



The UST Central Seminary: The 81st Year as the Interdiocesan Seminary of the Philippines*

Leonardo Z. Legaspi, O.P., D.D.

Years come and years go, and sometimes overlap. On June 29, the Pauline Year, celebrated to mark approximately the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of St. Paul, came to an end. But last 19 June, another year began, the Year for Priests. Today, November 27, our dear Central Seminary, celebrated its 81st year as the Interdiocesan Seminary of the Philippines, being established as such in as such in virtue of Pius XIth decree *Quod iam provide*. And by a happy chance, today's liturgical Rite of Admission brought those three Major celebrations together quite precisely.

Service underpins the meaning of these three anniversaries; service is at the heart of the diaconate and priesthood. Recall the passage in the Gospel where the seventy two were instructed and were told to carry no purse, no sandals; they were not to be shackled by any other interests but to be assignee-minded in carrying the good News on behalf of their Master. That outward detachment was, of course, to reflect their inner freedom to be totally at the disposal of the Lord. It is the same with you when you are ordained deacons and later as priests: you are asked to have inner freedom to be able to serve wherever you are asked to and in a capacity chosen by others. That is the sense of the promise of respect and obedience you will make at your ordination.

Priesthood is not a career. Priesthood is not designed to provide us with a comfortable livelihood. Priesthood is not a reward for any achievements of ours. It is a service. Our Lord said that he came not to be served, but to serve (Mk. 10:45). It is a lifetime of entering into the Holy of Holies to worship God, to give Him praise,

* Homily of the Most Rev. Leonardo Z. Legaspi, O.P., D.D., Archbishop of Caceres on the occasion of the 81st Year as the Interdiocesan Seminary of the Philippines and the ordination to the priesthood of Rev. Peter Vu Khak Nang, November 27, 2009, @ 3:00 pm, UST Central Seminary.

to offer prayer on behalf of and for the whole Church. It is a lifetime spent washing the feet of others—being involved in the daily concerns of your parishioners. In your particular case, Reverend Peter, these also mean helping them when they turn to you in their needs, suffering with them when they suffer for their faith, when they engage those who do not share your religious values, just as you rejoice when they rejoice in the consolation of having stood by your trust in the Lord through the prayers and examples of your Vietnamese martyrs.

And what will drive you on? The answer is clear: “The glory of God and the sanctification of Christ’s people.” Did I set too high a standard? Of course. No one would have expected less.

I know how meaningful the priesthood is for you, Reverend Peter, but however meaningful it is for you, you can never simply be walking along your own private path. You are being prepared for the service of the Church in Vietnam and through it, the world.

Indeed, although every sacrament has plainly an ecclesial dimension, it can also be true to say that the principal beneficiary when someone is being baptized, confirmed, forgiven and so on, is the person who is receiving those sacraments, while the principal beneficiary of holy orders is of the person who is being ordained, but the Church. When receiving ordination, you may come with wonderful ideas and exciting plans for yourselves and the ministry that you wish to undertake, but you must never be priests on your own terms. In these days when scandal and real evil are taking their toll, that priority must plainly be paramount.

There is, for you, my dear seminarians, another element that qualifies the service which you highly desired and for which you have been prepared over the years in the seminary. I refer to our celebration of the 81st year as the Interdiocesan Seminary of the Philippines. UST Central Seminary, like any other seminary, prepares you for the service of the Church and through the Church, the world. Unlike other seminary, the formation you receive here has a certain type, a peculiar type — the Central Seminary type. That’s a thing which doesn’t change. You could say a lot about it; you could write a book on it; but the obvious, salient point to write about it is this, that it is tenacious, has a firm grasp on old things and is suspicious of novelties.

How does the priestly formation interplay with the Central Seminary type?

We must not confine today’s celebrations to a nostalgic remembrance of the past but let us reflect on how it prepared us for the future. When for the first time we entered this Seminary, we entered as individuals, but when the time comes to leave it, we will step out not as isolated individuals but belonging to a brotherhood, a sacramental brotherhood, the community of priests molded upon the values of the

best of what it is to be a Centralite. When for the first time we entered this Seminary, we were immature young boys with unfocused energies and untapped talents. The day we leave its hallowed halls, we will emerge as adult men entrusted with a mission, namely: the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world.

How did this individual, immature youth become the mature, responsible member of a brotherhood of priests worthy of being entrusted with the awesome stewardship of the Eucharist? The answer to this vital question is the answer to the cynically posed question of what could possibly justify the long years of seminary formation we undergo. To answer the question is to discover that central core process which constitutes the essence of seminary life. It is to provide the seminarian with an environment conducive to an encounter with Jesus Christ. For it is in this relationship that the priest-to-be is offered a new relationship leading to a new identity. It is a relationship with the Lord. It is the identity of a disciple of the Lord who is challenged to live in the Spirit. If the seminarian fails to cultivate an intimate, abiding friendship with Jesus Christ, he will discover his seminary training carrying the same baggage he brought with him when he first entered the seminary — a baggage of unresolved character weaknesses that renders him unprepared spiritually to resist the sensuous temptations of the world and unworthy of the sacramental instruments of grace to be entrusted to him.

This is the core of your formation at the Central Seminary: respect for old things, suspicious of novelties but not closed to homogenous developments of truths, persevering in following Jesus Christ, faithful to the Church.

Recall the conversation between Simon Peter and the risen Jesus by the Sea of Galilee. That meeting makes clear what to expect when we follow Him. Jesus says to Peter: “When you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would.” We only know too well about that. As young people, we love the freedom to do what we like, make our own plans and be masters of our destiny. But, Jesus goes on, “When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go.”

These words foretell Peter’s martyrdom, but they have meaning beyond that. They warn those who serve the Gospel that they will not be in control. And more than that, the words, “you will stretch out your hands”, express not just that loss of control, but a readiness to surrender control. The type of service of a Centralite is the conviction that responsibilities may be given us that we would never have chosen for ourselves; nevertheless we stretch out our hands and accept willingly.

How appropriate are the words of the prophet Elijah: “Here I am Lord, send me forth!” □