



# ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY

OFFICE OF THE RECTOR

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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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### “Consecrated Study: Understand, Imitate, and Conform”

As you know, our theme for the year is taken from the ordination rite:

“*Understand* what you do, *imitate* what you celebrate, and *conform* your life to the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”

**Understand** - literally to “stand between” or delve deeply into a topic. Tonight we are going to focus on the consecrated study of theology; delving deeply into the mysteries of God and the Church – to wrestle like Jacob with the Lord and delve ever deeper into the books through our prayerful study. But the reason for our study is not for us alone. *Contemplata aliis tradere* – a Dominican motto from St. Thomas Aquinas – Contemplate and then hand on to others the fruit of your contemplation. Our theological Studies are at the service of God *and* others. Yes, we are to grow and expand our minds and hearts by “doing theology on our knees” – but it should never be a closed loop or compartmentalized, rather in love, it is ever open to the service of others. Pope Francis reminds us: “A person who is not convinced, enthusiastic, certain and in love, will convince nobody” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 266).

For instance, the study of scripture helps us know God better through His Word and thus to become great sharers of that Word. We study Canon Law so that we understand the Church’s teaching and assist others in its application (at least that is what Fr. Remek tells me!). Our systematic courses on Trinity, Sacraments, Theological Anthropology, Christology, Ecclesiology, Grace and Eschatology, Protology, Patrology, and the “ologies” could go on, are not studied in order for us to use fancy words that our people do not understand, but rather so that we can assimilate the Truth and distill it as skilled artisans who explain God’s Love and activity in the world (both *ad intra* and *ad extra*!). The study of Morality is not meant to imprison us or others, but to show forth the beauty and liberation of living as children of the Father. Our liturgical and sacramental practica are in the curriculum to teach us how to pray and lead others into prayer. Yes, you study a lot. I am truly edified by the dedication with which you have entered into seminary formation; and yet at the beginning of the year it is simply good to refocus our attention on why we are here and why we are spending so much time in prayerful study. An outsider might say that we are “wasting our time” but what better to do than “waste” our time on the study of God (it is the perfumed oil that is “wasted” on Christ’s feet). People are often amazed when I tell them that we have a five year post-graduate program. They exclaim, “they could be doctors in that amount of time.” My response is that you are - isn’t healing and saving souls even more important than physical healing? Brothers, you are preparing for the most exciting, most important work on the face of the earth!

Thus “understand what you do!” This directive of the ordaining bishop to the new priest - understand - delve into the mystery, know, feel, experience, wrestle, pray, struggle; at times you

will make A's, or B pluses, or even C minuses! As my dear Dad used to say, "All I ask is that you give it your best." And all I ask is that you give it your best and desire to learn for the sake of the people of God. But again first *you* must "understand." The Seminary is the "school of the Gospel" - learn from Christ Jesus in your daily prayer and consecrated study. Bring your books to the Chapel sometimes, stop and contemplate in the midst of your readings as a form of *lectio divina*, keep inviting the Holy Spirit into your mind to unfold the mystery of Christ's love for the world. You will find yourself, your mission, your identity, your way of life and all virtue in the Gospel. Develop a relationship with the Gospels - "put out into the deep" and grow in the Word. Allow the Word to take flesh in you. The Gospel is our life not our homework. Understand and get to know Jesus through your studies for Christ is our all! He is our identity. In the midst of this mystery stand in awe of God and of our vocation; this keeps us grounded in humility and docility. As the *Program for Priestly Formation* directs, "the seminary study of theology ... must flow from prayer and lead to prayer" (PPF 163).

So first of all understand, and secondly **Imitate** - "imitate what you celebrate." The priest celebrates the paschal Mystery of Christ; His passion, death, and Resurrection. How can we imitate this mystery in the here and now? Do not be afraid of hard work! St. John Paul II spoke so often of the great dignity of work. You are being formed for a difficult life. I repeat, you are being formed for a difficult life. Granted not as difficult as if we were missionaries in the third world, but the difficulty of our poverty usually revolves around our time. Our time is not our own, and right now your time is to be dedicated to the four dimensions of priestly formation. If you do not like working hard, then diocesan priesthood is not for you. If you can't stand going to two or three Masses a day, or being under the microscope all of the time, or having your nicely structured schedule wrecked by emergencies, or working at night on a homily after a hard day, then just maybe diocesan priesthood is not for you. In fact, marriage also might not be for you, because my married friends guarantee me that in order to support a family, keep a marriage healthy, and raise children entails hard work. A mistake that we sometimes make is to see work as the enemy! Imitate Christ who worked with St. Joseph as a craftsman, and who tirelessly travelled the Judean countryside proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom.

We are being called to *build* the Kingdom, not *receive* the Kingdom. Building does not happen by sitting idly by and hoping that something happens. "I'll just sit in the rectory and if someone needs something they can find me" - is that the New Evangelization that Pope Francis is talking about? Building, as we can see from our campus demands labor and hard work - and in this hard work lay great dignity especially as it is done *with* and *for* Christ. Building means hours spent in drafting plans, getting our hands dirty and calloused, building means that we go to bed tired because we have put in a full day's work. St. Joseph the Worker is a great model for us; contemplate him and his foster Son working together in their hidden trade as craftsman - a hidden life with no fanfare, like sitting at a desk for hours with no one ever even knowing the real work we are putting in. Like St. Joseph we are called to work alongside Christ in the Nazareths of our own state in life. Working *with* Christ and *for* Christ gives meaning to all that we do. St. John Vianney reminds us: "All that we do without offering it to God is wasted." And as Msgr. Preston Moss of the Archdiocese of Nassau once told me, "Keep your hands on the plow, even when they are bleeding!"

This means first and foremost that we each take personal responsibility for the work entrusted to us. House jobs, apostolic assignments, diocesan responsibilities, daily prayer and study - yes, this is our work, but more importantly it is our life. Work and Study are not enemies! The priest who sees his daily duties and responsibilities as drudgery is missing out on the beauty of life.

Granted we need downtime, adequate rest, nutrition, and exercise. But our college days of lying around all day on the couch, watching daily movies, playing Halo for two hours, socializing nightly, and communal sports every day are over. You are not college kids anymore and life only has meaning if we engage in the serious work that lay ahead of us. As a priest, you will be able to carve out some downtime, but don't try to compare it with the free time you had as a sophomore in college and think *that* is supposed to be the norm. Regarding one young priest, Cardinal Dolan observed, "I am not worried about him burning out because he was never on fire in the first place." Do what you do for God and give Him your all. Regarding our studies, it is good to remember that it is a privilege and in many ways a luxury to be afforded the opportunity and time to learn and grow in understanding of the mysteries of God – I mean really who gets to do this as their profession? Your years of seminary formation are a gift and it is good to start the year reminding ourselves of the many graces we receive and our call to imitate not just St. Joseph the Worker, but Christ the Worker!

Which comes to our last point, "***conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's cross.***" This is our challenge – each of us, priest, professor, staff, and student on this campus are called to conform our lives to the mystery of the Lord's cross. "Conform" can be defined as "to act in accordance with or to be in harmony." A good reflection for us this year, especially when we are tempted to complain, is to regularly ask ourselves the question, "Am I in harmony with Christ crucified and living in relation to this mystery?" After all, isn't *formation* ultimately all about *conformation* to Christ? We want to be able to say with St. Paul, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ living in me" (Gal. 2:20). The crucifix is the image of the death-to-self that we are to embrace in our daily lives; configured to Christ, conformed unto Him to live for others. But the *mystery* for each of us individually will unfold for us throughout the whole of our lives. The mystery of Jesus' death brought life, joy and spiritual fruitfulness into the world – this is the very mission of the priest, to bring life, joy and spiritual fruitfulness into the world through his death. "I have been crucified with Christ." Con-formed – through Him, and with Him, and in Him – this is our life. Do we embrace the wood of the Cross in the wood of our desks as students, administrators, and professors? Do we embrace this mystery we behold everyday in the Eucharist so as to be consumed by the world as Christ is consumed in His offering?

Brothers, Jesus Christ loves us and wants only what is best for us as individuals and for the Church. Be not afraid of embracing the Cross, of embracing your vocation. "Fear is useless, what is needed is trust" (Luke 8:50). May each of us let go of our childish ways, sinful habits, and false dreams of what our lives should be and con-form to the mystery of the Cross in the here and now. This year gives us an opportunity to reflect deeply on the words of the ordination rite: "*Understand* what you do, *imitate* what you celebrate, and *conform* your life to the mystery of the Lord's cross." Lord send us your Holy Spirit and give us the grace to understand, to imitate, and to conform our lives that we might bring about life, joy and the spiritual fruitfulness You desire for the world.

Varia:

- Gratitude for a great start to the year!
- Example of the Deacons in the house.
- St. Joseph Community Center Flood - please be aware
- Family Weekend hospitality (remember books out of pews)