!”

At Chrism Mass this year, the Holy Father spoke to the priests about our need to open our hearts to Christ:

Two things, above all, are asked of us: there is a need for an interior bond, a configuration to Christ, and at the same time there has to be a transcending of ourselves, a renunciation of what is simply our own, of the much-vaunted self-fulfillment.

We need, I need, not to claim my life as my own, but to place it at the disposal of another - of Christ. I should be asking not what I stand to gain, but what I give for him and so for others. Or to put it more specifically, this configuration to Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, who does not take, but rather gives [...]

Dear friends, it is clear that configuration to Christ is the precondition and the basis for all renewal.

(Benedict XVI, Holy Thursday Chrism Mass, April 5, 2012)

Priestly formation is simply put, all about a greater configuration to Christ so that we might be His loving servants to those entrusted to our care, for Jesus Himself came “not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45).

New faculty and returning introductions:

New: Msgr. Hogan, Fr. Rios, Fr. Remek

Gratitude for the Returning Faculty

Appreciation for the work of our previous two rectors for whom I worked

I want to close with an analogy of the Olympics currently concluded. These men and women get up early every day, eat properly, orient their whole lives to achieve a goal. So brothers, train well, pray hard, study with diligence, give yourselves generously to our program. Get up on time, follow the Rule of Life, and just show up.

As St. Paul writes:

“I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. Do you not know that the runners in the stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so as to win. Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one. Thus I do not run aimlessly; I do not fight as if I were shadowboxing. No, I drive my body and train it, for fear that, after having preached to others, I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. 9:22-27).

Run so as to win!

In the Notre Dame Football stadium, the words “Play like a Champion” are written above the home locker room tunnel; they see it, touch it with their hands, and desire it every time the players run out onto the field. The icon of the Good Shepherd is meant to fire us up to “Pray like a Champion” – let us do so every day!

Brothers it is a privilege to be your new rector and to be here to serve you – may this “Year of Faith” be just that for each of us as we grow in faith, hope, and love for Jesus Christ our Good Shepherd and Risen Lord.