



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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### “Freedom”

One of the most iconic movie scenes of the 1990's was that of *Braveheart* when William Wallace (i.e. Mel Gibson) led his war-painted thirteenth century Scottish Highlanders with the battle-cry: “Freedom!” ([click here](#)) This should also be the cry of our hearts, and certainly my desire for each of you: to live in total and absolute freedom as you discern God's call for your life. Please be aware of anything that can hinder your freedom to choose and be chosen by God: Parents, bishops, priests, fellow seminarians, addictions, financial burdens, immigration status, anger, hurts, lust, resentments, etc. Are there any areas that are obstacles for you? (recent article by Bp. Serratelli: [The Internet and Freedom](#)).

I encourage you to discuss in spiritual direction and formation advising, to the extent that you are comfortable, any time that you are feeling suffocated or un-free in your life here in the seminary. We don't and can't force you to do anything. If you experience the rule of life of the seminary as something truly oppressive, and I am not talking about the occasional challenge, then that's something to discuss with your spiritual director and formation advisor. To paraphrase the vice rector, it could be “a positive sign ... of ANOTHER vocation.”

You don't *have* to do anything! Our free choice now to submit ourselves to authority is preparation for the life we have chosen and are being chosen for. The Church is not forcing you to be a celibate, obedient, prayerful, public figure. You are freely choosing this, and once that choice is made at ordination, that choice is for life!

We see such total freedom in our newly beatified martyr [Fr. Stanley Rother](#), whose total freedom bound him to the fate of his people. He was determined to give his life completely to his flock in Guatemala, stating that “the shepherd cannot run.” One of his priest friends testified that had Fr. Stan not returned to Guatemala, “he would have survived, but he certainly would have not lived!” He wrote home to his bishop in Oklahoma in his last Christmas letter: “If it is my destiny that I should give my life here, then so be it.” Right before Holy Week he spoke with his local bishop in Guatemala and assured him: “My life is for my people. I am not scared.” This is freedom – this is a freedom grounded in the freest man ever to live: Jesus Christ! Jesus was so free because his only desire was to do the will of the Father.

Sometimes we might hear grumblings like: “But it is too hard to do what is asked of me all of the time!” Or “I don't want to do all of this stuff and I don't want to be a public person; I want to be a priest on my own terms!” To quote the movie [Apollo 13](#): “Houston, we have a problem!” Deacon

Jim Keating shared with me a great image. When his son approached his future father-in-law to ask for his daughter's hand in marriage, he didn't quite get the exuberant response that he expected. His future father-in-law questioned him on how he would provide for his daughter and as to what kind of husband he would be. Upon his return home he told Jim, "well, he didn't throw me a parade." Certainly, that is because a father wants to make sure that his daughter, the bride, is taken care of and provided for by the groom. The bride is not so desperate that she will just take anyone and the father knows the giftedness of his daughter. In a way, seminary formators are like the father-in-law just mentioned, our job is to protect the bride. Marriage must be entered into freely and without reservation. Our job is to ensure that you are ready to embrace the bride by the time you approach ordination. Thus formation advising and annual evaluations are so important. We can understand the analogy used here if we think about what the bride and groom must know about each other to enter into marriage freely: without reservation or duress. Be free in sharing with the Church everything that your bride needs to know about you – that is what formation advising is all about. A groom doesn't go to confession to his fiancée and there are some things that she simply doesn't need to know – save that for spiritual direction. But grow in transparency with the Church and you will experience greater freedom.

Some seminarians go through their six to nine years of formation living in fear of getting kicked out – that is not of God, nor is it a peaceful place of freedom to live. Live in freedom. A prayer of mine in seminary was: "God, you called me here, if YOU want me to be a priest, I give You permission to lead me there. If You do not, please close the door and open others." Trust the Holy Spirit to lead you and trust the Holy Spirit to lead us in helping you as well (e.g. Bishop Wack's homily after the Board of Trustees). I think it is important to point out that we don't like to kick people out. In fact, I wish every seminarian was a man of integrity and became a wonderful, holy, hardworking missionary disciple. According to CARA, the reality is that at least 25% of you will depart seminary formation at some point in the journey, and we need to know this is a normal part of our life. You are not a failure if you discern out or are asked to leave – we are not failures on the seminary level either, it simply means formation works. There is a reason that seminary is so long, because discernment and formation take time. Remember there are two discernments occurring: the seminarian's and the Church's (e.g. Please read the NCDVD Booklet by Msgr. Jim Shea on Personal and Ecclesial discernment entitled *Discernment within the Heart of the Church*).

It's important to note that freedom works both ways. The bride is as free as the groom. The Church needs to have freedom, in her discernment, as does the seminarian in his. So let's talk openly about what happens when the Church (i.e. the task of ecclesial discernment of the seminary) asks someone to leave. I want to shine light on the process so that you realize that we do not act indiscriminately or in isolation. Now don't panic, I had to give a talk a month ago at the National Vocation Director gathering on the topic of dismissals and so I thought it opportune to share some of these thoughts with you as well (i.e. the other shoe is not about to drop – there is nothing brewing!). A dismissal may happen two ways. The first one is a dismissal of urgent necessity due to a particular moral failure or circumstance. The second is also a dismissal of necessity but is not urgent; it is due to an inability of the seminarian to embrace or respond to the program of priestly formation appropriately.

So the first kind of dismissal is both the most serious but ironically may be the easiest. If the man has been caught in an egregious act with verifiable evidence, the seminary and the diocese should act promptly in offering a swift dismissal. It is important for you to know that I meet with all parties involved, listen to all sides, collect information, pray for wisdom and discernment, and trust the Holy Spirit to make manifest what needs to come to light, and then move and act as needed. I also don't make any decisions without serious consultation with the Formation Team, the Diocesan Vocation Director, and the Bishop. Whenever I need to discuss something very serious, I invite in the formation advisor, the spiritual director, and the seminarian all to my office to make sure that everyone is hearing the same thing – clarity and lack of ambiguity or triangulation is important at this point. If a dismissal occurs it is because someone has broken a serious moral boundary: stealing, flagrant plagiarism, but usually, we are referring to something of a relational nature with another person. Such as dating, sexual activity, serious boundary violations, etc. Remember, we are called to live in freedom, but not a freedom that gives free reign to the flesh. As St. Paul writes: “For you were called for freedom, brothers. But do not use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh; rather, serve one another through love. [...] live by the Spirit and you will certainly not gratify the desire of the flesh” (Gal. 5:13, 16). Know that you are free to do whatever you desire, but remember there are also consequences. Thus no one is dismissed without due process, serious discernment, and grave matter. However, I understand that it is very hard when it is a friend and you most likely have incomplete information. Please know that we cannot share that information with you or the community for the sake of the man's reputation (get a release form if you want, because as Fr. Remek will remind us: Canon 220 states that no one is permitted to harm illegitimately the good reputation which a person possesses nor to injure the right of any person to protect his or her own privacy).

Now, the second kind of dismissal happens when the seminarian simply does not have the requisite qualities for the diocesan priesthood in the 21st century. As the *PPF* states:

Seminarians who lack the positive qualities for continuing in formation should not be advanced in the seminary program. They should be advised to leave the seminary. Seminarians not recommended for advancement should be notified as early as possible and in a constructive manner. In these cases, an opportunity should be provided for the seminarian to present his self-assessment; others who can speak on the seminarian's behalf should also be heard (*PPF*, 287).

As we like to say, formation is not meant to be an “Easter egg hunt” – we should not have to work that hard to see priestly virtues and qualities in you, they should be manifestly self-evident. If, after many advising sessions and repeated efforts to assist a seminarian in his growth, including the possibility of growth counselling and even the warning of formation probation, he still shows no sign, or at least not sufficient sign of needed growth, then the Formation Team has come to an impasse on the path forward and must assist the man, erring always on the side of the Church, to move out of priestly formation. We strive never to surprise a man on areas of needed growth, but rather address them immediately so that they have real opportunity to grow and show us the needed change. However, it does not always happen and then we can be at peace knowing that we have given the seminarian every opportunity for growth and change prior to dismissal. The *PPF* states:

When there is doubt about the readiness of a seminarian for advancement, consideration can be given to a recommendation of a period of probation outside the seminary. The time period involved should be specified, not open-ended. The period of probation should have clearly identified goals and means to assess the achievement of goals. Likewise, appropriate supervision is necessary so that this period away would help bring about needed growth for a possible return to the seminary. If doubts remain after this period, the seminarian should not continue in formation (*PPF*, 288).

All that being said, I have seen miracles and quantum leaps occur in a man's vocational journey at this point of being challenged by the seminary – which in my mind is always the preferable outcome! But sadly, there are others who “just don't have it” – they don't possess the requisite qualities for priestly ministry today. In such a case, we work very hard to help the seminarian see that this is simply not a fit. This is particularly difficult if the man simply doesn't see it. At this point we review with him the two forms of discernment occurring, the personal and the ecclesial (as previously mentioned), explaining that the Church does not see the requisite qualities for his advancement at this point. It is also very challenging when it is a border-line issue and/or the seminarian is not accepting the subtle, and not so subtle, guidance of his formation advisor and/or the rector. Working with a seminarian who has done nothing “wrong,” but whom we don't believe “has it” or will be “useful for ministry” (CIC, 1025 § 2) can be the most difficult situation. We strive to be gentle and kind as we accompany him on this journey, mindful that we are dealing with a soul. This process does not happen overnight; it takes lots of discernment and time to unfold. If priesthood is not a fit for a man, then the reality is that *he* will never be happy or contented in his life. In the end, we are actually trying to help him to discover his true vocation in Christ. It is ultimately an act of charity towards him even though he may not see it at the time.

The formation team often resorts to “four formation factors” as a way to help us gauge a man's possibility for progress:

1. Gauge the seriousness of the issues: hurting the Church vs. annoying/idiosyncratic.
2. Gauge the time expected for the issues to be resolved: short-term vs. long-term vs. life-long.
3. Gauge the capacity of the individual to accomplish the desired change and/or resolution.
4. Gauge the willingness of the individual to enter into the desired change (influenced by past track record).

The Holy Spirit is in charge and we need to allow Him to inspire and lead us when tough decisions are to be made. The seminary must always err on the side of the Bride. The benefit of the doubt must always go to the Church. Two questions I often ask: “Would I want this man as my associate pastor? Would I want him in my sister's parish?” If the answer is “no” to either of these questions, then we are called to act. The seminary, like the father-in-law, gives no free rides, it is not a parade, it is hard work! The Bride of Christ deserves only men who embrace daily conversion and transformation in a true spirit of freedom so that genuine formation can occur.

On the flip side, it is important for me/us to regularly remind you that you should not live in fear of being kicked out. Live in freedom!!! If it is God's will for you to get ordained it will happen, and if it is not, we pray that He make it clear to you and us – because all we want is the Father's will for your lives. It is never our desire to throw seminarians out for no reason whatsoever. We certainly don't sit around and say, we already have too many priests, let's mess with this guy and play games. I want to encourage you to trust and be transparent – the seminarian who is transparent, humble and open to formation has nothing to fear and will experience a great sense of freedom – I have seen this and know that it is true! If you don't want to live in the way that the seminary and the Church demand, then please depart, no one is forcing you to stay! Deacon Jack's homily last Monday spoke also of the affirming nature of the Church's discernment on your behalf. When you are in doubt, be open to those entrusted with your formation to help you. The rector, the formation advisor, and the diocese should not be the last ones to know of a decision to depart seminary formation, but should be a part of the process of discernment – that is only a matter of fairness to your fiancée. Deacon Jack was at a pivotal moment and he trusted our faith in him even when wasn't quite believing in himself (explain the rest of the story).

The etched marble wall at the Korean War Memorial in Washington, DC, states quite starkly: Freedom is not Free!!! Our freedom costs us our lives – “I live, yet not I, Christ is living in me” (Gal. 2:20). Our truest freedom is a surrender to live completely for Christ and His Church. The freedom that binds us, actually makes us ever more free! Free to give ourselves joyfully in poverty, chastity, and obedience. Free to realize that the seminary is not a cakewalk or a parade (nor is the priesthood going to be easy!), but a time of struggling through difficulties and being transformed – a time of configuration to Christ who came to serve and not be served! The seminary wants to enrich your freedom by helping you to become ever more aware of your own contradictions and more open to wholesome living. We want to help you close the distance between the ideal and your reality year by year. Free to live in trust, transparency, authenticity, and humility as we each desire to grow in relationship with Jesus Christ, the freest man to ever live! William Wallace knew that life would be tough, and it might well cost him his life, but he was free, and that allowed him to sacrifice everything. This is also the freedom that a priest must have to live and minister like Fr. Stanley Rother; and that is the life of freedom that the Lord desires for each of us.

Pope Francis constantly reminds us that it is all about Christ:

How can we discover our own vocation in this world? It can be discovered in many ways, but [...] the first indicator is the joy of the encounter with Jesus. [...] Every true vocation begins with an encounter with Jesus who gives us joy and hope anew; and he leads us, even through trials and difficulties, to an ever fuller encounter; that encounter with him, grows greater, and to the fullness of joy (“Remembering the Encounter with Jesus,” General Audience on 30 August 2017, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 1 September 2017, pg. 3).

As St. Paul writes: “For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5:1).