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CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVES OF STUDIES FOR MINISTRY TODAY*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Fr. Jean-Marie Carriere, S.J., and I were part of an Ad Hoc Commission mandated by our Superior-General, Fr. Adolfo Nicolas, S.J., to "study changes in the philosophical and theological studies of Jesuits that would better prepare them to accomplish the Society's mission in the decades to come." Pope Benedict XVI on a couple of occasions also asked Fr. Nicolas for the Society of Jesus to help the Church in re-conceiving the philosophical and theological training of priests.

The address of Pope Francis to the Bishops of Brazil, which I quote at the end, also places great emphasis on review and reform of formation for both clergy and laity.

Some key questions:

1. What are the necessary elements for the overall vision of theological formation today that will enable priests and religious "to witness and help to understand that there is in

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fact a profound harmony between faith and reason, between evangelical spirit, thirst for justice and action for peace?" (Pope Benedict to the Jesuit General Congregation 35, no. 4)

2. What questions need to be considered during the theological studies to prepare priests and religious for participating in and contributing to the dialogue between faith and cultures, between faith and other religions?

3. What do these questions require for the way we teach and learn?

In the work of the Commission, some of the key goals that emerged were:

1. The years of philosophical and theological studies should introduce students to different "Ways of Knowing" in today's world: Science and Technology, Business, Cultures of Poverty, Different Religious Cultures (Buddhism, Confucianism, Islam), the Secular World.

2. Fr. General expressed that his major concern was how to educate Jesuits toward a growing capacity to understand reality:

    a. Historical reality, their own culture.

    b. Social reality, social structures.

    c. Psychological reality, as we grow through relationships.

Pope Francis, in just a little over a hundred days, has articulated the Context and Perspectives of Ministry and Formation for Ministry in a novel and cogent way. Or better, he has articulated the Context and Perspectives by going back to the roots of Ministry in Jesus Christ and the Apostolic Church. From these preliminaries, I present the following points for reflection on the Context and Perspectives for Studies for Ministry Today.

II. THE FAITH IS TO BE PREACHED IN A CONTEXT AND CULTURE

But the Catholic Culture we Knew in the Past has Broken Down.

a. The context in which our courses in Theology and our theological pedagogy were developed was in a World of Faith and Catholic Culture. Of course, there were non-Catholics, atheists, etc. But the world of faith and Catholic culture was sufficiently pervasive. (During my years of study, we simply listed others as "adversaries" and dismissed them.)

b. Today this Catholic culture and context has broken down or is breaking down. In the areas of:

    i. Practice—sacramental life: regular mass, communion, confession, etc.

    ii. Knowledge of the faith—When I was handling Jesuit formation, I found that for many of those applying, their only significant encounter with Catholic life was a "Life in the Spirit" seminar.

    iii. Community—above all—the rituals and practices that bring us together and bind us in community.

c. In many of our countries, the culture and context is not Christian—Buddhist in Thailand and Myanmar, Confucian in Vietnam, Islam in Indonesia.

d. When we look at the Early Church, the apostles and followers began by building community—a community built around faith in Jesus Christ, the Scriptures, sacramental life, preaching of the Word, service and sharing with one another.

e. When we look at the success of Pentecostalism—they are doing something similar. They build community, even in difficult areas, e.g., in Pope Francis' visit to the favela of Varginha in Rio de Janeiro, they had the saying that the only ones there were the gangs and the Pentecostals.

Implication for the Perspective of Studies for Ministry

a. We have to build communities of faith in our time. Or better, we have to build communities where the faith can be nurtured. Grace builds on nature. Paul built community. The early Spanish missionaries built community. Where do future ministers of the Gospel learn to do this?

b. Our communities today are mainly urban. We need to reflect on whether the methods of the past, rooted in rural culture, are still viable today.

c. We should learn from Charismatic groups, whether Catholic or Pentecostal. In Latin America and in the Philippines, they provide some of the best examples of forming Christian communities.

d. The world where our future ministers will seek to form communities will have many subcultures. We have to prepare them to understand and to be able to enter into these subcultures:

    a. Whether it be the culture of the urban poor with Pope Francis in the villas of Argentina or the favelas of Brazil.

    b. Or the culture of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Islam.

    c. Or the culture of minorities (Karens, for example, in Myanmar or Thailand).

    d. Or the postmodern youth.

III. WE LIVE IN A WORLD DOMINATED BY SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY AND BUSINESS

Their Ways of Knowing are very Different from those of Philosophy and Theology.

a. In general, the dominant ways of knowing of philosophy and theology were shaped in Greek Thought and then in the High Middle Ages of Scholasticism. Their main tools of knowing were analysis, reflection, and logic. The empirical and quantitative ways of knowing that emerged since the 16th century were not accessible to the earlier period. They did not have the technology to do empirical research nor the mathematical tools to organize them.

b. Thus Philosophy/Theology and modern thinking, influenced by empirical science, have diverged to a point where it is hard even for those of good will to bridge the intellectual gaps.

For example, Ateneo has a course, Science 10 (Science and Society), which is an introduction to scientific thought and to major scientific questions. I have been giving the plenary lectures on "The Origin of Life" and "The Origin of the Universe." In the lecture on the "Origin of the Universe," I tell them what we know about the Universe from

a. Astronomy, beginning with Edwin Hubble a century ago to the Hubble telescope in outer space today,

b. and from Particle Physics, including the "Big Bang," and all that.

Students always want to know where Genesis and God are in all that. I explain the different genre and purpose of Genesis (it is not a scientific treatise) and my own faith in God's Providence in the world. But I also tell them that science searches for answers that can be found in the world and through the scientific method. This is not to deny God. But the point of view of science is to seek for answers

that are in the world we can study, analyze, and measure. Science believes that questions about our universe, including its origin, can be answered by science.

What does this say for those studying for ministry? It may help if we consider:

a. A course like the Ateneo Science 10. For those in Theological Studies, these can engage questions from: a) Evolution of Humankind, b) Neuroscience, c) Origin of the Universe. They do present questions regarding first parents and original sin, the soul, creation.

b. Questions that the Church addresses, which involve science or economics and business: a) Mining Issues, b) When does life begin, etc.

IV. CARDINAL MARTINI AND "TEACHING THE FAITH IN A POSTMODERN WORLD"

The postmodern mentality pervades our world. It is evident in the world of music, cinema, media, advertising, literature. All of us, especially the youth, are deeply influenced by it. You can google the article of Cardinal Martini, published in America magazine, with the above title.

1. Postmodernity according to Cardinal Martini:

    a. It keeps its distance from a former world where there was primacy of truth and values over feelings.

    b. There is a spontaneous preference for feelings over will.

    c. For impressions over intelligence.

    d. For an arbitrary logic and the search for pleasure over an ascetic and prohibitive morality.

e. This is a world in which sensitivity, emotion, and the present moment come first.

f. Human existence, therefore, is a place where there is freedom without restraints, where a person exercises, or believes he can exercise, his personal empire and creativity.

2. He says: "I recall a young man who said to me recently: 'Above all, don't tell me that Christianity is true. That upsets me, blocks me. It's quite something else to say that Christianity is beautiful . . .'" Beauty is preferable to truth.

3. Perhaps this situation is better than the one that existed previously.

4. The mystery of an unavailable and always surprising God acquires greater beauty.

5. Christianity appears more beautiful, closer to people, and yet more true.

6. So, Cardinal Martini on how to live in this world:

   a. **Do not be surprised by diversity**. Do not be frightened by what is different or new, but look upon it as something in which is found a gift from God.

   b. **Take risks.** Faith is the great risk of life.

   c. **Befriend the poor**. Put the poor at the center of your life because they are the friends of Jesus who made himself one of them.

   d. **Nourish yourself with the Gospel.**

V. THE WORLD OF POVERTY AND GROWING INEQUALITY

The Call of Pope Francis, who Chose to Name Himself

after Francis of Assisi, il poverello, and Who Wishes for a Church for the Poor and a Church that is Poor.

Pope Francis invites us to reflect on the absence of the Church from the world of the poor.

a. Recall the remark in the favela, Varginha, in Brazil: Only the gangs and the Pentecostals enter here. And the hope that Pope Francis' "walkabout" gave.

b. Historically, the Church has put the blame on science, anti-clericalism, and the Enlightenment for the Western world's alienation from the Church. However, if we look back in history, we can argue that in the social revolutions of Europe, the Church lost the poor and the working class because, for the most part, the Church was seen as on the side of power and wealth. Fr. Jean-Marie can say more. But in my philosophical studies years, I was much influenced by the Worker Priest Movement in France and Germany and by the writings of Abbe Godin (as told by Maisie Ward in "Is France Pagan").

c. In the Philippines as well, the more likely reason for secularization or loss to Pentecostals is not Science or Anti-Clericalism, but the Church being absent from the struggles of the majority poor. When I was handling Jesuit Formation in the 1980s, I asked Fr. Jack Schumacher to put together a book of readings about the Philippine Social Problem. Most of us had forgotten the peasant revolutions of the late 19th and early 20th century, the beginnings of the socialist/communist movement—the land problem and the alienation of the farmer and worker class.

d. So there is need for future ministers to understand the history of the social problem in our country. We need to teach honestly that the alienation of many people from the Church has also been due to our weaknesses and failures.

VI. CHALLENGE OF POPE FRANCIS' ADDRESS TO THE CARDINALS AND BISHOPS OF BRAZIL

I had thought of writing something about the Context and Perspectives from the point of view of Teachers and Learners. But Pope Francis puts it so powerfully in his talk to the Cardinals and Bishops of Brazil. So I invite us to reflect on some of his key points. Recall that he uses the story of the disciples walking away from Jerusalem to Emmaus after Good Friday and Jesus walking with them as the dominant image of his call to the Church today.

> Today, we need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey; a Church able to make sense of the "night" contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. But we need to know how to interpret, with courage, the larger picture.
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> I would like all of us to ask ourselves today: are we still a Church capable of warming hearts? A Church capable of leading people back to Jerusalem? Of bringing them home?
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> Dear brothers, unless we train ministers capable of warming people's hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness, what hope can we have for our future and present journey? It isn't true that God's presence has been dimmed in them. Let us learn to look at things more deeply.
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> What is missing is someone to warm their heart, as was the case with the disciples to Emmaus.
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> **That is why it is important to devise and ensure a suitable formation, one which will provide persons able to step into the night without being overcome by darkness and losing their bearings, able to listen to people's dreams without being seduced and to share their disappointments without losing hope and becoming bitter, able to sympathize with the brokenness of others without losing their own strength and identity.**

> **What is needed is a solid human, cultural, effective, spiritual and doctrinal formation. Dear brother Bishops, courage is needed to undertake a profound review of the structures in place for the formation of the clergy and the laity of the Church in Brazil. It is not enough that formation be considered a vague priority, either in documents or at meetings. What is needed is the practical wisdom to set up lasting educational structures on the local, regional and national levels and to take them to heart as Bishops, without sparing energy, concern and personal interest. The present situation calls for quality formation at every level. Bishops may not delegate this task. You cannot delegate this task, but must embrace it as something fundamental for the journey of your Churches.**

So we can consider this call as not just for the Bishops of Brazil, but for us as well.