Philosophy Studies in the Program of Priestly Formation: A Review of the Fifth Edition

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"To explain a profound mystery simply you must understand it profoundly." This observation, offered to me by a veteran professor at the university where I studied theology in preparation for the priesthood, has, in the 30-some years of my ministry, proved to be one of the wisest pieces of pastoral advice I came across in my seminary years. Why? Because sharing the saving mysteries of our faith is of the essence of the priest's ministry. His mission is "to father" into the mysteries of Christ those entrusted to his care. He is the instrument of their new birth by his celebrating for them these mysteries in the sacraments, by his teaching these mysteries to them in his preaching and catechesis, and by the guidance he gives them about how to live out these mysteries in their daily lives.

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A presentation of the Christian mysteries that is not "thought-full" will fall short of the mark. This is the case most especially in their presentation through teaching, but also true of their presentation in ritual or in direction. And for that presentation to be full of the fruit of thinking, it must be informed by philosophical insight. Unless a pastor's presentation of the Christian mysteries is infused with the light of the natural wisdom attained through philosophy, his efforts will not fully achieve their purpose; his people will respond to what he offers with only a part of themselves—with their emotions—but not with their minds, as well; with their historic loyalties, but not with their bedrock convictions. And when "the winds pound," that which is built on the shifting sands of such an unthoughtful presentation will collapse (see Mt 7:26).

Over the course of her 20 centuries of experience, the Catholic Church has grown ever firmer in her conviction that the study of philosophy is a tool she must provide for her future priests if they are to fulfill their responsibility of effectively presenting the mysteries of our faith. This conviction was reaffirmed at the Second Vatican Council in its Decree on Priestly Formation Optatam totius, nn. 14-15, and more recently underscored by Pope John Paul II in his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Pastores dabo vobis and in his Encyclical Fides et ratio, where he writes that philosophy "is fundamental and indispensable to the structure of theological studies and to the formation of candidates for the priesthood" (n. 62).

The good news about the proposed fifth edition of The Program of Priestly Formation (hereafter, PPF5) being presented to the bishops of the United States is that it firmly builds on the foundation of the church's conviction about the place of philosophy in the seminary curriculum. The latest edition of the norms to govern
the U.S. seminaries requires of seminarians a philosophical education which goes a long way toward ensuring that the church's pastors are well equipped to meet their obligation to offer God's people a thoughtful presentation of the mysteries of salvation.

The draft of PPF5 treats the philosophical formation of seminarians in two places: in a section titled "Philosophy" within the chapter on "Intellectual Formation" and in the more specific set of norms, "Pre-theology Norms," at the end of that chapter. In specifying as it does there the duration and the content of these studies, the proposed PPF5 is a significant advance over its predecessors. Before reporting on these two points, however, I want to review the PPF5's explanation of the importance of philosophy in the training of future priests.

Citing Pope John Paul II's affirmation in Fides et ratio about the "intimate bond which ties theological work to the philosophical search for truth" (n. 62), PPF5 goes on to explain that a seminarian's theological studies are required in order for him to understand the relationship between faith and reason, especially as this is worked out in philosophy and theology—each in its own sphere—the full flowering of the human drive to comprehend. Implicit in this part of PPF5's argument for philosophy is faith's conviction about the complementarity of nature and grace, which complementarity is itself most fully disclosed to believers in the unity of humanity and divinity in the Incarnate Word. Telescoping the various steps in the argument, one could offer a kind of short-hand Christological justification for philosophy in the seminary's curriculum: Future priests must study philosophy because they will be sacramental representations of Jesus-Christ, the God-man who is our Good Shepherd.

PPF5 offers a second reason to justify making philosophy a part of every seminarian's course of study: the need for him to have at his disposal the resources he requires in order to respond to the subjectivism that is so deeply embedded in our culture. According to PPF5, in helping future priests overcome this widespread relativism, philosophy pays off in two distinct dimensions: ad extra, by increasing his competence for evangelizing the culture; and ad intra, by reinforcing his gift of himself. In the first case, armed against the sophistry of our age, the priest can understand and help to resolve the difficulties his contemporaries have in answering the call to believe in the eternal truth of Christ. In the second case, with these same arms the priest can defend the certainty of the truths that make sense to him of the irrevocable of himself to Christ.

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Given all the ways philosophy is so important for the mission of the priest today, it will come as no surprise that PPF5 has substantially increased the philosophy requirements in the seminary's course of studies. PPF4 asked for 18 credit hours in philosophy; PPF5 calls for 30. With the typical undergraduate course being 3 credit hours, this translates into an increase from 6 to 10 courses in philosophy. Another way to think about this change, and one that seems even more discursive of its significance, is to note that according to the norms of PPF5 all seminarians will, in effect, have the equivalent of an undergraduate major in philosophy according to the current practice of American higher education. This provides every future priest with the opportunity to establish the basic habit of philosophical thinking and to develop the fundamental repertoire of distinctions and definitions, arguments and insights that constitute philosophical wisdom.

PPF5 does not limit itself to establishing a quantitative increase in the seminary's philosophy curriculum. It also gives specific direction about how that time is to be spent. It calls for courses in the history of philosophy, logic, epistemology, philosophy of nature, metaphysics, natural theology, anthropology, and ethics. Not content with simply listing these areas to be covered, PPF5 offers a succinct description of the contents and purpose for each.

PPF5 articulates, albeit briefly, two further requirements which, when met, will have a profound impact in giving a distinctive shape to the philosophy curriculum of U.S. seminaries. It calls for a philosophy program that is shaped by the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas, and it directs teachers to help their students make explicit the connections between philosophy and faith. A
comment on each of these points will be useful.

Concerning the first: PPF5 employs a rather round about way to speak of the role St. Thomas's philosophy should play in a seminarian's education. "The philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas should be given the recognition that the Church accords it." Given the context of the remark there is no question, however, about the exact nature of that "recognition." The quoted phrase comes immediately after a citation from the Code of Canon Law calling for "philosophical instruction [to be grounded] in the perennially valid philosophical heritage," which formulation is lifted word for word from the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Priestly Formation. In response to questions about the precise meaning of this injunction, both the Congregation for Catholic Education and the Code Commission have clearly stated that it refers to the teaching of St. Thomas. Put simply, PPF5 is following the Second Vatican Council and the Code of Canon Law in requiring that St. Thomas' philosophy form the foundation for a seminarian's studies in that discipline.

This directive, unequivocal as it is, is not, however, a sort of final word that settles all possible points at issue about the matter. An obvious follow-up question here is: What sort of Thomism should we teach our seminarians? Robert Sokolowski, a senior professor of philosophy at The Catholic University of America, calls for a "streamlined Thomism," made up of the essential fruits of Aquinas' philosophical thinking—"a sort of distillation of "the central teachings of Aquinas formulated in a classic vocabulary but also adapted and supplemented in view of our contemporary needs and understandings." In the course of implementing PPF5 we ought reasonably to expect, in fact we ought to encourage, more such suggestions and then enter into a lively discussion and review of how best to fulfill the mandate of the Council Fathers to make St. Thomas the foundation upon which to establish a renewed seminary philosophy curriculum.

The editors of PPF5 deserve a high commendation for bringing us back once again to face squarely the Council Fathers' clear mandate to give the central place in our seminaries' philosophy curriculum to the thought of St. Thomas. A full-fledged commitment to fulfill this challenge without quibbling or prevarication will radically reshape not only philosophical instruction in our seminaries but will have a profound impact on all intellectual formation of future priests. Further, the presence of this re-energized Thomism in our midst will be a valuable and ready-to-hand resource for the renewal of
undergraduate education throughout all the Catholic institutions of higher education in our country.

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Concerning the second requirement (the call for seminary teachers to help their students make explicit the connections between philosophy and faith), PPF5 says: “Seminaries should explore creative curricular strategies so that students can grasp the linkage between philosophical insights and theological frameworks.” Here PPF5 is making the highly significant strategic move of establishing in our seminaries a philosophy curriculum that is, to some degree at least, “mixed,” that is, composed of some elements that are not properly speaking philosophical. From a purely pragmatic view this move shows good sense, since it is a religious-theological motive that brings men into the seminary’s philosophy courses. Building on that fundamental interest is, in almost all cases, the key to helping seminarians succeed in their philosophy studies, rather than pass through the course work as if it were just one more “hoop” whose only significance lies in having survived the passage. Unless seminarians see for themselves the worth of the clarity attained in philosophy, the exercise remains for them painfully extrinsic, the mere recitation of formulae parroted back by rote.

Some might object that to mix the non-philosophical into the philosophy curriculum adulterates it to such a point that students are not, in effect, being initiated into the discipline. The example of Socrates, our tradition’s “Proto-Philosopher,” serves as a sufficient rejoinder. He invariably began his dialogues by raising the real-life questions of his interlocutors. From there he led them to philosophical insight. Launching into philosophy from the ordinary—from non-philosophical questions and non-philosophical concerns—far from obscuring the nature of philosophy, discloses it for what it is: an inquiry leading to final insights about the principles and factors that are at play in all the significant realities of our world.

Showing seminarians that philosophical investigation brings welcome clarity to theological studies and, indeed, to all religious matters is not only effective pedagogically but is legitimate even in terms of philosophy’s own identity. In fact, a philosophical wisdom that was disembodied, that did not admit of such linkages, could only be called “philosophical” equivocally, for philosophy is always already there to be done, ready to flower forth from that questioning of ordinary things that in wonder presses on to ultimate insight.

I have very deliberately spoken of linkages that extend from philosophy not only to “theological frameworks” (as mentioned in PPF5) but also to the broader religious interests of seminarians. Making connections between philosophy and theology is only the first place to begin. For example, philosophical distinctions and insights shed light as well on a seminarian’s struggles to live a life of prayer and holiness, they sharpen the skills and enrich the store of wisdom he needs to be effective in preaching and catechesis, and they clarify and reinforce his efforts to live an authentic human existence.

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PPF5, like all of the four editions that preceded it, seeks to concretize for the particular churches in the United States the mandate of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of clergy formation as one step on the road to renewing the church. We are about four decades away from the Council; circumstances continue to change, and so it is fitting to look at priestly formation afresh and to try for an ever more faithful acceptance of the vision of the Council Fathers. In regard to a renewal
of the philosophical formation of future priests, PPF5 is a significant improvement over its "older siblings." However, it is not only for its heightened fidelity to The Decree on Priestly Formation's specific mandates about philosophy that PPF5 deserves recognition. Praise at such a level concerns only the instrumental. Rather, PPF5, in further revitalizing the seminary's philosophy curriculum, helps to ensure that our future priests will be all the better equipped to work effectively in the New Evangelization—the end for which the Council called for renewal at all levels of the church.

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Endnotes
1. I acknowledge my debt to Robert Sokolowski, "Philosophy in the Seminary Curriculum," Homiletic and Pastoral Review 104 (May, 2004): 14-22, for precipitating this formulation. The article in its entirety is a very compelling argument for the philosophy studies required in priestly formation.
2. CIC, c. 251.
3. Opatam totius, 15.
4. For a concise digest of the supporting documentation, see the footnote to c. 251 in The Code of Canon Law Annotated, ed. E. Caparros, et al. (Montreal: Wilson and Lafleur Limitee, 1993). The editors send the reader back to Opatam totius itself to see that the Conciliar Decree borrowed the phrase "patrimonium philosophicum perenniter validum" from Pius XII's Encyclical Letter of 1950 Humani generis.
6. Cardinal William Baum, while prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, wrote about this point with great insight: "Most seminarians, however, would not give themselves to the study of philosophy if they were not called to the priesthood. Their philosophical study is intimately linked to their vocation...." ("Letter to the Bishops of the United States Concerning College-Level Formation of Diocesan Candidates" [8 September 1988], n. 20; in Norms for Priestly Formation, Washington, D.C.: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1993. II:247.)