

TOWARDS A BILINGUAL SEMINARY: A CATHOLIC EFFORT

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In preparation for a meeting of Catholic bishops from twenty-six northeastern dioceses and Puerto Rico on pastoral problems, the U.S. Catholic Conference's Secretariat for the Spanish speaking recently estimated that one out of twenty Catholic seminarians comes from a Spanish-speaking family. Yet other estimates say that one out of five Catholics in the United States is Spanish-speaking. Out of 58,000 priests in the country, only 180 have Spanish surnames and only 400 Anglo-American priests can speak Spanish.

This disproportion between the large number of Catholic people who are Spanish-speaking and the few priests ministering to them or, what is even more to the point, seminarians being prepared to minister to them, has been a matter of grave concern for the leaders of the American Catholic Church. At high-level meetings in Los Angeles, Miami, and Chicago, various proposals have been made and various attempts at solution of this pastoral problem have been presented. The following is an account of the practical effort of one seminary located in the southeastern corner of the continental United States to face part of the problem. The successes and failures of that effort may be of value to others.

The Time

The first Catholic seminary in Florida was founded in the early sixties. At the same time dramatic events on the island-country sixty miles from Key West caused a steadily-increasing exodus of Cubans into the United States, most of whom settled in Florida. In 1961, far away in Rome the first decree of Vatican Council II approved the use of the vernacular in Catholic worship. In the seminary back in Florida, besides a few Cuban refugees, there were some Puerto Rican students who were, it appears from the correspondence of the period, constantly urged to learn English so that they might make progress in their studies.

In 1971, the Vincentian Fathers, who had staffed the seminary from the beginning, withdrew and the administration

and faculty continued under the Archdiocese of Miami. In preparation for a self-study prepared for the Southern Association, a blue-ribbon committee tried to spell out the objectives of the seminary. In doing so, they paid special attention to a principle stated by Vatican Council just a few years before. What has been called the decentralization or even de-Romanization of the Catholic Church went beyond the translation of the Latin Mass; in the decree on Priestly Formation, the Council Fathers decreed, "Since only regulations of a general nature can be made owing to the wide diversity of peoples and countries, every nation or rite should have its own Program of Priestly Formation... In every such program, the general regulations will be adapted to the circumstances of time and place, so that priestly training will always answer the pastoral requirements of the particular area in which the ministry is to be exercised." (Optatam totius, #1) The particular suggestion the committee presented to the faculty council and ultimately to the board of trustees was in its first part sufficiently general for any Catholic seminary:

The purpose of the Seminary of St. Vincent de Paul is to provide a spiritual, intellectual and cultural program designed to educate and train candidates for the Roman Catholic ministry.

What was unique and very special for this seminary is enunciated in the extremely important second part of the statement:

Its geographical position justifies its two-fold orientation--to admit students especially from Southern states and Latin communities; to offer bi-lingual, bi-cultural programs in the liberal arts senior college and in a professional school of theology.

The Place

At a time when Catholic seminaries were being told to amalgamate, St. Vincent's finds itself situated 800 miles from the nearest Catholic major seminary to the west and 1000 miles from the nearest like institution to the north. One might expect then that the student population would be drawn from Florida and at the least, Georgia. What might be forgotten by those who look on Florida as a place for a winter vacation is the strong concentration of Latins in

the southeast and its proximity to the Caribbean isles from which many Hispanics came. Miami has been described in travel folders as the gateway to the Caribbean; it might be culturally described as a new Constantinople where many cultures, Hispanic and Anglo mingle.

There are very different attitudes towards the Spanish language in Miami as elsewhere. In reaction to the official bilingual status of Dade County, letters regularly appear in the public press, "Let them learn English." The young Cubans, industrious and progressive, do master English, but Spanish remains one of the close family ties. Those who subscribe to the old "melting pot" theory see in the language difficulty a short-term problem which will solve itself. Not only do they seem unaware of the recent ethnic theologies; they are insensitive to the tensions of Latin America. The Cubans are more likely the first rather than the last wave of refugees who will seek safety on our shores.

Among Hispanics themselves, there are varying approaches to the problem of language. As noted, the Cubans are quick to learn English although many retain their Spanish. In Puerto Rico itself, as well as in many Puerto Rican neighborhoods in the northern megalopolis, Spanish is fiercely preserved by those who seek independence while English is encouraged, at least as a second language, by those favoring statehood or commonwealth status. As we are learning now from our Mexican students, the problem of the southwestern United States is again different. The Chicano in particular feels that the United States in taking possession of Mexican territory guaranteed the practice of religion and the retention of Spanish culture, promises which have not been kept.

The People

What was challenging in the pastoral problem of Miami when its seminary drew up its objectives was then a real and present bilingual situation. If liturgies were to be celebrated in both Spanish and English, if God's word were to be preached effectively to people of different tongues and cultures, if spiritual counseling were to be given meaningfully, Anglo-Americans would have to be prepared for the task too, since there was simply not a sufficient number of Spanish-speaking candidates. There were several difficulties in this. First, the seminary could not devote its total energies to this single problem; there were students from the north and even west of Florida who had little interest in or need for Spanish; however, that picture recently has changed

in favor of more Spanish. Secondly, a language is more ideally taught in the earlier years. Now with St. John Vianney College Seminary devoting itself to the bilingual task at an earlier stage, some of the burden may be shifted.

In the beginning, the most urgent imperative was finding the right faculty for the special purpose. First, there had to be professors who would teach Spanish, oversee the organization and development of a language laboratory where the students could learn for themselves by tapes, and finally the purchase of Spanish books. In this respect, however, St. Vincent's was not greatly different from numerous missionary seminaries of the past, seminaries which prepared their students for a mission to people of a different tongue. Spanish professors developed courses in Spanish homiletics and on special Spanish questions such as the theology of liberation.

However, since some of the students were exclusively Spanish-speaking, it became important to find professors for them, professors who could, at least for a year or so, teach the respective philosophical and theological disciplines in Spanish until the day when the student could comfortably take courses in his second language. After a thousand years of Latin as the language of learning, it is interesting to note that we have come to think that theology is best taught in the language in which the student thinks and prays, even though he may need to learn another language to preach to the man from Macedonia. At first, it was possible to secure several Cuban and Spanish professors; later on through diligent searches it was possible to enlist the aid of other qualified professors who, although Anglo in nationality, were Spanish-speaking. At this point, all the core-courses in philosophy and theology--dogma, moral, scripture--are taught in Spanish as well as English. These professors tried some experiments in teaching courses in both Spanish and English at the same time; in the long range, however, it was discovered that separate courses either in Spanish or English were more effective.

The students gradually increased. Cuban candidates increased; Puerto Rico sent greater numbers, and finally the Mexicans came to a seminary which was Hispanic enough for them to feel at home while learning English for their work in the southwestern United States. Some Anglos became great Spanish aficionados and did a remarkable job of mastering Spanish idiom to become eloquent preachers in Spanish. Others needed more prodding; where their bishops required it, a graduated program of achievement was instituted so that the seminarian would be expected to demonstrate an ability to read

VOLL

the Scriptures in his second language intelligently by the time he would be installed in the ministry of reader (second year of theology) and to preach a homily (though he might read from a manuscript, even when prepared by others) by the time he was ready for ordination to the diaconate (end of third theology) and finally that he would be able to engage in pastoral conversation and counseling by the time he was ready for ordination to the priesthood (end of fourth theology).

Bilingual Community of Worship

Beyond the courses in language, literature, and history of other cultures, transcending the study of Sacred Scriptures and the traditions, doctrinal and moral teaching of the church, and antecedent to the practice of preaching and counseling in an alien tongue is the worshipping community of the seminary. The daily celebration of the Eucharistic Liturgy, the morning and evening prayer and spiritual direction must also have their bilingual dimension. Of the five days of the seminary's week of worship (since the other two are spent wholly or partially in apprentice ministry in parishes and other institutions) at least one day is entirely in Spanish. When special fiestas occur, they too are celebrated; smaller groups also meet for prayer and worship. Even when the celebration is in English, many lively hymns in the Spanish language and tradition are interspersed. At times retreats and days of recollection are given in both languages; when that is not possible, some effort at translation is made.

Finally, it is important to underline the nature of today's seminary. It is not a monastery nor is it any longer just a place of training for a future apostolate. Vatican II underscored the pastoral function of the seminary in its decree on the training of priests: "Students must learn the art of exercising the apostolate not only in theory but in practice and should be able to act on their own initiative and in cooperation with others. To this end, they should be initiated to pastoral work as part of their course of studies, and also in holiday time, in suitable undertakings." (OT#21) The American Program of Priestly Formation speaks of this pastoral formation as field education. (#177-202) However valuable a language school might be, most people agree that the best way to learn a language finally is the saturation technique, to be immersed in the language and culture of the people. For this reason, it seems important that a bilingual seminary should exercise its apostolate and training program not in some cultural vacuum but in service

to an actual bilingual community. Happily the very community which challenged the Seminary of St. Vincent is the growing community which is our immediate ambiente, the Anglo and Spanish community of southeast Florida.

Conclusion

This experiment of a Catholic bilingual seminary has been enormously expensive. The cost of maintaining what is virtually a double faculty may be gradually alleviated as more and more bilingual professors are employed. At times the sacrifice of men as well as money has seemed almost too great, especially when some seminarians would continue as Anglo or Spanish communities exist side by side without any influence or interaction on each other. At other times the friendship, the effective ministries of Anglos in Spanish, and of Hispanics in English has made the whole project seem eminently worthwhile.

As this Floridian seminary continues its commitment to bilingual service of the Catholic community, it seems clear that with such a specialized purpose, it might expect to serve a wider clientele. So far Florida and Puerto Rico have been the main beneficiaries. Here and there in the northeast corridor, which has many Spanish-speaking colonies, the seminary has a graduate; the first Mexicans should soon be ready for the Southwest. The latest Program of Priestly Formation published by the Catholic bishops in 1976 devotes a chapter to the "Ecumenical Dimension in Theological Education" (#270-304). Perhaps in the future others may not only learn from our failures and successes, but may engage in active cooperation in the preparation of students for a bilingual ministry.



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