

Is Maynooth Fit for Mission?

A group of seminarians offer their reflections on the short comings in priestly formation at the National Seminary. There are currently around sixty seminarians studying for the priesthood in Maynooth although it is worth noting that a further thirty students have been forced to continue their studies outside of Ireland having been rejected by the Seminary Council in Maynooth. These priests could return to Ireland at some stage, just why they were rejected by Maynooth might best be explained in the following reflections.

REFLECTING BACK ON THE EXPERIENCE:

The very first week I entered St. Patrick's we were told there was "no difference" whatsoever in the various modes of Presence of Christ in the world: the priest, the people, the Word and the Eucharist; all are equal and the same we were continually told, that Christ cannot make Himself more present in one mode than in another. We were also informed that we were not to kneel for the Consecration during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in St. Mary's. The Holy Father's authority was frequently challenged by both staff and seminarians, as indeed was the hierarchical structure of the Church and the lack of "female leadership" in the present structure. The role of our Blessed Mother in the Church and of private devotions was also frequently challenged and criticized. Almost daily in class one had to endure challenges to the Church's moral teachings, particularly in relation to homosexuality, contraception, marriage, and on some occasions even abortion. The role of women in the Church was a frequent topic of discussion, and the need for equality in governing and leading the Church, and this was particularly pushed by a number of Sisters on the staff with a very clear feminist agenda.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION:

The quality of spiritual direction in St. Patrick's is very poor. Spiritual direction usually took the form of a general chat, and there was no specific direction as such. I was not guided on the path towards holiness through spiritual direction in the Seminary. Many seminarians in St. Patrick's receive spiritual direction in secret outside the Seminary because of the same reason: poor spiritual direction within the Seminary. We also had a number of in-house spiritual retreats, reflection groups and classes. These classes were taken by a number of sisters who had a very clear feminist agenda in running the classes. The role of women within the Church was frequently addressed and the fact that they have suffered neglect at the hands of a "male dominated Church" for so many years. In addressing these issues, the sisters hid behind the guise of 'playing devil's advocate.' They continually used this ploy to assert their own views and opinions, safe in the knowledge that they could not be accused of being a feminist, anti-male, anti-Church Magisterium or pro-choice, because they were only "expressing the views of a large number of women out there, who feel hurt and neglected by the Church."

QUESTIONING THE REAL PRESENCE:

It was very uncommon for any of the priests to attend Eucharistic Adoration. A request for daily adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament was submitted to the Seminary Council but was turned down because the Council "did not want to impinge on other forms of adoration." During 'in-house' Liturgy classes we were told by Ms. [redacted] that "all modes of presence of Christ in the world are equal." We were told that Jesus is equally present in the Word, the priest, the people, and the Holy Eucharist. That all these modes of presence of Christ are the same; that Jesus cannot make Himself more present under one form. On one occasion, both [redacted] and [redacted] were present when [redacted] stated this and neither [redacted] or [redacted] objected to this or corrected her in any way. When seminarians



questioned this she reaffirmed what she had just said. We asked if this was the case then why did Jesus institute the Most Holy Eucharist as the Sacrament of His Body and Blood? If Christ's Presence is equal and the same under all modes does this mean we should worship one another? Again, we were told that these Presences were simply different modes, but that Jesus was present equally and in the same manner in each mode of Presence. Fr. [redacted] (Professor of [redacted]) stated on a number of occasions in our [redacted] class that the primary mode of presence of Christ in the world is the Word, and not the Holy Eucharist. [redacted] also frequently referred to us in class as "girls" and joked about "pillow talk," the suggestion being, how we would speak to someone in bed as opposed to speaking in public. Some of the priests, while celebrating Holy Mass, actually changed the words of the Eucharistic Prayer in order to personalize the Prayer.

RETREATS:

Many of the retreats run within the seminary took the form of promoting a watered down version of the faith and much of the material used for these retreats was founded on non-Catholic theologians and philosophers, or Catholic theologians and philosophers who have been silenced by the Church or who have had their work suppressed.

In 2009 [redacted] a Kerry priest working in Leeds, led an in-house retreat. Throughout the retreat he frequently made reference to a need to move away from a dogmatic theology and he stated that it annoys him when the Church makes statements saying, "this can't change or that can't change, because how do we know they won't change, things change all the time." He, like many people who have led retreats in St. Patrick's, tended to imply certain things, without crossing any lines, leaving it up to ourselves to piece it all together to figure out what they were implying. For instance, [redacted] questioned the Church's position on the non-ordination of women to the priesthood, without openly saying he

believed women should be ordained to the priesthood. In another retreat given by a Cork priest, [redacted] made a similar inference, telling us that if he had his choice of working with any minister of his choosing, he would choose two female protestant ministers he was on a Scripture course with in the U.S.A. He also compared priests and seminarians who stick rigidly to Church teaching to people looking out through narrow windows (such as in old Irish monastic towers) who can only see part of the picture and miss out on the greater picture due to their narrow view.

MORAL FORMATION:

In philosophy classes we personally witnessed seminarians defend abortion (in certain circumstances), homosexuality and contraception. We also witnessed seminarians attack the Church hierarchy and the teaching of the Church on matters relating to faith and morals, most notably the teaching of the Church surrounding homosexuality, priestly celibacy, the non-ordination of women to the priesthood, contraception, and sin. In addition to this some seminarians openly criticized the office of the Papacy and the hierarchical structure of the Church.

The building and grounds of Saint Patrick's are open to the general public which meant we were subjected to all that that entails. Many groups booked into the Saint Patrick's complex for hen parties in the town with the result that immorally dressed girls ended up wandering around the cloisters of Saint Patrick's. Also, as supposedly part of a class on the elderly, the entire first year class had to watch a movie called "Iris" which contained explicit sexual material including a lesbian scene. Many felt this was highly inappropriate. However, our protestations were dismissed as being over-the-top.

PASTORAL FORMATION:

The pastoral reflection groups tended to focus continually on the feelings and emotions of each group member. [redacted] the group facilitator,

continually told us that there were no right or wrong emotions and emphasized that our actions must be directed by our emotions. The intellect and the will were not entertained in these discussions at all. During the course of our first group reflection, told us that the reason we go on pastoral placements is to learn about ourselves. also frequently used the group as a platform to air her own views and opinions, many of which were criticisms directed against the Church's hierarchy, particularly in relation to the role of women within the Church.

INTELLECTUAL FORMATION:

Most students studying philosophy in the Seminary do so in the N.U.I.M. along with all the lay students. For most part the philosophy in the N.U.I. is very secular and some of the modules are taught by Jewish and atheist philosophers. The philosophical anthropology module for example was taught by a Jewish philosopher, and it was very notable that he omitted Saint Thomas Aquinas from the course and focused instead on thinkers such as Kant, Hume and Descartes. There was a distinct shortage of Scholastic philosophy being taught, with a very noticeable deficiency in the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas being taught. There were one or two notable exceptions: the philosophy classes taken by Fr. Pat Gorevan, Fr. Donal Daly and Fr. Simon Nolan were excellent and very much centered on the philosophies of Aristotle, Plato, Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas.

HUMAN FORMATION:

There appears to be a very unbalanced significance placed on human formation, to the detriment of spiritual formation. There was a major emphasis placed on feelings and emotions and very little on the intellect and will. Holiness was replaced by worldliness; there was very little sense of the importance of growing in holiness, and an over-emphasis on psychological development and an infatuation with sexual history, whereby everything was viewed as being due to sexual repression. The formation program was very horizontal, with little reference to the vertical (or transcendent aspect), or the supernatural element of our vocation.



MISCELLANEOUS:

In Saint Patrick's very few priests wear clerical dress; this is often commented on by lay students and visitors to the college. With the exception of the President, Monsignor Connolly, Fr. Oliver Treanor and Fr. Tom Norris, none of the other priests dressed regularly in clerical dress. For a stranger it was impossible to distinguish between priests and laity. The practice of wearing the soutane and surplice for leading the daily Office was discontinued, even though a large majority of students were in favor of maintaining this practice.


CONCLUSION:

In an era where the Church is encouraging openness and transparency, the Irish seminary formation system is punishing those who are open and honest in their faith, and rewarding those who continue to 'play the game' and who openly oppose the teaching of the Church. As a result of this, some young men are being ordained to the priesthood who have never developed an intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ or our Blessed Mother. Some of these men end up leaving the priest-

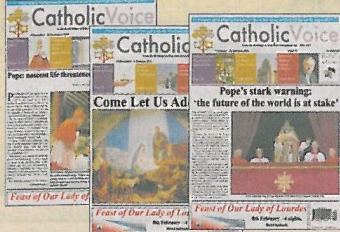
hood after a short period because they cannot cope with the solitude and loneliness of priestly life. How can the priest be lonely when Jesus is present perpetually in the Most Blessed Sacrament, awaiting our visit, thirsting for our love, and above all thirsting to pour out His love and mercy upon us and all those whom we lead to Him? The Church needs to form more good and holy priests who can lead others to the great Gift of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament, where they will discover a joy and peace the world cannot give.

This is a truthful and accurate account of our experiences and observations in St. Patrick's College. The treatment we received in St. Patrick's almost broke us and took us away from our true calling, the calling God had in mind for from all eternity. At times over the past two to three years we began to doubt our faith and began to wonder if in fact there was something wrong with us: if the Seminary Council were so sure of this then maybe they were right and there was something wrong with us for being this way. However, thanks to the grace of God, and thanks to wonderful priests, we were given the grace and strength to persevere and remain faithful to Christ and His Holy Church.

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