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THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION AND PASTORAL MINISTRY*

2009 Graduation Remarks

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One of this year's graduates, Jason Dy, S.J., asked me what I would tell his class by way of *pabaon* [a going-away gift]; perhaps some words of inspiration. What I have decided to offer is a deal or, better expressed, a covenant between them and LST, with the hope that it will truly inspire us, breathe more life into us all.

Allow me then to explain this covenant using my experience. After my March 1977 ordination, I was assigned [as] resident priest in San Jose Resettlement Area, Carmona, Cavite. On the April afternoon I arrived, some lay leaders of *Kriska* (*Kristyanong Kapitbahayan*, the local version of basic Christian communities) requested me to visit a house where someone was supposed to be possessed. "Possessed???" I thought to myself as I tried to remember the exegesis of many such accounts in Scripture. As we entered the house, I saw a teenager lying stiff on a mat and held down by several people. The mother of the "possessed" quickly narrated her daughter's story—"*Yang batang yan kasi, naglalaba sa ilog kaya niligawan ng kapreng tomboy* [It's because this child washes clothes in the river. She caught the eye of a lesbian tree-dwelling spirit]!!!" Between my nods and more details from the mother, my central processing mind searched through its RAM—"*Kapre* and

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lesbian?? Yes I know what such creatures are and how they look like from childhood stories. But are they spirits like fallen angels, created by God? Is an exorcism needed? But you need one appointed by the bishop for that." Then I vaguely remembered stories of Fr. Jaime Bulatao of the Ateneo Psychology Department about how young women appear to be possessed when they are under stress. Such thoughts were swirling in my mind as I tried to compose myself and come up with what to do. "Yes, prayer!!! Prayer is always a safe answer." I knelt beside the girl, made the Sign of the Cross, led some prayers about the Lordship of Christ, and blessed her with holy water. Thank God no convulsions followed. After we began the Rosary, she appeared to fall into a restful sleep. On the way back to the *convento* [rectory], Rahner's article on the sacramentality of and, therefore, the presence of the Spirit in the world was vaguely floating in my mind.

I took time to tell this story not because it is eccentric but because it is typical. Circumstances will vary, but you will encounter situations in your ministry which may not be unfamiliar but which call you to an appropriate and sometimes quick pastoral response. How do you minister to a *Katoliko-sarado* [traditional Catholic] family whose daughter has become a born-again Christian, an urban-poor wife with three young children trapped in an abusive relationship, or a parish organization divided by personal grudges, class divisions, and generational gaps? These are God's people whom ministers like you—ordained, religious, and lay—are called to serve. This is where you, our graduates, are headed towards.

And where do you come from? Here at Loyola School of Theology, an ecclesiastical and civil institution where you have completed years of theology courses, four for most of you. There is no need to explain its current status, as you are familiar with it, even too familiar. But it is good to remind ourselves, especially at an occasion like today's, that LST is part of a long tradition of theological education for ministry, partly symbolized by the red color and stripes of the academic gown that I am suffering from. Though we can rightly say that this tradition stretches all the way to the ministry of Jesus and is partly codified in documents from the Holy See and the CBCP [Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines], let us just focus on some more recent

developments in this tradition. For instance, the division of your courses into biblical, church-historical, doctrinal, and practical areas came from the influence of Karl Hagenbach's 1833 *Encyklopaedie und Methodologie der theologischen Wissenschaft* [Encyclopedia and Methodology of Theological Science]. As you know too well, your programs require x number of units from each of these areas. Another example from the post-Vatican II era is the separation of houses of formation and schools of theology, as well as the close relations of these schools with universities, as we have with the Ateneo de Manila. Developments such as these impact your theological education in ways more profound than you and the LST faculty are perhaps aware of.

Now if this is where you come from, how is this linked to those situations of ministry that you are going into? For a few of your courses, the link is quite direct as they mimic ministry situations such as counseling, hearing confessions, or presiding at liturgy. But for the most part, the link is not quite as direct. You may be asked to conduct bible study classes or explain the sacrament of baptism to parents of infants about to be baptized, but most people will not [often ask] you direct theological questions like "Where did the Apostles' Creed come from?" or "What is revelation?"

If this be the case, how then can years of theological courses be justified as preparation for ministry? In the extensive literature on theological education [which I have just discovered], responses to this fundamental question have been formulated in terms of twin concepts like theory and practice, academic and professional, head and heart, classroom and field. And in all of them, what is desired are integration and balance between what has been called the "Athens" school, representing Christian character formation or *paideia*, on the one hand, and the "Berlin" school of Hagenbach and company, referring to scientific and professional study, on the other.[1]

But even this is not sufficient to articulate the link between preparation for ministry and theological education as we need to face

[1]David H. Kelsey, *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School?* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

even more fundamental issues such as the nature of theology as well as the pedagogy of preparation for ministry.

There is here no doubt about the ministerial goal of theological education or the importance of systematic study and research, but the necessity [of] aligning them remains the great challenge to all of us, especially in our Asian contexts. And lest we despair at the enormity of this challenge, let us remind ourselves that such is not peculiar to theological education. Medical education, for example, is grappling with whether the better preparation for doctors is through a curriculum centered on the traditional divisions between anatomy, physiology, pathology, etc. or one organized around problem solving of medical conditions like headache or [weight loss].

Having pointed to this great challenge that we all face, let me now propose the deal or covenant. On the part of LST, I promise that during this coming school year, the faculty and administration will work to explicitate better its conception of the link between preparation for ministry and theological education. This has actually begun with faculty discussions on what they see as "core tasks" for those in our programs. On the part of this year's graduating class, I ask for the same generosity with which you donated your publications fund for LST scholarships. I ask that during your first year in ministry, you note down how your theological education at LST has helped, not helped, or even hindered preparation for that ministry. And then, one year from now, we will compare notes, so that later generations of students will turn [out] to be even better ministers of God's people through their theological education at LST. Deal or no deal???