

**ADDRESS OF HIS EMINENCE EDWIN CARD. O'BRIEN  
NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF DIOCESAN VOCATION DIRECTORS  
51<sup>ST</sup> ANNUAL CONVENTION  
HAUPPAUGE, NY  
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9:00AM**

I was not – and still am not – sure what kind of message you have expected of me today. But whatever the message was to be, I knew from the start that I had to thank you and encourage you in the challenging call given you by your bishops! You are the 12<sup>th</sup> man in an 11 person seminary faculty and second only to the rector, yours is the most critical role.

My experience over the years is that most vocation directors are happy despite the unreasonable expectations many may have of you (including, possibly, your bishops). You are happy because you realize the importance your role has for the future of your diocese. You are happy because you have earned the respect of your bishop and your clergy. You are happy to be working so closely with a young, spirited and hopeful generation. But most of all you are happy as vocation director because you are in love with the priesthood of Jesus Christ, and your perseverance – so critical to your calling and any success you may realize depends completely on that love. Each of you knows, as surely as I do, that your love of priesthood must be nourished by constant prayer, a prayer life, in fact that convinces you without a doubt, that your labors are not solely your own, but are the labors of Christ Himself: “You have not called me, but I have called you”. Your “ear” in pursuing future priests must be tuned and retuned in prayer, that you do, in fact, have the voice of Christ calling the candidates whom you encounter.

How fortunate the Church is, in our culture, to have men respond positively to that call. And while they might be too few in number as we assess the present needs of our Church, my impression is that those who do respond are equal to the finest of past generations, if not even superior.

Consider, for one thing, the cultural climate of our present day America and the secular peers of this generation.

A review of a just published book, Excellent Sheep, points to a sharp turn in attitude on the part of college-student high achievers for whom an expensive education is worth the sacrifice: but no longer to satisfy intellectual curiosity or passion for a cause or character formation. In 1971, for instance 73% of incoming freshmen said it was important that their education help them develop a meaningful philosophy of life while 37% cited the achievement of personal wealth as the goal for their higher education. By 2011, 80% cited financial wealth as their high priority with only 47% seeing education as a vehicle toward answering life's important questions. Elite colleges were of little help, increasingly treating applicants as customers rather than students. Acquiring the accumulated wisdom of previous ages is not high in the advantages or goals of today's higher educational institutions.

We should be grateful for Catholic institutions of learning on the high school and college levels whose value-centered curricula result in an uncommonly high degree of students desiring and pursuing service to the community. This, notwithstanding the fact that – mysteriously! – so many of our high schools year after year produce no religious vocations. As for our colleges, institutions like St. Francis

University in Steubenville and Thomas Aquinas in Santa Paula, among a few others, do offer solid applicants for seminary formation annually. The key to such successes should not be dismissed in terms of liberal and conservative – indeed, it could be suggested that a demanding liberal arts curriculum has something to do with it.

None of this is news to any of you but a gathering such as this offers a great opportunity to exchange success stories from within your respective dioceses.

For the recent years that I have been a diocesan bishop in Baltimore, and many more years prior, I have had many opportunities to work in the field of vocations and seminary formation. I have admired the accomplishments of vocation directors and seminary formators. Much credit must be paid to the initiatives of Pope St. John Paul II in this regard. In the 20 years following the Council, formation varied greatly largely because many questions were being debated regarding the identity and function of priestly ministry. Years ago I wrote that a man will give himself generously to a mystery but not to a question mark and until the initiatives of St. John Paul II there were too many questions about the future of ordained priesthood to attract men to the vocation. That Pope's annual Holy Thursday letters and other writings, his call for two Apostolic Visitations of seminaries and houses of formation in our Country, as well as the sheer weight of his own priestliness in his travels and World Youth Days, gave new impetus to many young to take a serious look at the vocation, and provided seminary formators a clearer focus for reform.

*Pastores Dabo Vobis* will long remain a *vademecum* in its call for spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and most especially human formation, a significant step forward

in helping you screen candidates and rectors and spiritual directors in guiding progress. The stress on solid philosophical formation and a sure spiritual foundation before entering theological studies resulted in the call for two propaedeutic years for those coming from most colleges. The fact that some administrators are tempted to take shortcuts in pre-theological formation will, in my opinion, prove harmful in the long run.

With the Pontificate of Pope Francis, I'd suggest we find ourselves at another crossroads in priestly life and formation. His call for and example of a life-style of poverty and simplicity, collaborative decision making, as well as his plea for evangelization across religious, cultural and social peripheries have been received, as you know, with almost universal approval and even adulation. Not only in the Vatican will things not be the same. His challenges for a renewed missionary discipleship must be heeded throughout Church life and, surely, in seminary formation. I would like to address the issue of missionary discipleship after a brief personal aside on the Conclave of March 2013, that elected Jorge Bergoglio Pope.

[Personal reflections on the Conclave]

I spoke earlier of the almost universal approval that Pope Francis enjoys. "Almost" – since it is no secret that there seems to be some unease among some of our younger clergy and seminarians regarding our Holy Father's style.

Some of the disillusion probably stems from the Holy Father's reluctance to put stress on the "hot button" issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, as strongly and frequently as have his recent predecessors. In one of his first newspaper

interviews he acknowledged that while as a son of the Church he was in full agreement with the Church's moral teachings, he was not "obsessed" with them. Rather, he is convinced that in stressing God's love and mercy and the wonder of the full Gospel significance of the Incarnation and Redemption, the Church's moral teachings would find an appropriate and helpful context.

Then there are Pope Francis' earlier comments in off-the-cuff interviews which lend themselves to be take out of context by those who would paint him as a moral reformer. "Who am I to judge" is obviously the most cited of these. As most of us know, but as many others refuse to acknowledge, the full quote was, "If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" A finely nuanced and theologically precise statement, though 62% of subsequent news reports quoted only the last five words, "who am I to judge?"

Another quote and closer to home, on seminary formation creating "little monsters". I think we would all agree with the full statement, that priestly formation is the work of an artisan, not a policeman. "We must form their hearts. Otherwise we are creating little monsters. And these little monsters form the People of God.... In the end we must not form administrators, managers, but fathers, brothers, travelling companions."

In his Post-Synodal Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, in addressing the dearth of vocations to priesthood, he says, "...we are increasingly aware of the need for a better process of selecting candidates to the priesthood. Seminaries cannot accept candidates on the basis of any motivation whatsoever, especially if those motivations

have to do with affective insecurity on the pursuit of power, human glory or economic well-being.” (#107)

This reflects the lengthy paragraph 44 in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* on affective maturity. We are all conscious of carefully screening of candidates in this area and depend on second psychological testing - surely in our day and age there can be no substitute for this. I think it preferable that testing be conducted by a believer and that it covers very specific areas of affectivity without invading the internal forum. This can be a delicate balancing act. Also, especially if a number of reports are coming in from different psychologists, each should be clear on questions that must be addressed, and your psychologist who interprets the report for you should be certain of the criteria you set.

The Pope's Argentina is much closer to a Third World Country than to a First World one. Indeed just as much of his pastoral time there was spent visiting the *favelas*, we should not be surprised that much of his papal energy in word and action is in favor of the disenfranchised, setting the tone for other shepherds of the Church. In the mid 3<sup>rd</sup> century the prefect of Rome demanded that Deacon Laurence hand over all the Church's riches to the emperor and Laurence gathered the decrepit, the blind, the lame, cripples, lepers, orphans and widows. Over the last 18 months, the Pope's surprising trip to Lampedusa and his weekly hours spent embracing the most deformed and spurned brought to him in St. Peter's Square, should help convince the world and us, that the poor are truly the Church's greatest priority, as they were Christ's. For Francis, the poor are not only a people he wants to help, but a people he

can learn from: they are, in his words a university not from books but from the heart. The world sees here a missionary disciple of Christ leaving his comfort zone, literally, to reach all the peripheries in need of the light of the Gospel. They like what they see in this ongoing missionary disciple of Christ who is singularly challenging a massive global indifference toward the poor. In this He has altered the tone of the papacy, of the Church and of the priesthood. And of priestly formation?

Formational change must take place but won't be done overnight. It will take prayerful study, reflection and discussion beginning from an evangelizing bishop encouraging his rector, formation staff and, surely vocation director, to advance the formation of a missionary priesthood. As I assess the key pillars of Francis' evangelizing priesthood I would suggest these four to be encouraged, and reflected in the seminary structure and programs, its formators and its students.

The four pillars of Francis' missionary papacy would be (in my reading, at least): simplicity, synody, subsidiarity and solidarity.

1. Simplicity of life or evangelical poverty. An insatiable consumerism which marks our culture has infiltrated our Church and, often our priesthood. I need not catalog the marks of simplicity that have shone through Francis' life as a bishop and, now as a pope. Even as archbishop of Buenos Aires – apartment living, cooking his own food, utilizing public transportation. Accordingly, frequently over the last 18 months, he seems to have been harsh with the clergy, criticizing clericalism, privilege-seeking, material expectations on the part of the clergy.

How can we define simplicity of life for a priest? As our Supreme Court said about pornography – it is difficult to define but you know when you see it. Have you heard, since Francis' accession, any tongue-in-cheek comments by our good people over the kind of car Father (or Bishop) drives? And in mentioning clerical privilege one personal experience comes to mind.

Years ago, as I stood as rector in front of Dunwoodie to welcome new seminarians on their opening day of orientation, one young man drove up to unload his car smartly dressed in collar, and with a card prominently posted on the dashboard, CLERGY. He hadn't set foot in the seminary but was already expecting a certain "clerical" respectability.

Our Catholic people are very generous to us and enjoy inviting us to their homes or offering us gifts. No problem. But how often can that lead to expecting and even maneuvering for material advantages because, you know, as seminarians and priests, we are sacrificing our lives. Really??

2. Synody is a praxis that seems to fascinate the Pope and is borrowed from the Eastern Orthodoxy procedure of reaching decisions by consensus. Not that we could or would want to take that orthodox praxis on fully, given Papal Primacy. But he has shown an extraordinary desire to receive input from others. The group of 8 or 9 cardinals, and the institution of a number of committees of lay professionals to advise him on the running of the Vatican are evidence of a shift in papal administrative style. There now promise to be

major if gradual changes in the structure of the upcoming Synods and who is to say that Eastern Orthodox voices and votes might not eventually be welcomed.

Something of this, too, should be reflected in the structures of the seminary and in the pastoral approach encouraged among our students. Synody is an art as well as a technique, calling for keen and respectful listening. Cardinal George has noted that for Pope Francis, bridge building begins with relationship and friendship, then comes the theology. In my dozen years as rector, for example, I rarely experienced a successful pastoral reflection program, despite my efforts. Maybe it's my instinct to teach, rather than first to listen and learn. And in one Seminary I have seen a wonderfully functioning Board of Trustees composed primarily of laity, and in another institution a Board as lifeless as a corpse. Synody calls for a certain sense of ownership. The views and suggestions of Board members must really be wanted and respected. Likewise in the conduct of diocesan and parish pastoral councils. We must know our people well enough to recognize their strengths and draw from them. How can seminary formation promote this art?

3. Subsidiarity is closely related to synody in that sound pastoral decisions will reflect a regard for others' abilities without attempting to dictate to them or control every situation.

Some years ago I read of an experience told by the present rector of St. John's Seminary in Boston, Msgr. Jim Moroney, about his first parish homily as a deacon. He worked on it and practiced it for many hours and was

convinced it was a masterpiece. He delivered it perfectly and without a script and was very pleased with the outcome. As the people greeted him after the Mass, not one complimented him on his perfect product. He returned to the seminary crestfallen and went immediately to his formation advisor. He was asked one question – As you were looking down from the height of our pulpit, did you convey to the congregation in any way that you loved them? He never forgot that lesson. An awareness of, respect for, and trust in the charisms of our people!

There should be a genuine humility emanating from a priest – young or old – when addressing a congregation composed of many people who are more intelligent, wiser and even holier than he. Pope Francis speaks of the art of accompaniment: remove your sandals before entering the sacred ground of the other (Ex 3:5; EG 125).

Again the words of Pope Francis: I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life....you must try to seek God in every human life. Although the life of a person is a land filled with thorns and weeds, there is always a space in which the good seed can grow. You have to trust God.

More specifically, subsidiarity suggests the need for less administrative centralization and cutting through the red bureaucratic tape that too frequently delays justice owed to members of the Church.

I recently read of a case in Ireland where the parish permitted one parent to pour the water and the other to pronounce the words of baptism over their

infant. The local bishop referred this abuse of a sacrament to Rome (as I presume such was canonically called for) for disciplinary action. Cardinal Brady later suggested that this could be handled locally by a canonical process involving the Conference of Bishops.

As a diocesan bishop in Argentina for a couple of decades and more, Jorge Bergoglio probably experienced a fair amount of frustration in the time consuming necessity of Vatican referrals when a simple, more local administrative process could have been applied.

Note as well, the appointment last week of a commission to study the marriage annulment process with a view to simplifying it to the extent possible. Again, subsidiarity.

4. Solidarity – *Miserando atque Eligendo* – “He’s had mercy on me and has chosen me”, the Episcopal motto of Jorge Bergoglio resulting from an early and profound conversion experience that convinced him that like every other human being he was an unworthy. He was like them, and us, sinner and the love and mercy and forgiveness he experienced is the centerpiece of the Gospel he must preach. If the brilliance of a homily is to resonate in the heart of the people, it must first resonate in the heart of their pastor whose convinced and convincing conviction is that God loves me and has saved me. It’s a universal message of joy and the missionary disciple “must never look like one who has just come back from a funeral”.

Like the priest, the candidate and seminarian must ever be aware of his rootedness in and with the People of God – a sense of belonging: God takes us from the midst of his people and sends us back to them. (My mantra in describing the uniqueness of the diocesan priest: *In medio Ecclesiae aperuit os eius* – In the midst of the people he opened his mouth and the Lord filled him with a spirit of wisdom and understanding).

This calls for an ability to relate to the culture. In speaking of his friend Pope Francis, Cardinal O'Malley praises the Pope's unique ability to touch so many of our own people who had heretofore been distant. It is much harder to preach the Gospel in a culture that is vaccinated against the Faith, such as in our Country where so many Catholics have stormed off, dozed off or simply drifted away from the Church. Somehow, Francis senses "what it means to live in a culture of unbelief, a culture that does not even know it does not believe because it still lives on the residue of Christian civilization."

Anyone aware of Francis' early interviews must be impressed by his grasp of literature, music and the arts. That notwithstanding, he insists that the Lateran and Gregorianum and all their theological resources do not make the evangelizing disciple. It is the Spirit of Christ and the anointing of the Spirit that identifies the true disciple and explains why "we find, among our faithful simple old women who perhaps didn't finish elementary school but who speak to you about things better than the theologian."

I do not have a recipe for the changes called for to meet the expectations our people have realized so immediately in Pope Francis. But just as *Pastores Dabo Vobis* changed the face of modern apostolic formation a generation ago, I suspect that through the labors of those such as yourselves working with their colleagues in seminary formation over the next generation, we will receive a revived formation in missionary discipleship and benefit from an increase in vocations to accompany it. Vocations at home with the Second Vatican Council and anxious to promote the beauty of our modern liturgy.

And what sterling examples do we have of this missionary discipleship in our own history. Early in our Nation missionaries from Europe gave their lives on our soil and successfully laid the foundation of the Faith in New York State and Canada, the Southeast and Far West and the Mississippi Valley. In our turn the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw inspired young men and women go to distant shores to preach and demonstrate God's love for them in Christ. Hopefully, we will recapture this missionary zeal for Evangelization "*ad gentes*" in the formation of today's diocesan priests. Might we not pray that such missionary zeal be sparked in a New Evangelization of our parishes and dioceses as well?

In this regard, I think of the letter from St. Francis Xavier to St. Ignatius from India. We are familiar with this from the of Office of Readings on December 3 as Francis explodes with frustration:

“Again and again I have thought of going round the universities of Europe, especially Paris, and everywhere crying out like a madman,

riveting the attention of those with more learning than charity: ‘What a tragedy: how many souls are being shut out of heaven and filling into hell, thanks to you.’”

Are these words out of date in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? Might this be an element in the lack of missionary fervor toward non-Christian peoples far away and here, close to home? Has this intense zeal to save souls diminished today, or even disappeared? Perhaps there is a subtle presumption among us that whether believers or not, baptized or not, sincere good will will bring salvation.

The New Testament pages are a real challenge to us. In preaching the joy of the Gospel, is it possible to avoid the words sin, hell, and damnation and the urgent need to accept Jesus to be saved?

Absent these convictions, where will we find that Evangelizing urgency that has been the hallmark of the great evangelizers of the past: Peter, Paul and... Jesus Christ.

Closer to home.

We think of St. Isaac Jogues, the French Jesuit who brought the Faith to the Mohawk Indians of Canada and North New York State in the mid-1600s. Tortured and with several fingers severed he was rescued in 1643 by Dutch Protestants. He returned briefly to France but insisted on returning to Auriesville where he was again tortured by his captors and tomahawked to death.

Less dramatic, perhaps, but with equal missionary fervor was Louis William Dubourg who fled France during the Revolution there and came as a guest to Baltimore. There he entered the Sulpicians in 1795. In 1812 he was appointed administrator of the vast Diocese of Louisiana, long without a bishop and desperately in need of French-speaking priests. So he sent a circular letter to France begging for seminarians and priests. Here is what he said in an attempt to attract clergy:

We offer you no salary, no recompense, no holiday or pension, much hard work, a poor dwelling, few consolations, many disappointments, frequent sickness, a violent or lonely death, and unknown grave.

And they came – many came along with women religious to establish schools (including a college) and parishes on even the next dozen years.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw a return of that missionary spirit with the establishment in 1911 of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, commonly known as Maryknoll. One of the founders was Bishop James A. Walsh who describes the task of the missionary, whether in China, in rural America or in a large city parish:

The task of a missionary is to go to a place where he is not wanted, to sell a pearl whose value, although of great price, is not recognized, to a people who are determined not to accept it even as a gift.

You might have heard of the Catholic Evidence Guild founded in England in 1918 to train lay speakers for Hyde Park and London street corners. Frank Sheed was one of its most successful speakers, giving more than 7000 soap box speeches during his lifetime, explaining various facets of Church teaching and belief. The Guild travelled to the States and was a popular apologetics exercise for many seminarians. I was one such speaker during my studies at Dunwoodie and along with another seminarian, with soap box, American flag, amplifier and necessary police permit, we would draw crowds in midtown Manhattan, explaining some misunderstood facet of Church teaching.

With some guilt, I can look out of my window on the Borgo Pio in Rome and see hundreds of people a day swarming that small but quaint Roman neighborhood, many of them, most likely, un-churched tourists. Here is a missionary periphery only steps from St. Peter's Basilica. Sometimes I imagine, what if I get onto a soap box once again – I suspect the first reaction of many would be “He couldn't be Catholic – that's what Protestant Evangelicals do.”

And, unfortunately, that's all too true. Who knows! Some day, someone more energetic, courageous and missionary-minded than I will take up the idea and climb upon a soapbox again.

Thank you for your attention, your kindnesses and, most especially, for your unique contribution to our Church!