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RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“Social and Christian Maturity: Raising the Bar”

We are going to discuss tonight the necessary Social and Christian maturity necessary for one to be ordained a priest. The subset of tonight's talk is going to be on the appropriate use of alcohol, hence the subtitle/pun “raising the bar!”

First of all, before one can be a good seminarian and priest, we must be good Christians. In fact, there are three levels of maturity to which each of us must attain prior to ordination: human, Christian, and ultimately priestly. Too often we forget our primary calling in life, and when we lose the focus of our call to “divine sonship” then everything else is skewed. You have heard me say before: “you are not called to be good and chaste and holy because you are a seminarian, but because you are a Christian!” (please read the [PPF 76, 80, 85, 86, 89, 92, 93, 94, and 101](#)).

We can look to our Human Formation rubric to show the path of growth. Here are the qualities in the “exemplary” category of Social and Christian Maturity:

- Is outgoing, hospitable, affable, kind, respected, and is able to build relationships with many different types of people in the community
- Habitually practices appropriate etiquette and courtesy, good table manners, and respectful language; a model for others
- Sought out by peers as a sounding board because [he] is a good listener
- Seeks out opportunities to be of service to those in need consistently and leads others toward serving
- Enthusiastically and graciously takes on challenging leadership roles; effectively communicates to motivate others
- In groups, demonstrates superb ability to work collaboratively with others including men and women; demonstrates profound appreciation for the diverse gifts of those present in a team
- Engages enthusiastically and consistently in the community life of the seminary; notably contributes to building up community life
- Maintains deep, enriching and nourishing relationships with friends, family, teachers, and peers
- Is able to set appropriate boundaries in relationships even with individuals with personalities that challenge boundaries
- Is prompt and consistent in meeting appointments and responsibilities

Or as the other end of the spectrum under the heading “foundational” states:

- Has some general difficulties in relationship with others; struggles with sociability
- Needs further instruction in appropriate etiquette and/or table manners; or needs to be more mindful of using respectful language

- Likes to be the center of the conversation and does not listen well to others
- Pre-occupied with [his] own needs
- Is uncomfortable taking leadership positions; others are confused when communicating information
- Struggles to work with others in groups and does not relate well to people of different backgrounds and/or to women; attitudes [that] may be interpreted as prejudicial
- Disengaged from the community life of the seminary (e.g., frequent absences, does not engage in optional activities)
- Does not have close friends; is distant from family members, teachers and peers
- Insufficient capacity for establishing relationships of friendship; searches for compensatory affection; weak or absent boundaries
- Often tardy or does not show up consistently to appointments

Where are you on this spectrum? If we are all honest with ourselves, we will feel challenged by one or more items on this list. Please take the time now as a seminarian to develop these areas in order to mature into the man that the people of God so desperately want and need you to be. This doesn't mean becoming something that you are not, but rather becoming more fully yourself, more fully alive. *Gloria Dei est homo vivens*: “The living human person is God’s glory” as St. Irenaeus wrote (*Adv. Haer.* IV, 20, 7). We can only reach our highest potential as human beings by allowing Christ to give meaning to our lives – *He* defines us and nothing else – it is not a matter of what I do, what I own, or my talents – but it is all about Christ Who has given me all of these gifts, and He alone gives true human meaning to our lives. We must realize with St. Paul, “For me life is Christ” (Phil. 1:21). Only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word can man truly discover himself. Vatican II elaborates:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His Love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22, which was the most frequently cited section from the Council by St. John Paul II).

St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: *Gratia supponit naturam et perfecit eam*: “Grace builds on nature and perfects it.” The order of grace builds on the order of nature. By becoming the best human beings we can possibly be, thus we become better Christians.

Human formation, according to St. John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (43) is the foundation upon which all else is built. One can either be a bridge in bringing souls to Christ or an obstacle for them. We are to be balanced people; strong and free! We are to be “men of communion” and not “arrogant, or quarrelsome, but affable, hospitable, sincere in [our] words and heart, prudent and discreet, generous and ready to serve, capable of opening [ourselves] to clear and brotherly relationships and of encouraging the same in others, and quick to understand, forgive and console (see also 1 Tim 3:1-5; Tit 1:7-9)” (*PDV* 43). The less we allow sin and vice to rule our lives, with Christ’s help, the more human we become. We are called to a constant conversion; always turning to Christ and away from sin. Put on Christ and be yourself! This is the social and Christian maturity we are looking for in our future priests.

So now let me move to a particular area of concern for the Church regarding our own maturity having to do with our responsibility with alcohol. There is a commercial that used to run around this time of year that went something like this: [song] “Ingle Ells” and then the screen flashed:

“The holidays aren’t the same without J & B.” Really? That is pathetic! But in this season of Holiday cheer, there are definite pitfalls of which each of us needs to be aware.

Imagine a Christmas party in your parish that you have been invited to. You are the 30 year old, decent looking, nice associate pastor that for the most part everyone really likes. I am going to present two scenarios, which one do you want to be? First of all, the scenario in which you don’t care to maintain self-control related to your drinking and this is what can happen: you are nervous and so you have two drinks which turns into six. Now you think that you are being really sociable and funny, but in effect you are looking more like self-inflated goofball. Beyond that many further dangers lurk: the equally intoxicated flirtatious woman is hanging on you and you don’t know how to (or want to) get out of the situation. Then there is the old adage, “loose lips sink ships,” and once the alcohol is coursing through your veins you start talking about things that are really no one’s business, or worse speaking of things of which belong to the internal forum. You are thinking to yourself at this point, isn’t this good that I am just like everyone else at this holiday party, and others are looking at you thinking, I wish Father was different than all of us, we need his witness to raise the bar for us, not belly up at the bar with us!” So now you have unwittingly placed yourself in a compromising position, most likely scandalized others, and missed an opportunity to evangelize by being countercultural in word and deed.

So what could this party actually look like if we rewound the tape and you had maybe one or two, or even no drinks at all? Now that looks like a socially mature Christian man who is enjoying himself and is comfortable with whom God made him to be. That man is in control and enjoying the people of God. He is conscious of his words and actions and is able to also say “no” to any temptations that may come his way in a peaceful and sober manner.

How often people get themselves in trouble when they are drinking and then fall back on the excuse, “but I was drinking and didn’t know what I was doing.” Then you shouldn’t have had the third, fourth, or the whole twelve-pack. We are responsible for our actions at all times. That is Christian maturity! How many priests have scandalized the faithful by abuse of alcohol? In my seven years at SVDP when a seminarian has gotten himself in trouble, I would say 80% of the time it is alcohol related. How much heartache could have been spared had their drinking been under control? Please always remember the beautiful and serious vocation for which you are preparing. There is a dangerous “culture of drinking” that we must be conscious of in which it is viewed “as macho, as sophisticated, as adult, or as grown up.” There has always been a “clerical culture” that romanticizes the scotch and cigar image of the priest. Is that the image of Christ? While it is true that Jesus ate and drank with sinners (cf. Lk. 5:30 and 15:2; Mk. 2:16; Mt. 9:11), and was even accused of being a “glutton and a drunkard,” (cf. Lk. 7:34) Our Lord was simply welcoming those on the fringes of society into His table of plenty; reaching out to the peripheries to draw in those far from His Father’s house. Drinking in the Rathskeller is not quite reaching out to the fringes! We have to raise the bar! As Catholics we are not so puritanical as to teach that drinking in and of itself is considered sinful. However, the *Catechism* is very clear that: “The virtue of temperance disposes us to *avoid every kind of excess*” and then lists alcohol as one of the excesses which should be avoided (CCC 2290). This paragraph goes on to list it as “grave guilt” if driving is then involved. The *PPF* lists alcohol abuse as an area that must be addressed and corrected before ordination ([PPF 64](#)). As priests “on call” for so much of our life, what a crime it is when we endanger others lives when sitting behind the wheel after a few drinks. Over the years I have had people tell me about how “Father reeked of alcohol” when he came to the hospital to anoint their mother.

[share a personal story]

Knowing a number of recovering alcoholic priests has been a great blessing for my life. Having heard their stories of destructive living and embarrassment to the Church has also helped to keep me on the straight and narrow. These priests who are very in touch with their weaknesses are some of the most compassionate and understanding men you will ever meet. In general, people who have been through recovery are some of the most decent human beings I know. They know that they are nothing without God and that only He can help them as they surrender themselves into His loving hands. If you ever get a chance, please attend an AA meeting or an Al-Anon meeting for families of alcoholics. Many have questioned “if” they have an issue with alcohol and have attended numerous meetings to make that determination. “If I have to make a conscious decision that I can only drink 2 drinks in an evening and that becomes stressful for me, alcohol may be a problem for me.” In other words, don’t engage if you do not know how to stop. You will learn a great deal about addiction, the detriment to families, and maybe even yourself in the process of looking at the Twelve Steps which apply to so much in our lives.

Do you really want your judgment compromised and risk your effectiveness as a priest? Addiction to alcohol is real and if you find yourself not able to stop or that you have to drink every night, or that you have had blackouts, or that you are a “binge drinker,” or that you have remorse the next morning, then talk to your spiritual director, your formation advisor, or to me. All of us want you to be the best you can be, and “you drunk” is not your best. As my old spiritual director used to say, “You can’t beat the booze.” Why is that? Well alcohol affects your judgment almost immediately because it is doesn’t have to be digested and goes straight into your bloodstream to all parts of your body, particularly the brain. Alcohol can be such a twisted substance because while on the one hand it is releasing [dopamines](#) (or your “reward center”), at the same time it is actually a depressant which only exacerbates our problems. Alcohol is a very toxic substance, and the lining around the brain, the meninges, which prevents many bad things from being ingested into the body from going directly into the brain, is not able block the toxic alcohol molecule. This has an effect not only while drinking but also the ever popular post drinking hangover (which is incidentally, one more reason not to drink!).

Brothers, we know that alcohol affects the “don’t care” part of the brain and thus leads to behavior in which one might not normally engage. Since the time grapes were first crushed and fermented, much damage has been done by people of all walks of life who have been out of control. We have an even greater obligation to the people of God to be men of social and Christian maturity. As we enter into the holiday season, please be careful about your consumption and listen humbly and honestly to any warning signs that might be present.

Ask yourselves the following questions:

- Do I have an adolescent preoccupation with alcohol and talk about it all the time? (Do I ever talk about God?)
- Do I overindulge and get drunk regularly or even occasionally?
- Do I *need* to drink to relax?
- What do I do when I’m tired or have had a busy schedule after Friends of the Seminary or International Food Festival? What *do* I do to unwind?
- Have I tried to drink with moderation but cannot help myself and end up overindulging?
- Can I have a good time without drinking?
- Do I drink in advance to “loosen up” before social occasions?
- Do I drink on a daily basis, and if so, why?
- During the day, do I anticipate when I can drink? I can’t wait until...

- Do I drink alone?
- Have I done things while intoxicated that I never would do sober?
- Can we have fraternal events that are not about drinking?
- Finally, am I still holding on to a college-kid-lifestyle, when I am well beyond that age and am called to be a mature and socially responsible man?

There is nothing wrong with a glass of wine or two with a dinner or a couple of beers in a social setting, but do I *have* to have them? Does it define me? Is it the only way that I know how to relax?

Many good priests have had a stunted ministry because they were not able to maturely handle the simple reality of alcohol in their lives. Let's pay attention to our fraternal obligation to speak with our brothers when needed and lovingly confront them when there is a concern about an addiction.

[Venerable Matt Talbot](#), of Dublin, who struggled for sixteen years as a raging alcoholic, took "[the Pledge](#)" to not ever drink again. He is a great witness of faith and reparation for those struggling with their use of alcohol, especially for priests caught in this destructive disease. His daily prayer was: "For thy greater Glory and consolation, O most Sacred Heart of Jesus, for Thy sake, to give good example, to practice self-denial, to make reparation to Thee for the sins of intemperance and for the conversion of excessive drinkers, I will abstain for life from all intoxicating drinks, Amen."

Not all of us are called to forsake drinking for life, but all of us *are* called to be men of social and Christian maturity: that of giving good example, practicing self-denial, and making reparation as we pray for the conversion of all, especially as we enter into the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy! After previewing this talk, Bishop Lessard opined, "See how alcohol is the cause of many failures on the list mentioned at the beginning of this talk about what really makes a priest a man!"

I close with the words of the last document of the Second Vatican Council: "Whoever follows Christ the perfect man becomes himself more a man" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 41). Be *that* man!