

What It Means to Be a Seminary Professor

The Role of the Teacher in the Seminary

Teaching finds its origin in God, who is the true Teacher of us all.¹ Ephesians 4:11 reminds us that the call and gifting to teach likewise come from God and are part of His supernatural work which aims to build up the whole body of the Church: “And he [sc. the risen Christ] gave the apostles, the prophets, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”²

The teacher is thus always necessary for the Church and works alongside and together with the pastors to discern what the Lord is doing and what he asks of us. In Acts 13:1-3, one finds the teachers working alongside those who announce the Lord’s word to the Church, fasting and praying with them until it became clear what the Lord desired and whom he was sending out to do this work. A teacher must therefore never separate himself from the church and its pastors nor try to set himself above them. The teacher should rather think of himself as a fellow elder alongside others, teaching and urging what is helpful while extending charity in all matters not strictly necessary to salvation.³

The Character of a Teacher in the Seminary

Scripture also urges teachers to have a simple and transparent way of living and relating to other people.⁴ To arrive at such a life, Scripture must be studied not just for its content, but in a variety of ways that allow Scripture to study and critique oneself and also lead on to prayer. Spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina*, guided meditations, personal retreats and meeting with a spiritual director are thus necessary to arrive at the kind of life necessary for effective seminary teaching.⁵ A willingness to grow and to be challenged by new and different perspectives should also lead the seminary teacher regularly to draw upon any relevant experiences students may have and to consider with interest their perspectives, dissent and criticisms; modesty should therefore lead to a classroom dynamic that is more collegial and less hierarchical in character.

The Need for Integration in Seminary Instruction

Seminary instruction must include three elements. First, it must help students discern what is true. Students should therefore be invited to read classic texts from major teachers within the Church, examining both the historical context within which the texts were written and the lasting contribution of

¹ Job 36:22; Is. 30:20; compare Mt. 23:8

² Compare 1 Cor. 12:28. On the necessity of teaching for the well-being of the Church, see also Heb. 5:12.

³ 1 Pet. 5:1; 1 Tim. 6:2-4; cf. 1 Tim. 1:4; 2 Tim. 2:14-16, 23-25; Titus 3:9 and compare Acts 18:15.

⁴ 2 Tim. 3:10; Tit. 2:7-8

⁵ Cf. James Keating, *Resting on the Heart of Christ: The Vocation and Spirituality of the Seminary Theologian*, Omaha, NE: IPF Publications, 2009.

such writings to the Church's doctrinal, spiritual and pastoral teaching.⁶ Students must also understand the changed social and intellectual conditions associated with the rise of the modern period, the Enlightenment and secularization, which have shaped the culture in which ministry is carried out.⁷

Second, students must move from discerning what is true to loving what is true and good. Every academic discipline has a certain content that is helpful for arriving at knowledge of the truth. At the same time, to have knowledge without love and desire is not helpful. As James 2:19 notes, "Even the demons believe—and shudder!" The knowledge they have is empty and bears no spiritual fruit. In a similar way, post-Enlightenment culture has tended to separate the education of the mind from the eliciting of desire and the shaping of the will, matters which in the history of pastoral formation historically have been (and must be) kept together.⁸ In introducing students to classic spiritual texts, we are inviting students to enter into an unfamiliar (and therefore disorienting) new situation and to experience the invitation there to a greater love for God and for all those we encounter in ministry. There is great value in having students read Julian of Norwich's vision of the crucified Christ as embodying limitless divine love or Gregory the Great's account of prayer producing ardent desire to serve one's people. An instructor who assigns texts of this type must also patiently help students to engage with these texts at multiple levels, including more personal, affective forms of engagement.

Third, it is important to invite into the classroom experienced clergy who exemplify the life and values necessary for healthy ministry. This may take the form of invited presentation or having a pastor help seminarians work through a classic text or a difficult case study. In inviting pastors into the classroom, the seminary instructor will also have an opportunity to model for students the fraternal charity which binds pastors together in the shared work of the Gospel.⁹

⁶ As the British church historian Owen Chadwick has noted, "History...does more than any other discipline to free the mind from the tyranny of present opinion" (*Freedom and the Historian*, London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969, 39; cited in John Tracy Ellis, *Faith and Learning: A Church Historian's Story*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989, 10).

⁷ On secularization and the way that it has fundamentally changed the conditions of ministry in the United States, see especially Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002 and Christian Smith (ed.), *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003.

⁸ "Desire also implies an urgent and loving willingness to work for the salvation of others, with the help of God's grace, since to love God means to love what He loves. Study without desire is lifeless and leads nowhere, but study fueled by desire leads to pleasure and joy" (Thomas McDermott, "The Love of Learning in the Life of the Diocesan Priest" in James Keating, *Seminary Theology: Teaching in a Contemplative Way*, Omaha, NE: IPF Publications, 2010, 28). See further Jean Clémence, "Éducation spirituelle de la sensibilité," *Christus* 4 (1954): 77-88.

⁹ See Diego Coletti, *Vivere da prete: La forma cristiana della vita sacerdotale*, Casale Monferrato: Piemme, 1995, 80-86.