

‘THE WINDS OF CHANGE STIR IN OUR SEMINARIES’

Dr Mark Dooley

When I first wrote about the Irish seminary system in this newspaper two weeks ago, I could not have anticipated the overwhelming response that my article received. When I wrote about the subject a second time last Monday, my mailbox was saturated with notes of support and solidarity. Never before in my journalistic career, have I had such an enthusiastic or favourable reaction to anything I have documented.

Not only have I been contacted by countless seminarians and clergy, but also by some leading figures in Irish public and political life. And the content of their correspondence is always the same: it is about time that someone shed a spotlight on the seminary system for the sake of the Irish Church and its people.

I am also reliably informed that my articles have been read by senior members of the Roman Curia. That, of course, is very encouraging and will, hopefully, result in radical reform of priestly formation in this country. Meanwhile, the disturbing stories of many former and existing seminarians continue to pour in, all of them highlighting the fear, intimidation and dysfunctional training to which they have been subject.

As one correspondent poignantly put it, ‘It gives me great joy that, finally, someone is exposing what is happening here in the seminary, because if we have any complaint to make, or feel any injustice, we have nowhere to turn at all’. And then, chillingly, he concludes: ‘I wish to remain anonymous because we feel such fear here in the seminary’.

How sad is it, that in a place where you would expect to find Christ, you find only fear? But that is the awful reality, as the events of the past week go to prove.

In response to my articles, a letter was posted on a public notice board inside Maynooth. It was addressed to me, and claimed that my articles were ‘misinformed and insulting to the vast majority of the seminary community’. Seminarians were then ‘invited’ to sign the letter, which was purportedly written on the sole initiative of a student.

When only a couple of signatures were appended a student then proceeded to knock on each seminarian’s door, once more ‘inviting’ him to sign the letter. By the following morning, only a fraction of the student body had signed the document. The ‘vast majority’, in other words, had declined to do so.

The students were then addressed by the President of the seminary. According to seminarians present, he accused those who had communicated with me of lacking

'elementary Christianity'. He went on to say that they should examine their conscience, and that such communication was a sign of their not being suited to the priesthood.

In other words, those brave men, whose sole wish is to see the seminary system reflect the true spirit of Christ, are now being asked to consider their vocation. Simply because they broke ranks and sought someone to highlight their situation, the seminary authorities consider them unfit for priestly ministry. That, in my view, is a scandalous display of dictatorial clericalism which must be driven from the Church.

Still, shocking as it may sound, none of this is new. According to some very fine priests who wrote in support of my findings, the seminary system was just as bad in the Seventies and Eighties. Those men only survived because they longed to stand, as all priests should, in persona Christi, or in the person of Christ. This meant looking beyond the seminaries in order to emulate those priests who embodied the old theological virtues which once animated the priestly state.

As I say, Catholics don't want their priests to blend in, but to stand out. That is why Pope John Paul II, despite his counter-cultural pronouncements, was so revered by the young. Like the saintly Pope Benedict, he was in the world yet not entirely of it.

It seems perfectly obvious to me that if priests were trained along those lines, there would be no crisis of faith, no crisis of vocations, and no crisis of clerical abuse. For how could those who truly stand in persona Christi, betray their sacred vows? But when that model of priesthood is undermined, as it is in our seminaries, then saintliness can very easily be sacrificed.

In 1995, Archbishop Elden Curtis of Omaha rounded on the flawed American seminary system, when he wrote: 'I am personally aware of vocation directors... who turn away candidates who exhibit a strong piety toward certain devotions, such as the rosary. When there is a determined effort to discourage orthodox candidates from priesthood and religious life, the vocation shortage which results is not caused by a lack of vocations but by deliberate attitudes and policies which deter certain viable candidates'.

Archbishop Curtis may well have been discussing the situation in Ireland today. But now the seminary system in the US is thriving, not least because it became apparent that in order to swell vocations, seminaries must secure, as George Weigel put it, 'faculty members who are unimpeachably orthodox, who understand the distinctive nature of theological education in a seminary, and who themselves lead lives of holiness as priests, religious or lay Catholics'.

This is a lesson that Church authorities need to learn if genuine reform is to become a reality. In the meantime, please spare a prayer for those splendid seminarians who have summoned up the courage to speak out.

Theirs is a rich vocation rooted in Christ, one that must be allowed flourish despite the pitiless plotting of the Pharisees.