

COLUMNISTS

Seminaries still face major problems

Scientific studies have shown that the single most important factor in determining the difference between a spiritually vibrant parish and one that is mediocre-to-moribund is the personal and pastoral quality of the parish priest. Hence, Catholics have a stake in both the size and quality of the talent pool drawn from seminaries and channeled directly from there to parishes.

One authoritative expert on Catholic seminaries today is Sister Katarina Schuth, OSF, professor at the St. Paul Seminary School of Theology, University of St. Thomas, in St. Paul, Minn. Her new book is entitled *Seminaries, Theologates, and the Future of Church Ministry* (Liturgical Press).

Sister Schuth and members of her team visited 38 of the 42 U.S. theologates that enroll candidates for the priesthood, conducting 550 interviews of faculty, administrators, and students. In addition, presidents or rectors of these institutions responded to extensive questionnaires, as did a random sample of faculty and vocation directors.

Sister Schuth is commendably careful and restrained in her interpretation of the data. Yet, one need only read between the lines to see that the problems confronting seminaries over the past few



essays in
theology

BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

decades have, for the most part, remained in place or become more acute.

First, the decline in enrollments continues. At present there are 2,300 diocesan seminarians, 676 religious order seminarians, and 343 pre-theology students in the 42 theologates. Over the past decade, the number of seminarians has declined by about 600 and the number of pre-theology students by about 140. In spite of pious predictions to the contrary ten years ago, the recruitment situation has actually worsened. Moreover, as one academic dean noted, the "declining number of seminarians has led some dioceses to accept students who have neither the aptitude nor the personal qualities to be a priest."

Second, the number of priest-faculty members has declined in the same peri-

od from 684 to 489. Although seminary faculty members are "extraordinarily satisfied" with their situation and welcome the opportunity to prepare men for the priesthood, many complain about excessive workload and lack of time for their own research and writing.

Third, a vocal minority of seminarians, resistant to the renewal brought about by Vatican II, continues to distract faculty and other students from the work at hand. Although the proportion of these so-called traditionalists remains about where it was a decade ago, in the vicinity of 10 percent, "the impact of their views far outweighs their numerically small presence."

As the academic dean cited above observed, "The students who come with a rigid and narrow understanding of their faith often have the support of people outside the seminary who agree with their positions. They feel quite free to defy faculty, realizing that faculty members have little recourse." These students "tend to challenge any thought that does not correspond to their preconceived notions of church teachings."

One pastoral theologian pointed out that when this type of seminarian enters parish life, they are likely to clash with parishioners who are pleased with the

conciliar renewal and want and expect it to continue, particularly in the matter of collaborative ministry.

Fourth, one of the "surprising" findings of the study is that approximately half the number of seminarians are either converts to Catholicism or Catholics who had not practiced their faith since childhood. According to the report, these students "pose a particular difficulty when it comes to teaching them in the same classes with students who have a rich educational and practical experience of the church." They also tend to be more resistant to the council's call for greater engagement with the world.

Fifth, for a growing proportion of seminarians (25 percent), English is their second language. For many of them, the study of theology at the graduate level is particularly difficult. The large presence of these seminarians also underscores the multicultural character of the church, a fact, the report suggests, that is still "poorly understood inside and outside seminaries."

Sister Katarina Schuth is to be congratulated on her work. Now it is up to church leadership to act on it.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Jesus taught that love supersedes rules

Ninth Sunday of the Year (March 5): (R3) Mark 2:23-3:6. (R1) Deuteronomy 5:12-15. (R2) 2 Corinthians 4:6-11.

During the 1993 NCAA Women's Golf Championship in Athens, Ga., a hubbub was caused when University of Kansas golfer Holly Reynolds hit her tee shot on the 13th hole into the edge of a pond. Attempting to play her ball out of the water, her swing struck an unsuspecting fish. Fish and ball splashed skyward and landed next to each other on the bank, only a few feet away. Reynolds' compassionate instinct was to pick the fish up and toss it back. She did.

"You're breaking the rules," her opponents cried. "You aren't allowed to touch that fish. You must play your ball where it lies, fish and all!"

Kendra Graham, the highest ranking official on the scene, had but one question, "Was the fish dead?"

"No," Reynolds assured her. "The fish was flopping."

"No penalty!" declared Graham. "Since the fish was alive, it could not be considered a 'loose impediment.' Continue play!"

Rules, rules. We all have rules we won't break. Some joggers have a rule about jogging. "No matter that it's rain-



a word
for
sunday

BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

ing or snowing. It's 5:30 a.m. My exercise must be followed with precision!"

This was the problem with the Pharisees. Jesus and his disciples were walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. The disciples were hungry. Their instinct was to pluck some grain. A ruckus ensued. The Pharisees had rules about such things. "Foul," they cried to Jesus. "Did you see that? They broke the rules! Why are you allowing them to do what is not lawful on the Sabbath? For all to be right in the world of Jewish religious observance, you must command them to cease and desist from this illegal activity."

To all this legalistic jabber Jesus replied, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." They would treat this man as a dead fish; Jesus

instead followed the rule of love and compassion. Jesus elevated human need and compassion over petty, man-made rules.

Mark follows this story with another Sabbath incident. Jesus entered the synagogue and saw a man with a withered hand. His instinct of compassion was to heal the man, and that's what he intended to do. The Pharisees watched to see if he would attempt a healing on the Sabbath. Jesus perceived the trap they were setting. Jesus knew that the compassion of his heart was about to violate the Pharisees' impassioned, by-the-book application of their man-made statutory minutia. Knowing his actions would spark a theological hubbub, Mark says that "Jesus grieved at their hardness of heart and said to the man, 'Stretch out your hand.'"

To the Pharisees, religion was ritual: obeying certain rules and laws and regulations. Often Jesus broke these rules, so the Pharisees were convinced that he was a bad man. It is like the man who believes that religion consists in going to church, reading the Bible, saying grace at meals, and carrying out all the external acts which are looked on as religious, and who yet never puts himself out to do

anything for anyone in his life, who has no sense of sympathy, no desire to sacrifice, who is serene in his rigid orthodoxy, deaf to the call of need and blind to the tears of others.

To Jesus, religion was service. It was love of God and love of men. Ritual was irrelevant compared with love in action.

To Jesus the more important thing in the world was not ritual but service, not rules but people, not laws but love.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming.

Daily Readings

Monday, March 6

2 Peter 1:2-7; Mark 12:1-12

Tuesday, March 7

2 Peter 3:12-15, 17-18; Mark 12:13-17

Wednesday, March 8

Joel 2:12-18; 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2; Matthew 6:1-6, 16-18

Thursday, March 9

Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Luke 9:22-25

Friday, March 10

Isaiah 58:1-9; Matthew 9:14-15

Saturday, March 11

Isaiah 58:9-14; Luke 5:27-32

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