



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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### “Constructive Feedback: Building up the Body of Christ”

One of the greatest gifts we will ever receive is honest feedback. It is not difficult to realize that we do not see ourselves as others see us or certainly as God sees us. In fact, all of life is a gradual journey of discovery of who we are, and especially who we are in the light of Christ. In fact, we do not truly know ourselves except in the light of Christ. As *Gaudium et spes* stated: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light” (GS 22). To seek input from friends and family leaves us completely vulnerable to the truth; to getting kicked in the gut by the observations and perceptions of others. It takes great humility on our part to truly receive such observations from another fallible human being.

I can remember the first time I attempted such a foolish act. I was at Saint John Vianney College Seminary walking around campus after dinner with one of my good friends and I asked him – “What do I not see about myself? What do you think I need to work on?” He very quickly came up with an answer – too quickly if you ask me! It was I who asked the question and now I felt myself becoming defensive and thinking about his faults – the old splinter and plank thing. But wait, I wanted to know his thoughts, and so I received his input quietly, and with gratitude took my bruised ego to the Chapel for prayer and spiritual direction for processing. With time I began to see his observation as a gift that I could take to the Lord for my own ongoing conversion. While his perception of me was not 100% correct, I began to realize that day that “perception equals reality” or at least people’s perceptions can lead them to project something on us that we do not intend – yet for them it appears to be the case. We have to be so aware of ourselves and know how our actions could be and are perceived by others. It takes humility on our part to resist the knee-jerk reflex to defensiveness. “Lord help me to grow to see how I might be perceived by others either for the good or the bad.”

Brothers, being evaluated doesn’t end with graduation from the seminary – it only just begins! Whether it be the informal critique of the “coffee and donut crowd” after Mass (which will definitely happen!) or a formal evaluation like I am going through right now: according to our bylaws the rector is to be evaluated every two years by the Board of Trustees, the Administration, the Faculty, benefactors, and a representation of student body. And so I pray along with you who receive regular formal evaluations: “Lord help me to grow!” For us, formation and conversion should never end.

Remember our theme for the year: “Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.” Understand – seek input, correction, and “counsel from every wise person and do not think lightly of any useful advice” (Tobit 4:18);

Imitate – imitate the one who is “meek and humble of heart” (Mt. 11:29); and if it hurts or the truth or perception is painful – “conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”

I want to introduce you tonight to 2 instruments we use at our seminary as an aid for your growth: The *Endorsement Process* which we do every fall and the *Feedback Process* which we do in the spring.

First of all the Endorsement Process: Every year the Second and Third Theologians (those right before Pastoral Year and those preparing for Diaconate) are endorsed (*or not*) by the whole house. The sheet that you will sign gives you the opportunity to say one of four things along with your commentary as to why you said it: I endorse, I endorse with reservations, I cannot endorse, or I do not know the seminarian well enough to endorse. This is an external forum instrument which is turned in to my office within two weeks. It is used as a tool in conjunction with the Formation Advisor to affirm the good that an individual is doing or to find out if there are any serious areas of concern that need to be addressed. It is a process of discernment on my end to see if concerns raised are serious or if a number of multiple and similar observations are made that would be good for the seminarian to be aware of regarding a certain perception that he is projecting to the house. It is also mine to discern if particular observations made simply reflect differences in personality as we at times grate on the nerves of each other. We can presume that grave issues are not arising regularly. Thanks be to God, we have a very good and healthy seminary, but I am not so naïve as to believe that such issues might not exist from time to time. More often than not though, I am edified as I read the vast majority of you complimenting your brothers on any of a number of his virtues. However, the occasion has arisen in the past when I hear an alumnus speaking of a classmate who has gotten himself in trouble and/or left the active ministry saying, “well everybody knew about...his drinking, or drugs, or women, or men, or...” I have heard this even of men I taught and I reflect back to the alumnus, “No, everyone didn’t know! I was on the faculty and I can guarantee that though the seminarians might have known of a serious issue, we had no idea.” The Church has gone on long enough without addressing issues when they arise, in fact it will go down in history as our greatest failure of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Remember, calling a brother to conversion is about the good of the Church, the faithful, and ultimately the good of our brother’s soul.

Unlike the Endorsement Process, the Feedback procedure in the spring semester is completely a matter of the internal forum. As opposed to the whole seminary, you pick 3 people to offer you honest feedback on areas of needed growth as well as recognition of gifts. One model you might consider would be to choose a good friend, and then someone you don’t always see eye to eye with, and also someone you may not be that familiar with – this would give you three radically different perspectives to bring to prayer. Don’t be afraid to take a risk. It is helpful to bring their feedback into Spiritual Direction in order to process it well. You may wish to bring it to formation advising if you want. The external forum will not ask for it, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t process it with your advisor if you think it would be helpful.

So now let me offer some advice on how to endorse and give feedback, or in general how to do evaluations like the end of the semester course evaluation or the end of the year seminary evaluation. Remember, as a priest and employer you will have to do this regularly and professionally.

- 1.) Say a prayer before your pen meets the paper: “Lord what do you want me to say?”
- 2.) Have I discerned whether something should actually be said before I write? Have I tried, or am I in a position to offer this fraternal correction one on one? For example, if you are

the manager of the Rathskeller and one of the members of your team is slacking – don't go right to the vice rector or the rector, don't go and gossip about what a jerk this guy is – take it to him directly, share your concern, and pray for his change of heart. If over the course of time, the desired change is not perceived, then you can follow certain steps just as Jesus outlined in Matthew chapter 18.

However, this is not always possible if the issue is grave or the person is not well known by you. After discernment you may feel called to share it directly with your Formators.

- 3.) Charity above all – take heart the words of Saint Paul, “If I speak without love I am a noisy gong and a clanging symbol” (1 Cor. 13:1) and “Never let evil talk pass your lips; say only the good things men need to hear, things that will really help them” (Eph. 4:29). Pope Francis said it best recently when referring to fraternal correction, which must be done with love and charity. If it is not done with love, “it would be like performing surgery without anesthesia, resulting in a patient's painful death. And charity is like anesthesia which helps him to receive the care and accept the correction. [...] Take him aside, gently, lovingly, and speak to him” (Homily on 12 September 2014).
- 4.) Is what I am saying the truth? Or is it my bias, unsubstantiated rumors, gossip, slander, detraction, etc. This is not a “witch hunt” – you do not live under Gestapo rules where your freedom is hindered and you should worry about false accusations. Truth happens to be very important! As Msgr. Bosso says regarding preaching feedback: “it must be honest and charitable.” Write your comments with decorum and finesse so that your observations and fraternal correction can be received without bruising the intended recipient unnecessarily. One course evaluation read: “This is the worst class of my entire life!” The poor professor, who happens to be pretty darn good, looked at me and said, “Do you realize that this critique even includes middle school?”
- 5.) Fraternal correction must be both delivered and received with humility. Remember how flawed each of us are – we know we are weak sinners and so with fear and trepidation we dare cast stones at a brother aware as we are of our own planks!
- 6.) And finally, what about being on the receiving end of feedback and endorsements? As men preparing to be parish priests, your own skin needs to be thickened a bit. If we freak out at the slightest reprimand or correction, we are setting ourselves up for grave disappointments, especially if we consider ourselves beyond reproach – again, humility. We are to live in the absolute freedom of the children of God, and when we do, we need not be afraid of whatever might be said of me.

It hurt when my friend at Saint John Vianney pointed out one of my character flaws, yet almost 25 years later I remember that kindness and am still working on the same issue. Awareness leads us to growth if we allow Christ into the scenario. Trust me, it still hurts when reprimanded or corrected by my superiors, yet it is for my own “good and the good of all His Holy Church.” Fraternal correction is about building up the Body of Christ and not tearing it down. That ultimately is a great question for us to ask: am I building up or tearing down? Understand, Imitate, and Conform. I close with the words of our Holy Father:

“A Christian who, in community, doesn't do things, even brotherly correction, in charity, in truth and with humility, is disqualified! Because he has not managed to become a mature Christian. [May the Lord] help us in this brotherly service, so beautiful and so agonizing, of helping brothers and sisters to be better, pushing ourselves to always do so with charity, in truth, and with humility” (*ibid*).

*Endorsements are to be passed out and are due on Friday November 7<sup>th</sup>.*