

LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO SEMINARIANS

Dear Seminarians,

When in December 1944 I was drafted for military service, the company commander asked each of us what we planned to do in the future. I answered that I wanted to become a Catholic priest. The lieutenant replied: “Then you ought to look for something else. In the new Germany priests are no longer needed”. I knew that this “new Germany” was already coming to an end, and that, after the enormous devastation which that madness had brought upon the country, priests would be needed more than ever. Today the situation is completely changed. In different ways, though, many people nowadays also think that the Catholic priesthood is not a “job” for the future, but one that belongs more to the past. You, dear friends, have decided to enter the seminary and to prepare for priestly ministry in the Catholic Church in spite of such opinions and objections. You have done a good thing. Because people will always have need of God, even in an age marked by technical mastery of the world and globalization: they will always need the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the God who gathers us together in the universal Church in order to learn with him and through him life’s true meaning and in order to uphold and apply the standards of true humanity. Where people no longer perceive God, life grows empty; nothing is ever enough. People then seek escape in euphoria and violence; these are the very things that increasingly threaten young people. God is alive. He has created every one of us and he knows us all. He is so great that he has time for the little things in our lives: “Every hair of your head is numbered”. God is alive, and he needs people to serve him and bring him to others. It does make sense to become a priest: the world needs priests, pastors, today, tomorrow and always, until the end of time.

The seminary is a community journeying towards priestly ministry. I have said something very important here: one does not become a priest on one’s own. The “community of disciples” is essential, the fellowship of those who desire to serve the greater Church. In this letter I would like to point out – thinking back to my own time in the seminary – several elements which I consider important for these years of your journeying.

1. Anyone who wishes to become a priest must be first and foremost a “man of God”, to use the expression of Saint Paul (1 Tim 6:11). For us God is not some abstract hypothesis; he is not some stranger who left the scene after the “big bang”. God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. In the face of Jesus Christ we see the face of God. In his words we hear God himself speaking to us. It follows that the most important thing in our path towards priesthood and during the whole of our priestly lives is our personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ. The priest is not the leader of a sort of association whose membership he tries to maintain and expand. He is God’s messenger to his people. He wants to lead them to God and in this way to foster authentic communion between all men and women. That is why it is so important, dear friends, that you learn to live in

constant intimacy with God. When the Lord tells us to “pray constantly”, he is obviously not asking us to recite endless prayers, but urging us never to lose our inner closeness to God. Praying means growing in this intimacy. So it is important that our day should begin and end with prayer; that we listen to God as the Scriptures are read; that we share with him our desires and our hopes, our joys and our troubles, our failures and our thanks for all his blessings, and thus keep him ever before us as the point of reference for our lives. In this way we grow aware of our failings and learn to improve, but we also come to appreciate all the beauty and goodness which we daily take for granted and so we grow in gratitude. With gratitude comes joy for the fact that God is close to us and that we can serve him.

2. For us God is not simply Word. In the sacraments he gives himself to us in person, through physical realities. At the heart of our relationship with God and our way of life is the Eucharist. Celebrating it devoutly, and thus encountering Christ personally, should be the centre of all our days. In Saint Cyprian’s interpretation of the Gospel prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread”, he says among other things that “our” bread – the bread which we receive as Christians in the Church – is the Eucharistic Lord himself. In this petition of the Our Father, then, we pray that he may daily give us “our” bread; and that it may always nourish our lives; that the Risen Christ, who gives himself to us in the Eucharist, may truly shape the whole of our lives by the radiance of his divine love. The proper celebration of the Eucharist involves knowing, understanding and loving the Church’s liturgy in its concrete form. In the liturgy we pray with the faithful of every age – the past, the present and the future are joined in one great chorus of prayer. As I can state from personal experience, it is inspiring to learn how it all developed, what a great experience of faith is reflected in the structure of the Mass, and how it has been shaped by the prayer of many generations.

3. The sacrament of Penance is also important. It teaches me to see myself as God sees me, and it forces me to be honest with myself. It leads me to humility. The Curé of Ars once said: “You think it makes no sense to be absolved today, because you know that tomorrow you will commit the same sins over again. Yet,” he continues, “God instantly forgets tomorrow’s sins in order to give you his grace today.” Even when we have to struggle continually with the same failings, it is important to resist the coarsening of our souls and the indifference which would simply accept that this is the way we are. It is important to keep pressing forward, without scrupulosity, in the grateful awareness that God forgives us ever anew – yet also without the indifference that might lead us to abandon altogether the struggle for holiness and self-improvement. Moreover, by letting myself be forgiven, I learn to forgive others. In recognizing my own weakness, I grow more tolerant and understanding of the failings of my neighbour.

4. I urge you to retain an appreciation for popular piety, which is different in every culture yet always remains very similar, for the human heart is ultimately one and the same. Certainly, popular piety tends towards the irrational, and can at times be somewhat superficial. Yet it would be quite wrong to dismiss it. Through that piety, the faith has entered human hearts and become part of the common patrimony of sentiments and customs, shaping the life and emotions of the community. Popular piety is thus one of the

Church's great treasures. The faith has taken on flesh and blood. Certainly popular piety always needs to be purified and refocused, yet it is worthy of our love and it truly makes us into the "People of God".

5. Above all, your time in the seminary is also a time of study. The Christian faith has an essentially rational and intellectual dimension. Were it to lack that dimension, it would not be itself. Paul speaks of a "standard of teaching" to which we were entrusted in Baptism (Rom 6:17). All of you know the words of Saint Peter which the medieval theologians saw as the justification for a rational and scientific theology: "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an 'accounting' (*logos*) for the hope that is in you" (1 Pet 3:15). Learning how to make such a defence is one of the primary responsibilities of your years in the seminary. I can only plead with you: Be committed to your studies! Take advantage of your years of study! You will not regret it. Certainly, the subjects which you are studying can often seem far removed from the practice of the Christian life and the pastoral ministry. Yet it is completely mistaken to start questioning their practical value by asking: Will this be helpful to me in the future? Will it be practically or pastorally useful? The point is not simply to learn evidently useful things, but to understand and appreciate the internal structure of the faith as a whole, so that it can become a response to people's questions, which on the surface change from one generation to another yet ultimately remain the same. For this reason it is important to move beyond the changing questions of the moment in order to grasp the real questions, and so to understand how the answers are real answers. It is important to have a thorough knowledge of sacred Scripture as a whole, in its unity as the Old and the New Testaments: the shaping of texts, their literary characteristics, the process by which they came to form the canon of sacred books, their dynamic inner unity, a unity which may not be immediately apparent but which in fact gives the individual texts their full meaning. It is important to be familiar with the Fathers and the great Councils in which the Church appropriated, through faith-filled reflection, the essential statements of Scripture. I could easily go on. What we call dogmatic theology is the understanding of the individual contents of the faith in their unity, indeed, in their ultimate simplicity: each single element is, in the end, only an unfolding of our faith in the one God who has revealed himself to us and continues to do so. I do not need to point out the importance of knowing the essential issues of moral theology and Catholic social teaching. The importance nowadays of ecumenical theology, and of a knowledge of the different Christian communities, is obvious; as is the need for a basic introduction to the great religions, to say nothing of philosophy: the understanding of that human process of questioning and searching to which faith seeks to respond. But you should also learn to understand and – dare I say it – to love canon law, appreciating how necessary it is and valuing its practical applications: a society without law would be a society without rights. Law is the condition of love. I will not go on with this list, but I simply say once more: love the study of theology and carry it out in the clear realization that theology is anchored in the living community of the Church, which, with her authority, is not the antithesis of theological science but its presupposition. Cut off from the believing Church, theology would cease to be itself and instead it would become a medley of different disciplines lacking inner unity.

6. Your years in the seminary should also be a time of growth towards human maturity. It is important for the priest, who is called to accompany others through the journey of life up to the threshold of death, to have the right balance of heart and mind, reason and feeling, body and soul, and to be humanly integrated. To the theological virtues the Christian tradition has always joined the cardinal virtues derived from human experience and philosophy, and, more generally, from the sound ethical tradition of humanity. Paul makes this point very clearly to the Philippians: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (4:8). This also involves the integration of sexuality into the whole personality. Sexuality is a gift of the Creator yet it is also a task which relates to a person’s growth towards human maturity. When it is not integrated within the person, sexuality becomes banal and destructive. Today we can see many examples of this in our society. Recently we have seen with great dismay that some priests disfigured their ministry by sexually abusing children and young people. Instead of guiding people to greater human maturity and setting them an example, their abusive behaviour caused great damage for which we feel profound shame and regret. As a result of all this, many people, perhaps even some of you, might ask whether it is good to become a priest; whether the choice of celibacy makes any sense as a truly human way of life. Yet even the most reprehensible abuse cannot discredit the priestly mission, which remains great and pure. Thank God, all of us know exemplary priests, men shaped by their faith, who bear witness that one can attain to an authentic, pure and mature humanity in this state and specifically in the life of celibacy. Admittedly, what has happened should make us all the more watchful and attentive, precisely in order to examine ourselves earnestly, before God, as we make our way towards priesthood, so as to understand whether this is his will for me. It is the responsibility of your confessor and your superiors to accompany you and help you along this path of discernment. It is an essential part of your journey to practise the fundamental human virtues, with your gaze fixed on the God who has revealed himself in Christ, and to let yourselves be purified by him ever anew.

7. The origins of a priestly vocation are nowadays more varied and disparate than in the past. Today the decision to become a priest often takes shape after one has already entered upon a secular profession. Often it grows within the Communities, particularly within the Movements, which favour a communal encounter with Christ and his Church, spiritual experiences and joy in the service of the faith. It also matures in very personal encounters with the nobility and the wretchedness of human existence. As a result, candidates for the priesthood often live on very different spiritual continents. It can be difficult to recognize the common elements of one’s future mandate and its spiritual path. For this very reason, the seminary is important as a community which advances above and beyond differences of spirituality. The Movements are a magnificent thing. You know how much I esteem them and love them as a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. Yet they must be evaluated by their openness to what is truly Catholic, to the life of the whole Church of Christ, which for all her variety still remains one. The seminary is a time when you learn with one another and from one another. In community life, which can at times be difficult, you should learn generosity and tolerance, not only bearing with, but also enriching one another, so that each of you will be able to contribute his own gifts

to the whole, even as all serve the same Church, the same Lord. This school of tolerance, indeed, of mutual acceptance and mutual understanding in the unity of Christ's Body, is an important part of your years in the seminary.

Dear seminarians, with these few lines I have wanted to let you know how often I think of you, especially in these difficult times, and how close I am to you in prayer. Please pray for me, that I may exercise my ministry well, as long as the Lord may wish. I entrust your journey of preparation for priesthood to the maternal protection of Mary Most Holy, whose home was a school of goodness and of grace. May Almighty God bless you all, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

From the Vatican, 18 October 2010, the Feast of Saint Luke the Evangelist.

Yours devotedly in the Lord,
BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

© Copyright 2010 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana