

## **Spiritual Training in the Formation of Ministers**

**Fr William Liebert**

From the outset, I am sure that we all agree on the need and the importance of spiritual formation in the training of ministers of the gospel. We all recognise this.

A minister is more than a preacher of the word of God. He is also a leader of the people, in the fulfilment of the word of God in their own lives.

Jesus did not come to this earth to set up an earthly kingdom, but a kingdom of His Father, which would live in the hearts of all mankind. Jesus did not merely preach, but He led His followers to live what He preached.

This, in fact, was his greatest criticism against the scribes and Pharisees. They preached, but they did not live what they preached. He warned His followers to listen to what the Jewish leaders had to say, but not to imitate them in what they did.

I believe that, while you and I understand this, many people do not, and, perhaps, even many of those whom we are training, fail to understand that the ministry is not just the same as another career or profession.

What we need, some say, in this time of shortage of ministers of the gospel, is someone who can preach, who can perform liturgy, who can visit the sick, and so forth. If we made conditions for the ministry more attractive, then we would have sufficient people to do this work.

That is, I believe, where the failure comes in.

We do not need just someone to do this work; we need someone whose ministry goes to the very bones and marrow of his life. The Pharisees were “workers”, but not the type of spiritual leader that Jesus wanted.

This formation can only come about through a deep understanding of the spiritual life, and the development of spirituality in the seminarian, or candidate, in training for the ministry.

As persons involved in formation, we can do no more than open the doors for these young people in training. The real formation can be done only by the Holy Spirit, in a person who opens his life to the influence of the Holy Spirit. We show him how to open that door.

The doors that we show him how to open, in spiritual formation, are many. There is, for example, the door of prayer. Prayer brings with it a special closeness to God, which is absolutely necessary in the spiritual formation of a minister of the gospel. It is, as you know, far more than the recitation of words of praise and adoration, of sorrow and repentance, to God.

There is the door of self-denial, which he must also learn to open. Jesus warned that those, who could not deny themselves, could not follow Him, for they would be unable to take up their cross daily with Him.

There are the doors of sacrifice, of continence, of humility, of kindness, and so on, and so on.

In our formation programmes, we show how these doors are to be opened, so that the Holy Spirit can enter into our own personal lives, and literally change us.

We also know that we cannot take it for granted that the seminarian is actually opening these doors, simply because we show him how to do it. It is not an easy task, and is one that takes time, for personal habits, and ways of life, make the door to stick, or slam it shut, as soon as we try to open it.

### **The Door of Social Justice**

In this paper I want to single out one door that we must train the seminarian to open, as part of his spiritual formation. And that is training in social justice, as an integral part of his spiritual life formation. Social justice really means giving to each person his due. A minister of the gospel must have a concern for people, a concern that is more than just for

his spiritual welfare. Social justice is charity, but a special aspect of charity. Let me explain it this way.

A person comes to you with a worry and problem. Let us say that it is a marriage difficulty with his spouse. He expects that you will listen to his worry, and give him some advice. You listen patiently, and you attempt to lead him to some solution to his problem. You have performed an act of charity towards your fellow man. Social justice is, however, a bit deeper than this. As you listen to this man's problem and worry, you begin to see that his marriage problem has its root in the fact that he has no work. He migrated to the town, because he was forced out of the village by his own parents and village elders. He graduated from high school, but had no place to go after that. He wanted ground, but there was no ground to be had, so he set off for the city, hoping that he could find something there. He found a woman he calls his wife, but they are constantly fighting, because of their poverty.

Social justice now looks beyond just that act of charity, in listening to the man, perhaps praying with him, and offering him some advice.

Social justice is our concern for the oppressed; it is our concern for one group being oppressed by another. In this example, there is oppression. The village has oppressed this man, and driven him into misery.

This is an aspect, I believe, that is very much neglected in the formation of ministers of the gospel. Surely, we do train our seminarians to be kind and charitable, to offer assistance: spiritual, material, and so forth, but do we train them to go deeper, and seek out the oppression that is so often found in people's lives?

I believe we often do not, and there are reasons why. Firstly, we, ourselves, were men trained to be charitable in our ministry, and pay attention to the material and spiritual needs of our people. But, few of us were ever trained to go beyond the immediate problem of our people, to search for the root of oppression, if there is one, and there always is, whether it is the oppression of man's own sin, or the oppression from his fellow man.

We are, in fact, concentrating so much on the individual in front of us, in trying to relieve his misery, that we fail to see something deeper and much greater. And if we do, we become frightened, because the field of social injustice is so big, and even dangerous.

To put it briefly, we were trained in seeing man's individual misery, and what to do about it, but we were never trained much in seeing oppression in society. We were trained in charity, but not the deeper aspect of charity, social justice towards all.

The second reason, why we fail to train the seminarians to open the door to the Holy Spirit, so that, under the influence of that same Holy Spirit, he will see oppression among mankind, is because we are afraid of what he might do once he becomes attuned to the fact that there is social injustice among people.

There is a nagging fear in us that he will take up the cause of the oppressed, and, perhaps, become a militant crusader for social justice and the human rights of people. That may bring him into conflict with others, such as the government, or with other ministers, and with the church. He might become an embarrassment to the church, because we fear that he will take up wrong methods, even violence, to right the evil of social injustice. It is better, we reason to ourselves, that he comforts one rascal, rather than take up the cause of a whole gang of rascals, because someone is going to get hurt.

And so, it is better all round, if we do not get into the subject of social justice. Let the minister become a good, kind, charitable man. We train him to become like a doctor, who passes out medicine to one person after the other who gets typhoid, but does nothing about examining why they are all getting typhoid.

And there is a third reason why many leave social justice out of the spiritual formation of their seminarians. And that is, because some believe that social justice really has no place in the life of the minister, or, in fact, of the church at all. Too many are concerned that the principal aim of the church is evangelisation, that is, the preaching of the word of God. The social field, and especially the social justice field, really has no place in the life of the church.

Some may be surprised to hear this, but it is actually true. There is a deep apathy among many church people about the whole idea of oppression. It smacks, in some way, of communism. It is not up to us to delve into the problems of workers, of the rich against the poor, and so on. Let me try to answer these three reasons, which are put forth, as to why social justice is left out of the spiritual formation of seminarians.

Firstly, our own training has not equipped us for it. Social justice is not something particularly new to the Christian world, although the term “social justice”, is of a relatively newer era. Many of those, who trained us in the ministry, were not, themselves, faced with problems of social justice in their own training, because many of these problems were not present at the time. If we look back at our pastoral and ministerial work among the people, we acted according to the situation of the times. Basically, this was to carry the word of God to the people, and this was done through preaching and liturgy. Surely, all of us had spiritual formation. We were taught to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit, so that we would have the life of God within us, as we actively set about preaching, administering sacraments, visiting people, and so forth. For many of us, there was little or no actual poverty in Papua New Guinea some years ago. By world standards, our people were certainly not rich, but, still, everyone had enough to eat, and there was always a roof over each person’s head. The oppression of poverty was not there, so there was no door to be opened.

But, we can no longer afford to ignore that fact that, today, there is poverty, there is oppression. Circumstances have changed radically, and the minister of today is not facing the same life as we faced years ago.

That is why we, as those responsible for spiritual formation, must learn to open the door to the Holy Spirit in our own lives, in respect to social justice. We cannot give what we do not have. That is why we are going to have to study, to observe, to reflect, to pray over the social conditions of our fellow man in Papua New Guinea, so that we, too, can come under the influence of the Holy Spirit, if we expect the modern seminarian to be able to do the same.

The security of conservatism of the old times simply is not enough for today. Spiritual formation in seminarians starts with us.

The second is reason, our fear is that our new ministers will even become militant in trying to take up the causes of the socially oppressed. It is a legitimate fear, without a doubt. The fact of the matter is, however, that these young men and women are not blind. As they go out into the ministry, many of them are going to see the effects of social justice among the people they are trying to minister to. This cannot be hidden today. Social justice is a word and concept that is beginning to appear everywhere. No longer is it something that is limited to the apartheid of South Africa, or the conditions in South America. It is right here, and a person would have to be completely deaf and blind, mentally, not to be able to recognise it. What is going to happen is that the seminarians of today are going to take up the cause of social justice, whether we like it or not.

And, because they have not been trained in how to analyse social conditions, because they have never learned to integrate their spirituality with the concepts and principles of social justice, as taught to us in the word of God, then they are most certainly going to make mistakes, and certainly become militant, even in a violent way.

What they need, is to fully integrate their spirituality with social justice, so that, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, they will know what to do, and how to do it.

In many parts of the world, we have seen and heard of clergymen becoming champions of the people, and resorting to violence, and other methods. In many cases, it has been detrimental to the country, the church, the people, and certainly to the clergy.

That fear, that many have, that new ministers of the gospel will become so taken up with social justice issues, that they will neglect their pastoral work, and turn into social workers, that fear is a real one, as long as they have never clearly understood where social justice fits into their lives.

Jesus was certainly concerned about the social injustices of His day. It was the poor and the oppressed that He gathered around Him, and who were attracted to Him. But His spirituality, His closeness to His Father, was so developed that His concern was fully integrated into His life. He

knew what to do. We do not see Him abandoning His preaching, His prayer, and His ministry to become a social worker.

Neither will our young ministers do the same, as long as they have learned to build their concern for social justice on solid Christian doctrine and understanding. If we fail to bring this dimension into the lives of those we are forming for the ministry, then it will be our own fault, if these young ministers go wrong, if they take up even violence to rectify the wrongs that they surely must see in front of them.

The third reason, is that this is really not the concern of the church, that ministers should stick to evangelisation. For those who say that, I am afraid they do not understand the meaning of evangelisation. You cannot have evangelisation, without also having a concern for social justice. Social justice is an important aspect of evangelisation. Did not our Lord criticise the Pharisees for putting heavy burdens upon the shoulders of the ordinary citizens, and the poor, and yet did nothing to lift the burdens from them?

Go out and preach all you want, but if you preach without social justice, you are leaving the yeast out of the dough.

We hold a captive audience in our people before us. Yet, are we not afraid to preach about the oppression we find all around us. Take, for example, the oppressiveness of excessive bride prices. Do we exhort our people to accept Christ in their lives, to live a Christian life, by coming to church and pray, and, at the same time, fail to show them that the demands of excessive bride prices are un-Christian, and that no one can accept Christ in his life if he or she follows such un-Christian ways? Or the oppressiveness of sorcery, of magic, or paying unjust wages, and so on, and so on.

Is there any wonder that many of the youth claim the churches are not relevant to the signs of the times of the day?

A seminarian, who integrates social justice in his spiritual life, will reflect this in his evangelisation. All we need do is to study the scripture, and we see that the apostles of the early church did just that.

### **Social Justice Integrated in Spiritual Formation**

I have repeatedly mentioned that social justice is an aspect of charity, and charity is a basic component of spirituality.

If we consider the whole training of seminarians, we see that nearly all they learn in our seminaries and training centres somehow touches their spiritual life. Training ministers is not the same as training lawyers, doctors, and engineers. The academic life of these professions does not touch the inner soul of the person. We train people in the professions, in the mechanics of their trade, so to speak. A doctor learns surgery, but he can become a great surgeon, whether he is a great criminal, or a saint. It makes no difference.

Ministers of the gospel are not the same. Whatever we learn, touches our inner life. Some churches have a structured and systematic dogma in theology. Others have a less systematic method, but, nevertheless, have a structure in the Bible.

Nevertheless, in forming ministers, we have to make sure that the seminarian integrates his studies into his own spirituality. What good is it for him to learn about God, if he does not really believe in God, or follow God's ways? His study of scripture is not just so he can give learned lessons in exegesis, but it must also develop in him a deep belief and love of the word of God. He integrates his theology, when he learns to pray to the God he studies. In this way, spiritual formation is also spread throughout his academic life, and the two are integrated to form a man, who does not merely know the mechanics of his trade, but lives them.

In some training centres, and seminaries, spirituality is also taught as a separate branch of the academic life. This makes sense, because the minister must impart spirituality to his people, and such courses show the integration of all the academic studies that centre on bringing man to God. For that is what spirituality, and the spiritual life, is all about.

Social justice, therefore, ought to be part and parcel of academic courses, and of spirituality courses. To do this, one needs to research into what both the scripture and the church teaches about social justice. The development of a social justice doctrine will differ, of course, from church to church. The more developed it is, the easier it will be for us, as those

responsible for spiritual formation, to bring it into integration in the study of theology and of spirituality.

What comes from this, is a deeper appreciation of God, and the study of God. The words of scripture mean more, as social justice provides a dimension that is not found otherwise.

The seminarian learns that, to truly be a minister to his people, he must suffer together with them, as Jesus Himself did, and taught His apostles, and followers, to do. It will shake him out of a complacent style of life, and make him understand that, if he is to be truly a minister of the gospel, he cannot be merely a preacher of the word, nor, merely, a sacramentalist, or administrator, but must truly have empathy with his people, the vast majority of whom are suffering from one form of oppression or another. If we could do this, then our churches would be producing a different kind of clergyman than we, perhaps, are, and, perhaps, even some churches would find their whole structure to be shaken up.

There is a difference, you know, between a social worker and a social justice worker, and that difference ought to be reflected in the life of ministers of the gospel. A social worker does go to the problems of people, and is exposed also to the oppression of the poor. He pities, because of what he sees. The social justice worker begins from the root of the individual's human dignity, as a child of God. If he pities, then it is because some are not treating others as children of God, and in accordance with our human dignity. The social worker will endeavour to rebuild, and assist in reconstruction of social structures of society. But the social justice worker will endeavour to rebuild a lost dignity of man. And that is the difference between the two.

We do not want to turn our clergymen just into social workers, but into ministers, who work to bring social justice to the people.

But, you may ask, is there really a need to do this?

I believe that I will be able to show you there is a definite need for this, but, first, I would like to make some suggestions for your formation courses. But, we need to keep in mind that the giving of courses is not

enough. People can absorb knowledge mentally, but not spiritually, and that they must do.

Firstly, what degree, or amount, does the study of sociology occupy in your academic studies, or is it even present at all?

Sociology is simply the study of people living together. Ministers are working with people. Basic to our understanding of working with people, is an understanding of how people react, and interact, among themselves, in living together. The word of God must be given to them in concrete situations of life, and to do that we need, to have a good understanding of people.

Secondly, to what degree does the study of psychology occupy a place in your academic studies? It is through man's psyche that the word of God is to be taken into his life, and integrated into his living. If we are ignorant of how his mind works, his emotions, and feelings, then will we really be able to hope that he absorbs the word of God and makes it his own?

Thirdly, how aware are your seminaries of what is going on around them in life? Life in a seminary is usually quite a comfortable life, not luxury, of course, but, nevertheless, secure and comfortable. Yet, within a few kilometres, there may be people living in dire poverty, and being oppressed, and the seminarians are blind to it. Seminarians may complain that they do not have this or that, yet, if they had to go among the poor, perhaps their whole thinking would change. If they are to minister to their people, then they need to know what their people suffer in living. Many seminarians come from backgrounds that are middle-class and secure. Many have not the slightest clue of what it means to be hungry, to forage in garbage bins for food, to walk the street looking for bottles to sell. Yet these are common sights we find today.

Indeed, I cannot pretend to draw up an academic course for your seminaries in such a paper as this. You are far more capable of this than I am, but, perhaps, we all ought to begin to take a fresh look at what we are giving our seminarians in their training. We need to become far more aware of social justice ourselves, and then we will be in a position to revamp our courses, and integrate social justice into our spiritual formation.

I am not advocating just one or more courses to be added to what, perhaps, is already an over-burdened academic year. There may be room for this, here and there, but, more important, is that we begin to look at the whole of our theology in a different light.

I can really think of no better words to conclude this lecture, than to ask the question, as to whether we are training the kind of ministers that Jesus Himself saw as His own role. For, one day, He went to Nazareth, and went into the synagogue; He unrolled the scroll of the Book of the prophet Isaiah, and read:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind; to set free the oppressed, and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save His people.

And then, we are told, Jesus sat down and said, “This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.”