



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

RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

21 September 2017

“Shepherd Children”

I want to begin tonight with a brief reflection on the “shepherd children” of Fatima, our newest canonized saints of the Church. We are in the midst of celebrating the centenary of Mary appearing to the humblest and littlest of the faithful: Francisco, Jacinta and Lucia in a small village in a poor country. I have reflected a great deal upon these young people over the course of the summer and I have been struck by their reality as “shepherd children.” Isn’t that exactly what we are to become? Shepherds after the heart of Christ and “like little children to whom the kingdom of God belongs!” (Lk. 18:16). At the ages of ten and nine, Saints Francisco and Jacinta Marto are the youngest canonized saints who did not die a martyr’s death. After the apparitions of Our Lady, they gave themselves over completely to lives of sacrifice and penance for the conversion of sinners, and in 1918 they were victims of a great influenza epidemic that swept through Europe. These two shepherd children were called to the green pastures of paradise by the Good shepherd who they so faithfully followed. By the way, I want to encourage you to participate in the close of the centenary of Fatima on [Friday October 13th](#) at Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish in the Archdiocese of Miami with the Sister Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary – I will be going!

Doesn’t this give us a nice focus for the year? As you know, our theme as a seminary is: “Missionary Disciples for the New Evangelization.” How are we going to get there? By being shepherd children.

As shepherds we are to desire like Jesus to “seek out and save the lost” (Lk. 19:10) and “to give our lives as a ransom for the many” (Mk. 10:45). The shepherd, unlike the hired hand who is just doing a job, is willing to suffer and die for the sheep entrusted to his care (cf. Jn. 10:7-12). The shepherd walks in their midst, stays with them and even becomes the sheep gate at night, in a word, he “smells like the sheep” to use the popular phrase of Pope Francis. This is missionary discipleship – “being with” the faithful, serving them, searching out the lost. This also entails a “being with” the Lord who remains our chief Shepherd – remaining with Him in prayer and following His lead so that we can lead others. But where does the New Evangelization begin if not in our midst, right here at SVDP?

One of the items the faculty spoke about at our end of the year meetings was our need to evangelize and encourage each other. Pre-Theologians need the encouragement of their brothers in Theology, Theologians need the freshness and zeal witnessed by those just entering seminary in the Discipleship Stage. The priests and faculty are called to edify you by our way of life, especially

in the Configuration Stage as you get closer to ordination. So my encouragement to all of us is that we need not be afraid of sharing our faith, sharing the Good News (i.e. *evangelizare*) with each other in casual conversation, at table, in the classroom, travelling to apostolate, and even at recreation. We need not be afraid of making Christ present in our midst through praying together or praying for and over one another. Now, I don't mean that we have to talk about Jesus 24/7, but on the other hand, we need not be afraid, in fact we must exercise our faith in the here and now or we will be lackluster seminarians who instead of falling more and more in love every year with Christ and His Church, could become dim lights just going through the motions of seminary life. I desire so deeply for you to leave the seminary like a bullet leaving a rifle, on fire at 2000 miles per hour, as opposed to simply falling out of the end of the barrel making no impact on the intended target – the holy people of God. Let's ask each other about the call of God in our lives. Nothing edifies more than a good conversion story, vocation witness, or a reflection on the quiet encouragement of the Holy Spirit made manifest in the heart of another. Hence, my recent encouragement to share our stories of God's presence in the midst of our experiences of Hurricane Irma.

Learning how to pull up a chair and engage in table conversation begins here, or it will never happen at coffee and donuts. Noticing the person not talking, or the "ghost" at the table, is what the evangelist looks for. It certainly happens in the here and now, and the Lord invites us to creatively respond.

Let's reveal the face of Christ to each other and live the "joy of the gospel" on a daily basis. This is incidentally our new 5th Student Learning Outcome (SLO), because besides the 4 dimensions of formation, the Church needs men who are aflame with the love of God and not self-satisfied, or lethargic and lazy hired hands. The new Missionary Discipleship SLO reads as follows:

Express evangelical zeal and competency for pastoral outreach to all, with particular attention to the poor and marginalized, through the acquisition of pastoral language skills, awareness of cultural context, the application of theological material to pastoral situations, and well-developed preaching and teaching skills (Missionary Discipleship: MDiv SLO-5).

Our apostolic zeal begins now, and please God, crescendos the day we die. Our trajectory of love and service remains if we "remain in His love" (Jn. 15:10).

Another topic of discussion of the faculty was that of our habits, compulsions or even addictions that pull us out of communion with each other and with God. The Lord desires to draw us back into relationship precisely around the things that make us less childlike and less dependent on Him, and therefore less free.

As children who need their Daddy, we cry out to Him: "Abba, Father" reveal to us areas where our spiritual childhood is inhibited (cf. Rm 8:15). Tonight I am going to mention one area that fetters the citizen of the 21st century, self-included, that is, our dependency on technology. Now don't get me wrong, it is a great good which keeps us connected to so many. However, we all

know that this same good can separate people at the same table, distract us at prayer, suck up more time than it should by incessant checking on another's "changing status," or enslave us to unhealthy or even sinful traps lurking on the web (cf. the [Conference on Chastity and Accountability](#)). This can simply be understood as a modern form of asceticism, after all, weren't we all challenged by the Sunday gospel a few weeks ago? "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me" (Mt. 16:24).

And so, I would like to propose that each of us come up with our own particular detox or ascetical plan that can be discussed first in Spiritual Direction and then in Formation Advising. This is a modern form of asceticism that we all can learn to embrace. It will take on different forms for each of us depending on what God places on our hearts and our different needs at a given point in our life. *Nosce te ipsum!* One thing I have asked the faculty to do, and I ask us to renew it today, is to refrain from sending work emails between 8 pm and 8 am – obviously barring emergencies and personal correspondence. We are mostly Type-A personalities and it is not healthy for us to be working 16 hour days – our minds need rest and we need to model this for you. So I ask you to try and do the same. Please do not email your Formation Advisor after 8 PM so as to respect their boundaries. Obviously if there is an emergency use the phone and call – you should know by now that we are always there for you. Let's try to give our minds the mental rest and re-creation on a daily basis that we all need.

But there are plenty of other ways to be creatively ascetical as well. One seminarian told me last year that he was limiting his Facebook exposure by checking only once a day, another told me that he was putting his phone in a drawer for 2 hours every evening to avoid the distraction during his studies. For another it might mean battling pornography by joining Friends of St. Joseph and installing Covenant Eyes on his tech devices. It may even be cutting back on gaming which has become a distraction from genuine relationships or Netflix or Blogs, or just plain surfing, etc., etc....the list can go on and on. Only you can know what you are called to do to be a counter-cultural-warrior of the New Evangelization. To be childlike and free means that we are not controlled by our things, but have learned and wrestled with the reality of our world through self-control, self-mastery, and a lot of grace. Don't we all truly desire "freedom from all disordered affections" as St. Ignatius of Loyola accounts for in the First Annotation of the Spiritual Exercises?

As rector, I want to invite each of us to do a couple of things as a show of respect and deeper desire for fraternal communion:

- 1.) Let's keep the refectory a "tech free zone" – please don't answer calls or texts when there are living human beings in front of you. There is always the temptation to start googling facts and viewing the latest "piano playing cat" on YouTube, but do your best to resist the temptation. Let's be men and women of communion and preserve the "art of conversation" in our world today (cf. Fr. Thomas Cavanaugh's book on evangelization and conversation entitled *How to Win Friends for Christ One Conversation at a Time*).
- 2.) Keep your undivided attention on the Presence in front of us in the Chapel by leaving our phones behind *or* placing them in "airplane mode" every time you enter for prayer. Few

things are more distracting in prayer than a text message vibrating in your pocket at the very moment you are about to attain perfect union with the Blessed Trinity – but I guess that is not so important, now is it? Let’s also try to remember to use our breviaries when we pray in common and not our devices because we need to learn how to use the books and love the sacred page. When travelling I often use my phone for the Divine Office, but I am always happy to get back to the Breviary – I think it is the incarnational touch and feel that I have longed for.

Enough about all of this, let’s try together to simplify and to be like little children by enjoying the presence of the person in front of you in the refectory and the Presence of the Person (capital P) in front of us in the Chapel.

As you can piece together, these two main themes today are all about becoming better “[Men of Communion](#)” by engaging in the evangelization of the house and by being more present to each other and the Presence of God in our midst, in other words *availability* and *asceticism*.

As we began with the shepherd children of Fatima, I would like to recall another shepherd child. Remember the young David that God called from his flock in order to shepherd the chosen people. As Samuel was sent to anoint the future king, the Lord counselled him: “Do not judge from his appearance or from his lofty stature, [...] God does not see as a mortal, who sees the appearance. The LORD looks into the heart. ... [asking if all the sons were accounted for, Jesse replied] There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep. [...] (cf. 1 Sam. 16:7, 11-13). Again, a shepherd child who becomes the Lord’s anointed. Let us be simple and small before the Lord so that His Holy Spirit may likewise rush upon us as He did upon our newest Saints, Francisco and Jacinta; and with David the shepherd boy we can daily cry out: “The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want” (Ps. 23:1).

I close with the words of Pope Francis to those he ordained to the priesthood this summer:

Remember that you are chosen from among God’s people and appointed to act for them in relation to God. Do your part in the work of Christ the Priest with genuine joy and love. Be joyful, never sad. Joyful, with the joy of Christ’s service, even amid suffering, misunderstandings, and your own sins. Keep your gaze ever fixed on the example of the Good Shepherd who did not come to be served but to serve. Please do not be “lords”. Do not be “state clerics”, but rather shepherds of the people of God (“Not to Further a Career, but to Serve,” 7 May 2017 [*L’Osservatore Romano*, 12 May 2017, 6]).