

A Comparison of Seminarians of  
the 1960's to the 80's:  
A Possible Solution to the Priest Shortage

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The main problem facing the Catholic Church today can be stated simply: we have a severe vocation crisis. Oddly enough, the number of priests in 1963 is only slightly higher than in 1983, but the Catholic population has sky-rocketed over these twenty years (Laborers for the Vineyard, 7). The number of Catholics in the United States went from 44 million in 1963 to 52 million in 1983. However, there has been a drastic decline in the number of seminarians. In 1963, there were 47,500 seminarians; in 1983, there were only 12,000. Because the number of seminarians has declined, the number of ordinations have been steadily declining. The simple fact is that as more and more priests begin to die, fewer and fewer seminarians are ordained to replace them. But the Church needs more priests in order to continue to fulfill the expanding needs of the growing number of Catholics. Something has gone wrong; instead of an enlarged Catholic population bringing more vocations, it has brought less. The Church is indeed in a crisis.

The projections for the future do not look promising either:

Projections for ordinations, when combined with projections for resignations, retirements and deaths, lead to projected decline of about 50% in the population of active diocesan clergy by the year 2000 (Hoge, Potvin and Ferry 8).

As the number of ordinations decline, the average age

of the priest goes up. According to Dean Hoge, 45% of diocesan priests were 46 years old or older in 1970 (9). In 1985, 61% of the diocesan priests were 46 years old or older. As more and more priests get older, more and more will die, which will bring a decrease in the numbers of priests. Resignations have also been a key factor in the discussion of priest shortages, especially in the early 1970's. Hoge mentions a study that showed that the priests who resign tend to be the younger ones (10). However, he predicts that resignations will not be much of a problem as the number of younger priests continue to drop (12). As one can see, the Church has a problem on her hands, and she needs a solution quick.

There have been many suggestions given and many programs implemented in hopes of resolving the crisis, but there seem to be many factors involved. Some say the Church should allow women to be ordained or priests to get married. Others say that changes need to be made in the value system of families. And still others claim that the Church should reduce the need for priests (in this way, the Church would not have to worry about the priest shortage). The point is that there are many different ways to attack the problem of shortage of seminarians and ordinations. Also, a person should keep in mind that no one program will be able to solve the

priest shortage without causing any other problems in the Church. In order to solve the vocation crisis, many factors must be considered, each calling for its own separate program.

This paper will look at some factors and programs that would seem to help relieve the problem of decreasing numbers of seminarians. First, it would be helpful to compare the seminarian of the 1960's (when there was approximately 47,500 of them) to the seminarian of the 1980's (when there was only approximately 12,000). By comparing the seminarian of these very different times, a person can take note of the differences between the two types of seminarians and focus on these differences in hopes of finding a solution to the problem. The comparison will show that there are many differences between the seminarians of the 60's and 80's. However, this paper will only look at a few factors, such as priestly encouragement on the youth to enter a seminary and the effects of Catholic education on vocations for the Church.

The comparison will be a close look at two studies, one done in 1966-67 and the other done in 1984-85. The first study, done by Raymond H. Potvin and Antanas Suziedelis, looked at high school, college and theology seminarians. They sent questionnaires out to 7,930

students in the United States (there was a total of 43,518 seminarians), 90% of which returned the questionnaire (7). The second study, done by Potvin alone, questioned only the students in schools of Theology. The questionnaire was composed of the same items that were asked in 1966-67 as well as extra questions that could be used for further study in the future. Questionnaires were sent to 3,696 theologians of the existing 4,170. In this study, Potvin had only a 83% response rate (3). Of this sample, he randomly chose 916 theologians to study, and he sent them another questionnaire. Of this sample, only 680 theologians sent the questionnaire and identification cards back in time for it to be included in the study (Potvin, 4). These studies simply looked at many different aspects of a seminarians life.

The study first focused on background information. The seminarian of the 1980's tends to be older than those of the 1960's. "As many as 33 percent in the sample are over 30 years of age compared to 7 percent eighteen years ago" (Potvin, 5). The average age of a theologian in 1984 was 30, while the theologian of 1966 was an average of 25. There was a difference in ethnic background as well. Between 1966 and 1984, there was a decrease in the number of theologians who came from an Irish ethnic group, while there was an increase in the number of

Hispanic people attending schools of Theology (Potvin, 6). Potvin also found a difference in the annual income of a theologian's family. In 1966, the average seminarian's family made more money than did an average Catholic family. In the 1980's, however, the average income figures were about the same. Potvin points out that this could mean that in the 1960's, seminarians were more often recruited from the higher income families than in the 1980's (7). Potvin also found a difference in the size of families. "In 1966, 36 percent of all seminarians came from families with 5 or more children; in 1984 that percentage climbed to 46" (9). But Potvin is quick to point out that seminarians come from all sizes of families. In other words, "large families do not produce disproportionately more vocations" (Potvin, 9).

Religious backgrounds of seminarians are also changing. One important factor is that seminarians are less likely to attend Catholic schools in the 1980's than in the 1960's. In 1966, 70 percent of the theologians attended Catholic grade school for all of their primary school education, and 80 percent attended Catholic high schools for all four years. In 1984, the percentages were respectively 49 percent and 44 percent. "A more striking statistic is that 38 percent of today's seminarians in theologates never attended a Catholic high

school. That percentage was only one in 1966" (Potvin, 10). Potvin also found that parents' devotion to Mass has dropped since 1966, but seminarians' parents of the 80's receive communion more often.

Potvin has found that more and more students entering a school of Theology are over 30 years of age. The study has also found that theologians of the 80's seem to be more psychologically adjusted than those in the 1960's. This difference could be attributed to the older age of recent seminarians: as people get older, they are expected to become more personally adjusted (Potvin, 13). Some people frown when they talk about older seminarians because they believe that the older seminarians will be more rigid and more "conservative" in their beliefs of religion and priesthood. However, when Potvin tested for this, he found no major differences between the older and the younger students (53).

The comparison also found that the more recent theologians tend to describe a much closer relationship with their mother than did those of the 60's (Potvin, 16). However, the seminarians of the 1980's also described their mother as more overprotective and less strict. The description of the father for both times were about the same. However, as Potvin points out, the change in the description of the mother, especially as more over-

protective, could be very significant in explaining the decrease in seminarians since the mother plays an important role in the son's decision to enter a seminary (22).

In his study, Potvin takes a close look at when and how a theologian decided to become a priest. He found that seminarians of the 80's are delaying their decision to become a priest until later in life. He also determined that Catholic education had an effect on when a person first thought about the priesthood and when he made the final decision to become a priest. He found that those who attended Catholic elementary school thought about the priesthood at a much younger age than those who did not attend Catholic schools (Potvin, 23). The study also showed that those who attended a Catholic college were more likely than those who attended non-Catholic colleges (21 percent more likely) to make a final decision on priesthood in their college years (Potvin, 24). Potvin writes, "The obvious explanation for these relationships is that a Catholic school environment fosters early vocations" (24).

The National Survey also examined closely the effects of encouragement to become a Catholic priest. As mentioned earlier, the mother plays an important role in a person's decision to be a priest. However, Potvin found that fewer and fewer mothers are supporting their son's decision



to become a priest; in 1984, 75 percent of the mothers supported their son compared to 83 percent in 1966 (25). The father's support has also dropped from 74 percent to 62 percent. Priestly encouragement was also found to be significant among those attending seminary. However, most of the support came from younger or middle-aged priests (25-59), which there are fewer of in the 80's than in the 1960's. Other influences, though minor ones, are vocation literature, talks, and advertisements in magazines and on television (Potvin, 26).

Potvin also compares the attitudes that were held by seminarians in these two time frames. One study, done by the National Opinion Research Center, found that the seminarians of the 1980's have more "traditional" attitudes than did young priests of the 70's (presumably the seminarians of the 60's). However, as Potvin points out, "traditional" does not mean "conservative." In some areas, the seminarians of the 80's are surprisingly more "conservative," but in other areas the case is not true. For example, 63 percent of recent theologians feel that celibacy is an important part of priesthood compared to only 54 percent in 1966. Another significant finding showed that 44 percent of the theologians in 1984 believed that a promise of celibacy should be required compared to only 10 percent in 1966 (Potvin, 36). Potvin points

out that the acceptance of celibacy would require a strong commitment, which is characteristic of older and more mature people (recall that the recent theologians tend to be older than in the 60's). But in other areas, such as believing that one's conscience can out-way Church teaching, the seminarians of the 80's are more "modern" than those of the 60's (Potvin, 31).

In the last section of the study, Potvin looks at the satisfaction rates between the seminarians. He found that the seminarians of the 80's were generally much more satisfied with the seminary than the seminarians of the 1960's. In 1966, 8 percent scored 4 or 5 on a 0 to 5 scale of satisfaction compared to 31 percent of the theologians of the 1980's. Potvin also discovered that:

satisfied seminarians have closer supportive relations with parents, are less indecisive, are less fearful or suspicious, report less discomfort with superiors, feel less interpersonal inadequacy and admit to less psychopathology than the less satisfied (51).

Potvin also studied the many variables that directly and indirectly influence a person to leave the seminary. He found that some direct influences are one's doubt about becoming a priest, one's attitudes and beliefs about the priesthood (such as intent to marry if the Church allowed it), and one's religious experience. Potvin hypothesized that these direct influences, as well as the indirect influences, "are associated with whether parents have

good relations with their children and whether the mother is overprotective or not" (51). Here again, Potvin claims that the mother play an important role in the seminarian's life.

As one can see, there are many differences between the seminarians of the 60's and those of the 80's. Each difference could be a possible factor contributing to the decline of the number of seminarians in the United States. However, it is impossible to discuss each difference in this paper. For this reason, this paper will focus on two factors that are contributing to the decreased numbers in the seminary: encouragement from priests and Catholic education.

Dean Hoge, author of Future of Catholic Leadership, writes about the possible solutions to the priest shortage in the United States. He writes that encouragement is the most important factor if a person is going to solve the priest shortage through an increase in the number of seminarians (131). However, Hoge believes that the negative attitudes about Catholicism and priesthood will not change in the near future. Therefore, all the encouragement in the world will not produce the number of priests that are needed in our society. He admits that as encouragement goes up so will the number of seminarians (and thus priests). But encouragement alone

will not produce enough priests to solve the priest shortage. Hoge writes, "Vocation work needs to be supported, but at the same time other options need to be invoked too" (140). These "other options" include increased involvement of the laity (to relieve priests of many duties), ordination of women, or married clergy. Would people accept these "other options?" After all, these options would end the priest shortage much quicker than encouragement to the priesthood would. However, my guess is that most people would not be willing to accept a radical change in the Church, especially after the recent changes that were made as a result of Vatican II. No, the best way at this time to increase the number of priests is to encourage young men to enter the seminary. Increased encouragement will gradually produce the number of priests that are needed today.

Priests must be involved in the encouragement of young men to enter the seminary. As it has been shown in the study by Potvin, priestly encouragement is very important to a person thinking about the priesthood (26). A study done by St. Meinrad Seminary has also found this to be true. The questionnaire has been given to every new student that has come to St. Meinrad Seminary (College and School of Theology) since 1988 (the total number of students is 244). Of these students, 76.2 percent said

that they have been encouraged by a priest to enter a seminary (see Appendix A). In fact, some even suggest that the most important encouragement comes from the priest (Pro Mundi Vita: Dossiers, 18). But it seems that many priests are not encouraging the youth like they did before. One study done in 1970 found that priests were beginning to switch to a "hands off" approach (Hoge, Potvin, and Ferry, 53). This meant that the priest would simply allow the individual decide what was best for his life instead of actively encouraging the youth to consider life as a priest. Another study (1972) found that the younger priests, who are more likely to be the best role model for the young men, were the least likely to encourage youth to consider the priesthood (Hoge, Potvin, and Ferry, 55). As shown above, encouragement is down, and it must increase in order to solve the priest shortage.

As was mentioned earlier, parental encouragement, especially from the mother, is also important. But studies, such as Potvin's, have shown that parental support is decreasing. "We can no longer presume that support or encouragement for religious or priestly vocation is automatic in today's Catholic family" (Laborers For the Vineyard, 107). The attitudes that parents hold about religion and the priesthood must be changed so that the encouragement rates of parents will increase. Therefore,

not only should priests encourage the nation's men to think about priesthood, but they should also encourage parents and others to change their attitudes toward the priesthood so that they too will encourage their children to think about a vocation in the Church. Fr. John O'Toole, the Vocations Director for the Diocese of Pittsburgh, also supports this belief:

I have always been of the opinion that we will not get very far in vocation work unless we, first of all, strive to reach the parents and attempt to update - or educate - them about the priesthood and religious life (Laborers For the Vineyard, 102).

Fr. O'Toole speaks of some retreat programs that have been instituted for the parents of high school students in order to educate them about priesthood. He also goes to the house of each member of the Pre-Seminary Program in order to speak to the parents and their child about the priesthood. Through programs, such as these mentioned here, encouragement will increase, which will bring about an increase in seminarians.

Priests can also overcome some of the stereotypes that people hold through their actions. Many parents are "turned off" to priesthood because of the way they see their parish priest act. For example, Fr. Eugene Hemrick, director for the Office of Research for the United States Catholic Conference, tells a story about a woman who says that the big problem with vocations is that the

priests are "just too uptight" (Laborers For the Vineyard, 65). Fr. Hemrick claims that this is due to the unwillingness of priests to change. The priests must change as the Church and the congregation changes. If they do not then people will perceive them as "just too uptight." Although some say that a priest should present himself in a more cheerful and high-spirited manner, Fr. James Gill (a priest, physician and psychiatrist) warns that a priest must also discuss with parents and young people the hardships involved in the priesthood (Laborers For the Vineyard, 12). In other words, a priest must be honest with those he is trying to encourage. As priests present themselves in a more positive manner (and as priests continue their education with parents and young people), then it would follow that more young people would see the life of a priest in more positive way. And, as the studies have shown, if people view the priesthood in a more positive way, then they are more likely to think of priesthood as a possible way of life for themselves (Hoge, Potvin, and Ferry, 48).

The best possible solution to the vocation crisis is to set up programs designed to encourage the young to think about priesthood. In Guidelines for Diocesan Vocation Offices, the Bishops of the United States write,

A variety of programs should be developed for various age groups and for those in various life

situations (parents, teachers, pastoral ministers, students, young adults, etc.) (23).

However, it seems that there needs to be a special emphasis on the children. Eugene F. Hemrick and Dean Hoge have found that most seminarians first think about priesthood in elementary school (23). The questionnaire that was given to the new students of St. Meinrad Seminary (College and School of Theology) also showed that a majority (44.7 percent compared to 26.6 percent in high school and 11.9 percent in college) of seminarians thought about priesthood in elementary school (Appendix A). Therefore, it seems logical to set up programs for the younger people to encourage them to think more about the priesthood. Rev. Matthew Vetter, C.P., a Passionist father of Immaculate Conception Monastery, talks about a club, founded in 1944, called St. John Bosco Club for sixth, seventh and eighth grade boys who have thought about the priesthood. This club meets monthly to play games, listen to discussions on priests, and pray for vocations (Discussions on Vocations, 43). Through programs such as the one mentioned here, the youth will receive the encouragement they need to consider a life as a priest.

In 1944, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. Joseph V. S. McClancy, the superintendent of Catholic Schools for Brooklyn, spoke about ways to increase vocations (Discussions on Vocations, 32). He talked about the importance of prayer and masses



for vocations. He talked about the importance of the Bishop in vocation encouragement. Msgr. McClancy spoke of how his Bishop continually lectured on the importance of vocations: he talked about vocations to the public school children whom he confirmed, he talked about it to the Catholic school children, and he talked about it to the parents (33). But perhaps the most important form of encouragement came from the Catholic schools themselves: there were posters hanging up in classrooms to encourage vocations and the teachers had classroom discussions on vocations. Perhaps if everyone talked about vocations frequently, like it seems they did in 1944, then more and more young people would begin to see the value and importance of vocations. But, as the research has shown, it seems that encouragement from all areas, such as priests, parents and Catholic schools, has dropped considerably. However, there is hope for the future. A study, done in 1989 by Fr. Eugene Hemrick and Dean Hoge, has found that priests in their thirties are happy with the priesthood. Therefore, we would expect an increase in the number of seminarians since happier priests are more likely to encourage young people to think about the priesthood (Pro Mundi Vita: Dossiers, 20). More good news is that "they cited evangelization, working more closely with lay people and responding to the priest

shortage as the most important challenges in their ministry" (The Message, 10). Hopefully, there will be an increase in the numbers of seminarians as these priests continue to encourage young Catholics to contemplate the priesthood.

Encouragement must not only come from the priest and parents, but it should also come from Catholic schools. However, encouragement in Catholic schools seems to be decreasing as well. Fr. John O'Toole writes:

For a few years ,we presumed that they were speaking about vocations periodically throughout the year. Then we realized that they felt unprepared or that somebody else was taking care of this (Laborers for the Vineyard, 103).

Therefore, as Fr. O'Toole says, vocational education must find its place in the Catholic schools. Teachers must research the importance of vocations and have frequent discussions with their classes about vocations. The entire school can have guest speakers (priests or religious) who discuss vocations to the teachers and the students.

However, there is a problem with encouragement in only Catholic schools as more and more Catholic parents are sending their children to non-parochial schools. Therefore, no matter how much Catholic schools may encourage their students to think about priesthood, the many Catholic students who do not attend a parochial school will be receiving no school-based encouragement

at all. One study (1964) cited in Catholic Schools in a Declining Church found that 44 percent of the children that come from a family where both parents are Catholic attended a Catholic school (Greeley, McCready, and McCourt, 221). Ten years later, the percentage dropped to 29 percent.

However, despite the drop in the number of students attending Catholic schools and the lack of encouragement that seems to be present in most Catholic schools, studies show that attending a Catholic school does play a role in students pursuing a vocation in the priesthood or religious life (Greeley, McCready, and McCourt, 271).

Another study done in 1981 found the same correlation:

...we can see that those who considered a vocation are likely to have experienced their education in Catholic institutions to a greater degree than those who never considered a vocation at all (Fee et al., 135).

As one can see, Catholic education plays an important role in producing vocations for the Church. However, it would play a much greater role if more Catholic parents sent their children to Catholic schools. But, for whatever the reasons (too expensive, no Catholic school in the vicinity, etc.), most Catholic parents do not send their children to a parochial school. So the question is how do we increase the enrollment in Catholic schools? If an increase could be obtained, it would follow that more

students would consider a vocation in the Church, which would probably increase the numbers of priests as well. One possible way to increase the numbers in Catholic schools is through priestly encouragement and education. First, the priest must be successful in educating parents on the value of the priesthood and the dire need for priests. After this goal is completed, the priest can educate parents on the positive effects of Catholic education on priestly or religious vocations. By showing the positive correlation, the priest will be encouraging parents to send their children to Catholic schools.

These possible solutions mentioned above do have some negative aspects. To educate the parents on the value of the priesthood and to encourage more youth to think about the priesthood will require the priest to spend more time with the people. These possible solutions will also take a longer period of time than if the Church officials decided to allow married and women clergy. However, the Church discipline appears as if they will not change in the near future. Therefore, the Church and its members must focus on possible solutions that may resolve the priest shortage at this time.

Encouragement from priests, parents, and Catholic schools can be the start to an increase in the number of priests in the United States. Increased priestly

encouragement on the youth will not be effective if the youth's parents do not support their child's decision to pursue the priesthood. Therefore, the priest must also educate the parents on the severe shortage of priests and the values of the priesthood in hopes of changing the attitudes that the parents hold about the priesthood. In order to change the attitudes held by parents and youth, the priest must present his lifestyle in an attractive way. The priest must show people that although the priesthood may have its negative aspects, it is a life worth pursuing because of its positive aspects.

In order to increase the number of seminarians, and thus the number of priests, there must be increased encouragement within the Catholic schools. However, this encouragement will not help those Catholic students who do not attend parochial schools. Therefore, parents need to be encouraged to send their children to Catholic schools. If the data is correct, as the numbers in Catholic schools rise so will the numbers in the seminary, which will hopefully increase the number of priests.

A study by Hoge "found that personal encouragement is a foremost factor in promoting vocations" (131). Hopefully, encouragement from priests, parents and Catholic schools can solve the biggest problem facing the Church today: the priest shortage.

### Appendix A

This appendix gives the exact questions, as asked by St. Meinrad Seminary (college and theology), that were examined for use in this paper. This appendix will also give the data for each year.

1. Is there a priest (or priests) who actively encouraged you to come to the seminary?.....

1. Yes
2. No

In 1988-89 82 of 103 total said yes (79.6%)

In 1989-90 53 of 70 total said yes (75.7%)

In 1990-91 51 of 71 total said yes (71.8%)

Combined data for these is 186 of 244 total (76.2%)

2. When did you first think about priesthood as a possible vocation?.....

1. In grade school
2. In high school
3. Between high school and college
4. In college
5. In graduate school
6. While pursuing another career
7. While serving in the military
8. I don't remember
9. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

In 1988-89 (103 total) 44 said in grade school (42.7%)

26 said in high school (25.2%)

14 said in college (13.6%)

In 1989-90 (70 total) 31 said in grade school (44.3%)

21 said in high school (30.0%)

7 said in college (10.0%)

In 1990-91 (71 total) 34 said in grade school (47.9%)

18 said in high school (25.4%)

8 said in college (11.3%)

Combined (244 total) 109 said in grade school (44.7%)

65 said in high school (26.6%)

29 said in college (11.9%)

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