

*Please Note: This is an old article but its content is relevant regarding issues presently under discussion by VOTF.

Will the Seminaries Measure Up?

By **Ronald D. Witherup**
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The much-touted apostolic visitation of U.S. seminaries and houses of formation is now well underway. Last September, when someone leaked to the press the document designed to guide the visitation (called an *instrumentum laboris*, hereafter *IL*), several articles appeared about it. The media initially made much of the visit, mostly connecting it to the anticipated document from the Congregation for Catholic Education about homosexuals in priestly formation programs. Unfortunately, little has been done to place the visitation in its proper context. I propose to do just that, examine the *IL* and review the status of the visitation.

Contemporary Context

The media have given two perceptions of the visitation that are not entirely accurate. They connect it directly with the sexual abuse scandal and also exclusively with the question of the presence of homosexuals in the Roman Catholic clergy. True enough, the visitation was requested by the American cardinals and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops leadership in April 2002, in the midst of the unfolding scandal of sexual abuse of minors by Catholic priests and the mishandling of the issue by some bishops.

The fact is, nevertheless, that the Holy See had independently decided to make apostolic visitations, or ecclesial visits, of seminaries and houses of formation around the world at regular intervals (approximately every 20 years) for many different reasons. The Congregation for Catholic Education has the obligation to give sound oversight to the education of priests. The church has need of a well-educated and spiritually fortified clergy. More important, the faithful have a right to a properly formed and ethically upright clergy. They want good, holy, intelligent and dedicated priests who know how to serve, who represent Jesus Christ authentically (*in persona Christi*) and who are faithful to their promise of celibacy.

Some people also have the false impression that only the United States is undergoing intense scrutiny from the Holy See. That is not the case. In July 2004 there was a notorious incident of sexual acting out at the seminary in Sankt Pölten, Austria. A special investigator was named to examine a sordid situation that involved the complicity of the local bishop. Investigations also occurred earlier in other places around the world, notably in South America and Africa.

The last extensive visitation of U.S. seminaries took place some 20 years ago, from 1983 to 1989, under the coordination of the late Bishop John Marshall. It too was conducted

using an *IL* to ascertain strengths and weaknesses in seminary formation. Apparently, though, some think that visitation was a whitewash. George Weigel, for example, has implied as much in a syndicated column (June 2005), and his is not the sole voice expressing such an attitude. What does the current *IL* say about the nature of this latest ecclesial visit?

Outline and Procedure in the *Instrumentum Laboris*

The 13-page document issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education describes the purpose and nature of the visit, as well as the procedure to be followed. It also calls attention to 10 areas:

- The concept of the priesthood
- The governance of the seminary
- Admission policies
- The seminarians
- Human formation
- Spiritual formation
- Intellectual formation
- Pastoral formation
- Promotion to holy orders
- Service of the seminary to newly ordained priests

In addition, there is a catchall final category of “other concerns” that the visitation team might wish to bring to the attention of the Holy See and an extensive, but “not exhaustive” two-page list of 41 guiding documents from the Holy See on priestly formation.

The procedure is simple enough. The Holy See appointed Archbishop Edwin O’Brien of the U.S. Archdiocese for Military Services, who has twice been a seminary rector, as logistical coordinator of the visitation. He in turn proposed teams of three or four Vatican-approved visitors (all clerics), each headed by a bishop, to visit each seminary or post-novitiate religious house of priestly formation over the course of the current academic year. These teams are to interview every full-time faculty member or formator, every seminarian and graduates from the last three years. After the visitation (of four days or so, depending on the size of the program), the team submits directly to the Holy See a final report.

It is striking, if one assumes that sexual abuse is the primary background issue, that not one of the 96 questions addresses this explicitly. There is also no reference to professional expectations in priestly formation, a curious omission, given that we now know some Catholic priests, primarily in the 1970’s and 80’s, seriously transgressed professional boundaries and their promises of celibacy by sexual abuse or other misconduct.

Similarly striking, if homosexuality is the primary concern (as some suggest), only one related question appears in the form, and this is phrased imprecisely: “Is there evidence of

homosexuality in the seminary?”—with no clarity about what constitutes “evidence,” or whether the focus is primarily on activity, orientation, promotion of a subculture or all of these.

Strengths of the Document

There are some strengths in the *IL*. First, the Holy See consulted widely for input in drafting it. The congregation invited feedback from other Vatican dicasteries, seminary rectors, bishops and major superiors, as well as representatives from both the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men. Although not every recommendation was accepted, consultation took place. Moreover, Archbishop O’Brien himself was open about soliciting assistance with preparations for the visitation, especially through consultations with C.M.S.M. Also, the general outline of the *IL* takes its inspiration from John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which the majority of people working in formation regard as the most important document on priestly formation since the Second Vatican Council. The U.S.C.C.B.’s *Program of Priestly For-mation* (4th ed.) also helped to shape the *IL*. The integration of four major components of formation (human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral) is key, and the *IL* tries to emphasize this. The inclusion of human formation issues, which was largely left out of previous visitations, is admirable and, in light of the issues at stake after the sexual abuse scandal, extremely important.

The Holy See made clear, appropriately in my judgment, that formation in celibacy is a central focus of this visitation. But this should not be reduced to an investigation only of sexual issues. As indicated by the preponderance of questions on theological themes, the real interest of the Holy See is doctrinal fidelity. The primary intention of the *IL* is found in the second paragraph of the first page: “Particular attention will be reserved for the intellectual formation of seminarians, to examine its [i.e., priestly formation in the United States] fidelity to the magisterium, especially in the field of moral theology, in light of *Veritatis Splendor*,” John Paul’s encyclical published in 1995.

Limitations of the Document

Although I am optimistic that the visitation will largely affirm U.S. priestly formation and offer some useful recommendations, there are limitations—both in procedure and content—that may inhibit its full effectiveness. Procedurally, three problems stand out. First, there is the ongoing insistence on secrecy. Not only was no list of the visitors made public; the *IL* itself was kept secret until someone leaked it. In the U.S. context especially, one would have thought that the serious criticism of excessive secrecy aimed at church authorities in the midst of the sexual abuse crisis would have led to greater transparency in the apostolic visitation, but it did not.

A second procedural problem is the lack of an “exit interview” at the conclusion of the visitation. Seminary personnel, and even bishops or religious ordinaries, are left in the dark about the impressions made on the visitors. In United States, where most seminaries are

used to being scrutinized by accreditation agencies (whether secular or theological), at least an oral interview outlining major impressions has become de rigueur. Withholding such a judgment for what may be a period of many months or, more likely, years (if the last visitation is any indication) is a disservice. Ostensibly, the reason for this procedure is so that officials of the Holy See alone can make the final judgment about the adequacy of any seminary or formation program. (The congregation eventually allowed a preliminary report to be reviewed for factual accuracy, but only by the ordinary of the diocese or religious community; no evaluative judgments can be questioned.)

Third, the lack of extensive lay participation in the visitation seems odd, given the recent experience of the U.S. church in the abuse crisis, where excessive clericalism has been blamed for the lack of oversight and transparency. Actually, the congregation did make a concession in the case of this visitation, by agreeing to have some laity serve as “consultors” in the process. But they are not allowed to participate in interviews or be official apostolic visitors. Rather, their role is to peruse seminary documentation, visit the library and so on. Perhaps this concession will lead to further lay participation in the future, but in a U.S. context, this limited role seems overly restrictive.

There are also some serious limitations in the content of the *IL*. From the perspective of religious communities, the *IL* is still too oriented to diocesan seminary settings. Many questions do not fit religious houses of formation. This has been a longstanding problem with a one-size-fits-all approach that is not likely to change soon.

Another limitation is the lack of sufficient attention to a theology of the priesthood. The section on the “concept” of the priesthood seems more focused on awareness of various magisterial documents than on any in-depth understanding of the nature of the priesthood. Even less is there any question dealing with the relationship of the priesthood to other ministries in the church, especially lay ecclesial ministries and religious life. (One question, though, does deal with how a religious institute’s charism is integrated into priestly formation.) A question is also devoted to “a proper understanding of the role of women in ecclesial life” and models of “clergy-lay cooperation,” with reference to several Vatican documents. However, it is ambiguous enough to allow for broad interpretations that could be misconstrued.

Although the *IL* covers in general the four main areas outlined by *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral), one looks in vain for questions about how formation programs deal with multiculturalism, social justice, liturgy and sacred Scripture. These areas are vital to the formation of contemporary priests, and sometimes are also the very areas where tensions exist in formation programs (and in the church).

Given the historical context of the visitation, it is curious that the *IL* treats celibacy only under the heading of spiritual formation. Celibacy is clearly a focus of the visitation—for understandable reasons. One would have expected that human formation, which fortunately since the publication of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* has come to the fore, would have

also been an appropriate place to discuss this topic. Indeed, although the *IL* has a question on such “human” issues as appropriate use of alcohol, the Internet and television, looking for evidence of prudence and the ability to act in responsible ways, there is no question to assess the seminarians’ relational capabilities within a community or their ability to work collegially.

Another problem with the *IL* is the tone. Frankly, although it tries to place the visitation in the positive context of promoting better formation, it still comes off in an accusatory fashion (for example, the six questions that “must be answered,” with no clarity as to who must answer them—the team or the people interviewed). The *IL* implies as well that only those with ecclesiastical doctorates, or at least licentiates, are academically qualified and doctrinally sound. In an American context, where Ph.D.’s tend to be prevalent, this form of qualification might seem too restrictive. Finally, the *IL* makes no distinction about the level of a seminarian’s competence to make a judgment when asked to determine whether faculty members are doctrinally sound or not. Apparently, it is left entirely to the judgment of individual visitors to determine whether a seminarian is knowledgeable in responding to such a question, may have misunderstood his instructors or simply has an ax to grind.

The *IL*, of course, contains a disclaimer. It states: “By itself, an Apostolic Visitation can never discover, and even less address, all the various concerns of priestly formation.” This is true, but given the fact that apostolic seminary visitations are now envisioned to be periodic, one would expect that a more comprehensive approach would be in the best interests of the church. After all, it takes an extraordinary expenditure of time, talent and resources to pull off such a complex process in a large country like ours.

Status of the Visitation

My unscientific survey of how the visitation is going, based on informal conversations with people involved in formation in some of the seminaries and houses of formation that have already been visited, has yielded the following observations.

- The visitation has not been as disruptive as anticipated. Although there were a couple of instances of aggressive media intrusion (and misinterpretation of the process), for the most part the visitations have gone smoothly.
- The tone of the visitations has largely been positive. For example, one bishop leading his team announced that they were present to affirm what the seminary was doing well and to point out what could be done better. That is a healthy approach. There have been, however, some instances of overly intrusive and aggressive interrogations inappropriate for an ecclesial visitation. But I am told that most “visitors” have approached their task with the attitude explicitly expressed in the *IL*, that the visitation is meant to be “a service” and “a help” to the U.S. bishops rather than a threat.
- Even the anticipation of the visitation has been helpful. It forced some programs to design or update their literature, and especially to refine the description of how formation

takes place in fulfillment of the church's expectations. Ideally, this process should take place internally from time to time, but outside pressure can produce concrete results.

- When formators are honest, they acknowledge that mistakes were made in formation programs, especially in the 1970's and early 80's. Admission policies were sometimes lax (or absent), and programs at times admitted problematic seminarians, often under pressure from bishops or vocation directors who, strapped for vocations, pressed for the admission of less qualified or risky candidates.
- Some seminary formators remain concerned that the hot-button issue of homosexuality, especially in light of the recent Vatican document, will ignite a destructive witch hunt among seminarians and formation personnel. Given the public misconstruing of the visitation from the beginning, this is indeed a possibility. One hopes that the more central concern about proper formation in celibate chastity will hold sway rather than histrionic overreactions.

In conclusion, the *IL* and the visitation are far from perfect. But in the end, if the visitation fulfills its goal of improving what is and has been—in general—a good program of priestly formation in this country, then perhaps the process will not have been in vain.

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