

## WHAT TO DO BETWEEN THE ASCENSION AND PENTECOST

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Father Jean-Jacques Olier, the founder of the Society of Saint-Sulpice once described the seminary as the “time between the Ascension and Pentecost.” Elsewhere, he amplifies that image by writing,

The Seminary of Saint-Sulpice will be considered by all who enter it as an Apostolic College, where all are assembled under the protection of the holy apostles, to study their maxims, to invoke their spirit, to imitate their habits, and to live in conformity with the Gospel they proclaimed.<sup>1</sup>

While that orientation is edifying, it needs to be more specific. Allow me, therefore, to offer a number of observations from this evening’s reading and from this new icon that graces our chapel to offer some suggestions about how to enter into the process called priestly formation.

First, throughout the time between Ascension and Pentecost, the apostles gathered with Mary in an upper room, a liminal space suspended between heaven and earth, depicted not only interiorly in the painting before us, but also exteriorly in its suspension within the window frame behind the altar. As such, we should expect our sojourn here to be a time of passage, a time of interior conversion. Do not be afraid of the dying that leads to new life in the Spirit.

You will fully engage that process of conversion if you imitate how the apostles spent their hours while awaiting the Holy Spirit. Having been called by name, having dwelled with the Lord Jesus and walked with Him on his journey to Jerusalem and the Cross, they withdrew after the Ascension to study, to pray, and to discern. After all, it is during this liminal time that they called another, Matthias, to replace the one who had betrayed the Lord. Let those activities be our guide throughout the Cenacle time called seminary, and allow me to offer a few rules that my experience teaches me will render them

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Jacques Olier, *Divers Écrits*, ms 1, 281.

most fruitful.

## **Study**

You will spend the majority of your time over the next four to six years in study. Remember always, however, that the purpose and goal of your study is not the accumulation of information but the cultivation of a relationship. The hands of the Son and the Father lie outside the main body of the painting before you for a reason. Study searches for what lies beyond, knowing that the wisdom it seeks is never complete, for human wisdom becomes fruitful only to the extent that it reminds us that we do not know. What is most real, what is most efficacious in our study is the humility that finally bows down in silence because it is overwhelmed by the grandeur of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The eternal mystery of the Trinity is not something to be conquered or mastered, but an ocean of love to be contemplated, a sea of beauty in which we are drowned. Follow the advice of Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle, in your approach to study, therefore, “Let us try to enter with reverence and love into his [Christ’s] clarity rather than be clarity into his love.”<sup>2</sup>

That method of study is heralded by the Holy Spirit who hovers in shining brilliance within the painting. Only under His guidance and through His power can we learn anything, can we do anything. Abandon yourself constantly to the Holy Spirit in all things, therefore, following the advice of Father Olier:

We must have great confidence in this divine Spirit and abandon ourselves completely to Him, so that He may direct us. For He is our true spiritual guide as He was for our Lord Jesus Christ. And we should not become preoccupied with ourselves as if we thought we could reform ourselves: the Spirit of God will do that work in us. The more we give ourselves over to Him and entrust ourselves to His care, the more He will take possession of us and cleanse us by His care and His love.<sup>3</sup>

If you need a maxim to evaluate your study through the power of the Holy Spirit, always remember that

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<sup>2</sup> Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle, *Les États et Grandeurs de Jésus*, 2,1,170.

study that does not lead to prayer is not study, prayer that does not lead to study is not prayer.

## Prayer

Bringing such a contemplative attitude to your study will naturally lead us to the heart of our time in seminary, a life marked by prayer. With the apostles and Mary, this time needs to be a time that is marked by the explicit development of an ever deeper relationship with the living God. With them, we need to contemplate all that Christ Jesus has done in our lives, ponder the actions of the Holy Spirit who empowers us to pray, for “we do not know how to pray as we ought”<sup>4</sup>, so that we may worship the Father “in spirit and in truth”<sup>5</sup>

Learn from Mary how to pray. She sits beside the echoes of a Eucharistic table, surrounded by the apostles, many of whom are making explicit liturgical gestures. Therefore, we need to insist that liturgical prayer be the source and summit of all our prayer. Learn the discipline of self-denial that underlies the call to total participation in the liturgy, insure that all of your private prayer disciplines are oriented from and towards the liturgy.

In those particular, private prayer disciplines, learn from the one whom Saint Augustine claims was the Mother of God foremost because “she heard the Word of God and kept it” how to allow the scriptures to impregnate your innermost being through the practice of *lectio divina*. With her enter into contemplative silence as she “ponders all these things in her heart.” Following her example, raise your voice in praise for the “marvels God done for me” in your practice of the *examen*.

Only then allow your private prayer to expand into particular devotional practices. But make sure they flow from and return to the liturgy. Always remember the primary current activity of the saints. They participate in the heavenly liturgy of the wedding feast of the lamb. Let them be windows

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<sup>3</sup> Olier, *Divers Écrits*

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:26

that lead you back to the foretaste of that liturgy we celebrate each day. Allow them to be icons that lead you to Christ Jesus, eternal and sovereign priest.

## **Discernment**

A life marked by study and prayer, however, is not sufficient to describe what we are about here at Theological College. A life of study needs to be discerned by the evaluations of papers and exams, a life of prayer by spiritual direction. Your suitability for ordination needs to be discerned by the process of advising and evaluation.

The fact that discernment is the major rubric underlying all our activities as individuals and as a community is highlighted for me in the flames that distinguish the apostles in the painting before us. They remind us that each one of us, by virtue of our baptism and confirmation, have been impregnated by the Holy Spirit. He is our ultimate spiritual director, He alone truly animates our lives. Father Olier puts it this way:

. . . we should give ourselves over completely to the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, so that he may raise us above ourselves and make us act in a way that is holy and worthy of God. He wants to be our guiding principle so that we may act according to God's good will and pleasure. Of ourselves, we can do nothing pleasing to God. Everything that is not the work of the Holy Spirit is of the flesh and therefore displeasing to God. To worship in the Spirit and by the Spirit is to worship by the power and the impulse of the Holy Spirit who is in us motivating our actions. Then our works are holy and acceptable to God; they are even called Spirit: that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

Now this Spirit is given to all: "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh." (Joel 2:28) And this Spirit is given to us that we may be perfect as God the Father is perfect, acting through the Holy Spirit whom He calls His strength<sup>6</sup>

Abandoning ourselves to the Holy Spirit through and in the process of discernment entails at least four rules:

First, *trust the sign over the front door, Provedentia Dei nos provedebit.* The Providence of God

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<sup>5</sup> John 4:23.

will provide for us. The Lord Jesus has called each one of us to this time and this place so that he may continue to act in us, thus manifesting his state of the Incarnation within us. Allow yourself, therefore, to be human. After all the Word considered being human important enough to become one. We trust in God's providence by allowing our humanity to be configured unto his humanity, and we can do that only to the extent that we follow the dictum of the Oracle, *gnosite seauton*.<sup>7</sup> "Know thyself."

Second, the bard is correct, *The more I give the more I receive*.<sup>8</sup> The more you engage the process of formation, the more you will benefit from it. Self-transparency is the goal here. One day, when you say "present" at the moment of ordination, your bishop needs to know who is present. Risk being yourself and becoming yourself, therefore, especially in spiritual direction. If you have any doubts about what needs to be expressed in the external forum, ask your spiritual director.

Third, *look for models, become a model*. Allow the virtues of the faculty to become a model of priesthood for you. Allow our vices to become lessons about what not to do. Learn from one another. The gifts of each one are the gifts of all, if we truly believe in the communion of saints. We just don't have control over all of them, perhaps even any of them, insofar as they are given to us by God so that we may give them away to others.

Finally, *live a life of discerning service*. Pay attention to the moment the painting before us depicts. It is liminal in a deeper sense. This is the moment when the apostles, empowered by the Holy Spirit, will rush out to proclaim the good news of the risen Lord. All of the interior work they have done during the time between the Ascension and Pentecost needs to be expressed exteriorly, for the spiritual life is a constant movement between mysticism and mission. Our lives needs to express the same liminality of that movement. Remember that such service to the Gospel is found not only in your

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<sup>6</sup> Olier, *Divers Écrits*

<sup>7</sup> Sign over the temple door at Delphi.

pastoral placement. It begins at home, and can be as simple and profound as wiping up the coffee you have spilled in the corridor, or picking up the litter that constantly graces our front lawn. Know also when not serving is a service, lest you become a busybody.

## **Conclusion**

How may we sum up all this? What is a life of study but constantly seeking to have Jesus before our eyes? A life of prayer but constantly inviting Jesus to live in our hearts? A life of discernment that leads to service if not expressing Jesus in our hands? And what is all that if not to embody the demand of Father Olier in his first rule for the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice?

The first and final end of this institute will be to live supremely for God in Christ Jesus our Lord in such a way that the interior of His Son penetrates the depths of our hearts so that everyone may say with confidence what Saint Paul claims about himself, “It is no longer I who live, it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2, 20). This will be the only hope and the only thought in everyone, as well as the only exercise: to live the life of Christ interiorly and to manifest that life exteriorly in our mortal bodies.<sup>9</sup>

Doing so, we will rejoice with Father Olier in his claim, “*Qui a Jésus a tout.*” Whoever has Jesus has everything.

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<sup>8</sup> See William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* 2.1, 176.

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Jacques Olier, *Pietas Seminarii San Sulpitii*