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# BULLETIN

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# Spiritual Formation in the Seminary Community: Signs of Renewed Concern

by Dick Daniels

A concern for the spiritual formation of seminary students has continually been addressed in recent years. This focus on the spiritual life of theological students is appropriate within any seminary seeking to prepare persons who are competent and ready for the task of ministry. The following comment by Doran McCarty is indicative of this concern:

It is important for students to shore up the interior aspects of their lives. They will be using many administrative procedures, counseling techniques and literary criticism just as their counterparts in secular disciplines do. This makes it important for them to learn that their own spirituality is a distinctive facet of their personal and professional identity, so that they are not tempted to rely only on secular techniques baptized into religious service.<sup>1</sup>

Several projects during the last fifteen years have dealt with the spiritual formation of students within the seminary.

## **The Lilly Endowment Project on the Deepening of the Spiritual Life of the Seminary Faculty.**

Harold Duling, a director of the Lilly Endowment, had a great concern for the spiritual development of seminary students. In a study of seminary catalogues from around the country, Duling found only a handful of schools that offered anything significant on the life of prayer. He attended a silent retreat in Indianapolis led by Charles F. Whiston. The impact of the retreat prompted him to ask Whiston to coordinate a project on the spiritual life of seminary faculty members. The proposal was made, and in the spring of 1964 a grant was received from the Lilly Endowment.

The one-year study involved a series of regional weekend conferences and retreats for faculty and students. This was followed up with personal visits to several seminaries. At the end of the first year the project was redirected from students to faculty members. The continuing project centered on finding a core of faculty members in schools who would be interested in helping seminarians become authentic people of prayer. Four regional conferences were held which led to two national conferences in January of 1968 and 1969.

As a result of the national conferences, a National Trysting Group was formed with thirty faculty members. Membership and vows were renewable yearly and included the following commitments:<sup>2</sup>

### The National Trysting Group Rule of Prayer

1. I will daily keep a tryst with Jesus Christ, (at such and such a place, and at such and such a time). You may wish to omit this on Sundays, since you would then be worshipping in church with your-fellow Christians.

2. Content of the daily tryst with Jesus Christ:
  - a. A daily renewal of Covenant with Christ.
  - b. A daily reading devotionally of the New Testament, to expose oneself to Christ as Person of God, and to meet Him and hear Him through the Bible World.
  - c. Daily intercessory praying for:
    - 1) The other members of the Fellowship, who are also under the rule.
    - 2) For one's own seminary faculty colleagues and students—by name.
3. Periodic examination of how the Rule has been kept, with appropriate thanksgiving or confession. At the end of each semester or quarter to report to some other person, some colleague or to the Director.

Whiston's report expands on each of the following findings of this project in light of his contact with students and faculty members (pp. 7–14):

- a. A widespread ignorance among students of what true Christian praying really is.
- b. An expectation by students of this emphasis within the seminary curriculum . . . yet its not being provided.
- c. Faculty satire and ridicule in response to students asking for help in prayer.
- d. Failure of prayer fellowships due to a lack of understanding of the purpose, rationale, and methodology of such prayer groups.
- e. A resistance by students to come under this type of discipline.
- f. Lack of prayer life with students and their spouses or families.
- g. Student excuses including lack of time and academic pressures.
- h. Student desire for worshipful, not lecture-oriented chapels.
- i. Little prayer by students for faculty and peers.
- j. A spectrum of faculty reactions ranging from open acceptance to resentment and ridicule.
- k. Lack of disciplined spiritual life among most faculty.
- l. Faculty members feeling that the life of prayer necessarily would lead to pharisaic pride.
- m. Faculty expressing that the spiritual life of students is personal and private with each person needing to work it out individually.
- n. No regular habit of attending chapel services for a majority of faculty.

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## Voyage Vision Venture.

Two major projects on spiritual formation have been initiated by the Association of Theological Schools in the last decade. The first project is summarized in *Voyage Vision Venture*, the 1972 report of the task force on spiritual development.<sup>3</sup> This task force, funded through a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and headed by Rev. Eugene L. Van Antwerp, was instructed to "shape a set of concepts and principles that can guide a program of spiritual development" (p. 3).

A fundamental principle grew out of the task force discussion regarding definitions: "The spiritual formation and development of seminary students begins with, and is dependent upon, the spiritual formation and development of the faculty" (p. 9). This principle recognizes that the seminary is a community, and each faculty member lives out his/her own style of spiritual growth within that community. It is that dynamic of community which can foster or inhibit the spiritual life of seminarians.

Several observations about spiritual formation were gleaned from the report:

- a. Growth cannot be coerced or hurried (p. 20).
- b. One must accept the relation between a student's growth in the consciousness of his (her) own identity and the unevenness of his (her) spiritual growth. . . . Problems of spiritual development will always be corollary to problems of psychological development (p. 21).
- c. The spiritual practice of the presence of Christ . . . is bound up with the moral practice of the presence of man (woman) (p. 21).
- d. The heart of discipline is obedience (p. 23).
- e. Distancing from others is as important as nearness (p. 25).
- f. In a student's experience of the entire spectrum of seminary life, he (she) is being spiritually formed or malformed (p. 26).

The final section of the task force report ("Venture") reflected a number of dimensions of the seminary which impact on the unique approach to spiritual formation in that school (pp. 31-43):

a. *Community*. The work cannot be compartmentalized into a course, department, or position. "Only within the framework of community experience in seminary will the graduate find and retain some point of reference for his future ministry to the Christian community" (p. 32). The core of this community will be its involvement in worship, in community prayer, and in society as a total community or in smaller groups.

b. *Corporate Worship*. The student or faculty attitude of "competitive-ness" in leading worship (i.e., doing better than the previous worship leader) and the idea that "worship is only something you do to people, rather than also something people do Godward" (p. 33) have both contributed to the breakdown of corporate worship in the seminary.

c. *The Inner Life*. ". . . the inner spiritual development of seminarians is at least as important as the cultivation of the mind" (p. 35). In addition to planned programs, spontaneous groups interact with all levels of a seminary community and contribute to one another's inner life.

d. *Evaluation*. A three-step process for faculty to evaluate student spiritual growth includes: knowing the students, having an established set of standards for evaluation, and being able to evaluate the students in light of those standards.

e. *Guidance*. The idea is that some faculty will become spiritual mentors in a one-to-one relationship with students.

f. *Discipline*. Even with a decline in the use of rules and regulations, voluntary systems of discipline are being adopted by students.

g. *Field Education*. Since spiritual development is a continuing process, the field education involvement of students provides a context in which the spiritual life can be stimulated and experienced.

## Spiritual Formation in Theological Schools: Ferment and Challenge

The task force in the preceding report concluded by suggesting the need for a follow-up to their work. In January, 1978, the Association of Theological Schools received a grant from the Rockefeller Brothers

Fund to carry out a two-year program on the preparation of faculty, clergy, and lay leaders as spiritual mentors for students. In May, 1978 another grant was given by the Fund to hold six regional conferences on spiritual formation for faculty members. The Shalem Institute in Washington, D.C., under the leadership of Tilden Edwards, Jr., led this project. As described in Edwards' report in *Theological Education*,<sup>4</sup> two basic concerns were established by the national advisory committee:

1. A need to deal with fundamental underlying issues concerning the nature of spirituality and its relation to theology and other fields. In Protestant schools . . . a concern . . . how to approach this area concretely in terms of faculty preparation and method.
2. A need to forge a more integral and critical discipline of spirituality today that moves toward resolution of the centuries-old split between intellectual, affective, and intuitive approaches to religious knowledge. (pp. 12-13)

Three questions were sent to participants previous to the regional conferences (pp. 14-18). The first asked, "What is the most important concern you bring to this conference regarding spiritual formation?" The responses raised two concerns: (1) how to develop, model, and offer personal help for the spiritual life, and (2) an interest in other models for intentional spiritual formation. The second question asked, "Has your school developed an intentional, mutually explored set of assumptions and practices in this area?" Most schools indicated that these were not available. The final question asked, "What are some particular ongoing questions or difficulties that have been raised by these assumptions and practices?" The responses brought to light some tensions in the following areas: integrated vs. additional, mandatory vs. voluntary, level of student capacity, need for resources, use of chapel, use of small groups, and the evaluation of assumptions about spirituality.

Edwards' report summarizes the format of the regional and national conferences, the sources of concern for spiritual formation, distinctive emphases among various theological traditions, examples of what is being done on campuses, and a listing of what is needed in this area from publishers and the Association of Theological Schools. The end of his report includes a section on the preparation of spiritual mentors which is a reflection of his book, *Spiritual Friend* (Paulist Press, 1980). One of the important parts of the report is his summary of the major addresses given at the national conferences. Four principles essential to the viability of spiritual formation in theological education were given by Daniel Buechlein of St. Meinrad School of Theology (pp. 37-38):

1. Spiritual formation cannot be left to chance . . .
2. The role of faculty, staff, and students in spiritual formation is inevitable and reciprocal . . .
3. A careful distinction must be made between spiritual formation and spiritual transformation . . .
4. Intentional Christian community is the necessary context for spiritual formation . . .

It is my hope that this concern will continue to spread throughout the seminaries of this country. The forms will differ, to be sure. They may include a renewal of the classical disciplines of experiential Christianity (as in Richard Foster's *Celebration of Discipline*) or finding new ways to create a climate which fosters the spiritual development of students. Whatever the forms, this emphasis must not get buried far below the academic pursuits of faculty and students alike.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Doran McCarty, *The Supervision of Ministry Students* (Atlanta: Home Mission Board Southern Baptist Convention, 1978), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup>*The Lilly Endowment Project on the Deepening of the Spiritual Life of the Seminary Faculty: Final Report*, December, 1970, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup>*Voyage Vision Venture* (Dayton, Ohio: American Association of Theological Schools, Spring, 1972).

<sup>4</sup>Tilden Edwards, Jr., "Spiritual Formation in Theological Schools: Ferment and Challenge," *Theological Education* (Dayton, Ohio: Association of Theological Schools, Autumn, 1980), pp. 7-53.