

A Note on Sulpician Spirituality and Diocesan Priesthood

Years ago, a vocation director who was not familiar with the Sulpicians said that he did not want his seminarians to be imbued with Sulpician spirituality since they were to become diocesan priests. This vocation director must have had the impression that Sulpicians were ordained religious whose primary mission was not that of a diocesan priest. Therefore, in his mind, Sulpician spirituality would be oriented toward either the nourishment of community life under vows and/or the spiritual enrichment of those exercising a non-parochial ministry.

In this context, it is helpful to make three observations. First, the Society of the Priests of St. Sulpice is not an institute of consecrated life, i.e., a religious community. Sulpicians do not take vows, and they remain incardinated in their dioceses of ordination. Rather, they are a community of diocesan priests dedicated to the formation of other diocesan priests.

To understand this further, it is essential to recall that the duty of forming diocesan priests belongs primarily to diocesan bishops, but normally they have entrusted that duty to some of their priests. So the ministry of forming diocesan priests is an authentic ministry for diocesan priests. It is only that Sulpicians have the permission of their bishops to carry out this work as members of a community of priestly formators.

Second, Father Jean Jacques Olier (1608-1657), founder of the Sulpicians, was the pastor of a parish, St. Sulpice. It was one of the largest parishes in France at that time. Historians have noted that Father Olier was also the first to develop a refined spirituality for diocesan priests like himself. To do this, he applied the insights from the French School of Spirituality to the ministry and life of parish priests and to the preparation of seminarians who would be taking up that ministry. A lack of serious spiritual formation, he believed, was the greatest deficiency in priestly formation in his time.

The French School was a spiritual movement in the 17th century that was inspired by the writings of Cardinal Pierre de Berulle (1575-1629), founder of the French Oratorians. Also influencing it early on were St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) and Blessed Marie of the Incarnation (a.k.a. Madame Acarie, 1566-1618), foundress of the Discalced Carmelites in France. Later leaders of the French School were Father Charles de Condren, Saint John Eudes, and Father Olier. Also associated with the French School are other important figures like Father Olier's mentor and friend Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Louis Marie Grignon de Montfort, and Saint John Baptist de La Salle. This movement contributed greatly to the reform of Catholicism in France after the Council of Trent.

Third and finally, Sulpician spirituality is ultimately biblical spirituality that is heavily Pauline and Johannine in inspiration. When Fr. Olier was relatively young but after his conversion, he gave special attention to the study of sacred scripture. He even went to Rome to learn how to read the bible in its original languages.

In this context, it might be helpful to conclude with a look at the opening passage from Father Olier's seminal work the *Pietas Seminarii*. He wrote:

The first and last goal of this institute [i.e., the seminary] will be to live supremely for God in Christ Jesus Our Lord, in such a way that the interior life of his Son will penetrate the intimacy of our heart and that each one will be able to say what Saint Paul, for his part, affirmed with confidence: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." Among all its members such will be the unique hope and the unique thought, as well the only exercise: to live interiorly from the life of Christ and manifest it concretely in our mortal body.

There is not enough space here to draw out the implications of this programmatic text, but two observations should be made. First, in this passage he employed either directly or indirectly three key Pauline references: Gal 2:20, Rom 6:11-13, and 2 Cor 4:10-11. Second, driving this passage is Father Olier's desire to train priests who would allow the Holy Spirit to conform them to Jesus Christ the High Priest and Good Shepherd. The spiritual practices and devotions he recommended, e.g., daily meditation, regular Eucharistic devotion, rosary, etc., were meant to supply the means and support needed for this ongoing transformation.

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