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The original mission of the Seminary in Orchard Lake is still valid

“SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary, a part of the Orchard Lake Schools complex, has as its primary mission the preparation of men for the Roman Catholic priesthood. Its specific orientation is toward ministry primarily, though not exclusively, to Polish American Catholics. As such, the Seminary, as it continues the second centenary of its existence, shares in the mission of Jesus and the Church in a distinctive way.

In addition, the Seminary offers its resources for the theological and ministerial formation of men and women to enable them to serve the Church in its mission of renewal.

Deeply rooted in tri-cultural tradition— Catholic, American, and Polish, SS. Cyril and Methodius Seminary is committed to preserving, enriching, and transmitting this heritage. The Seminary seeks to develop in its students a sensitivity to and respect for the multicultural and pluralistic character of God’s people and to prepare them adequately for ministry in their own communities and in the whole Church.”

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The socio-cultural transformations, which occur continually in every society, evoke many changes in various spheres of human life and activity. As a result many social institutions must continually revise and adapt their programs to the new expectations and changing circumstances. This does not indicate conformism or co-inculturation of these institutions, but rather is a sign of wise direction in order to make them serve society to the best of their ability.

The Polish seminary in Orchard Lake finds itself in a similar situation. It was founded some 115 years ago. At that time the American Polonia was different, less differentiated both culturally and socially. Above all, Polonia was less dispersed territorially, living mainly in concentrated areas, a fact which facilitated the formation of Polish parishes. Also favorable was the widespread attitude of ethnocentrism. Ties with one’s own ethnic group were also stronger since Polonia was less differentiated generationally than at present. As a result, expectations of Polonian pastoral ministry were more concrete and clearly expressed. Hence, the mission of the Polish seminary could be formulated clearly and briefly, without arousing any doubts or reservations in interpretation.

At present, we are observing a far advanced process of integration of Polonia into the mainstream of American society, and an analogous situation in the area of priestly ministry. This reality demands a new rethinking of the original mission of the seminary and its expression in a new form, which would take into account the present sociocultural circumstances of Polonia and the Church in the United States. Above all, it is necessary to determine what are the present expectations of Polonia in regard do pastoral ministry.

Having answered this question, it will be possible to decide what are the tasks and the role that the Polish seminary in Orchard Lake is to fulfill today and to articulate its mission anew. At the same time it is necessary to recognize the needs and expectations of the Church in the United States, of which Polonian pastoral ministry is an integral part. One also cannot neglect to refer to the Church in Poland, with whom both the seminary and Polonia wish to maintain living ties and from whom support is expected, mainly in the sphere of priestly vocations.

The hopes of Polonia regarding priestly ministry are at present very diverse, ranging from ministry offered by Polish priests and modeled on the services given in Poland, mainly for persons of the first generation or seasonal immigrants, and extending to an “integrated” ministry, which takes into account Polish and American traditions and provided by Polish-American priests. Many Polish immigrants, especially those of successive generations, already belong to American parishes and are satisfied merely with occasional references to Polish customs and traditions. The same is true regarding the role and meaning of the Polish language in ministry and liturgy. One can similarly describe the desires of the Polonia in reference to Polish parishes. In some cities and traditionally Polish regions, Polish parishes have survived and have vibrant community life. Elsewhere mainly because of the mobility of the Polish people, the parishes are aging, losing parishioners, or are being closed. It is estimated at this time that of the 800-900 Polish parishes that existed in the United States, there remain at present at most one half, this phenomenon seems to be gaining momentum. Moreover, the process of their assimilation is being greatly advanced, either through mixed marriages, or their openness to local residents.

Since the expectations of Polonia and Polonian priestly ministry are so greatly diverse, the mission of the Polish seminary in Orchard Lake ought to reflect that reality. Fr. Joseph Dabrowski, the founder of the seminary, intended the institution to prepare the youth of Polonia for priesthood and for ministry in Polish parishes. In his opinion, the candidates were to be “of Polish ancestry, pious, prudent and well aware of their position. They also should be well acquainted with the Polish language and Polish customs and religious traditions.” In addition, they were required to know the English language and American culture. Despite the fact that at different times the seminary formation program underwent some revisions either in favor of greater “pro-Polish” or “pro-American” formation, yet it never abandoned its basic principles, namely, to aim toward integration of the Polish, American and Catholic cultures. Prepared in this manner for priestly ministry, seminary alumni became in the midst of our Polonia “a bastion of Polish culture” and good leaders toward integration with this country’s society and culture. Scholars of polonian history say, that “if this seminary did not exist, it is certain that today’s Polonia would be different.” Thanks to the alumni of the seminary and the Orchard Lake schools, both clerical and lay, Polonia was able to successfully withstand the processes of assimilation and to preserve not only its faith, but also its identity.

A similar role awaits the Polish seminary in Orchard Lake also at present. Continuation of its original mission in no way indicates that the seminary cannot assume new commitments which would be more closely identified with the needs of general

priestly ministry. Even in the past, fulfillment of the basic mission was not restricted by exclusivity. At all times candidates of other ethnic ancestry were being admitted. The seminary also did not have the power to decide where its alumni would minister. That was always the prerogative of the respective bishops, who freely directed the men to places with the greatest needs. And since the alumni had a comprehensive preparation, they were able to undertake work in any parish to which they were sent. Hence, this approach is nothing new for the seminary, although an all-encompassing education seems especially important in view of the current changes and far-advanced integration of Polonian and general priestly ministry. The ‘realization of the general Church mission is included in the original mission of the seminary, because either directly or indirectly, it is also a service to Polonia, which today cannot be easily separated from the rest of society and from the community of the faithful.

Taking under consideration the current reality of Polonia and the Church in the United States, it can be said that the Polish seminary in Orchard Lake is needed even more than in former times. In previous decades it was possible for priests without special pastoral preparation to serve in the old Polish parishes. Today that seems entirely impossible. Besides, a large percentage of the current American Polonia is not registered in Polish parishes, but rather takes advantage of services in multi-ethnic American parishes. The ordained alumni of Orchard Lake may readily be assigned to such parishes, and, depending on the needs of the local Polonia, special pastoral services can be organized for their benefit, in complete compliance with current Church law. This is one of the possible forms of offering priestly ministry to Polonia, available previously mainly through a network of Polish parishes. This is especially important in view of the great mobility and constant resettlement of Polonian inhabitants. Relocating of Polish parishes is very difficult if not outright impossible, but a Polish priest can freely follow his compatriots and organize ministry in their new location.

The size of the American Polonia also points to the need for continuing the mission of the seminary. In 1990 there were 9,366,106 citizens who indicated Polish ancestry. Current studies state that, “Polonia is adequately integrated with the general American society, but not ‘depolonized’.” It can be inferred that it still needs its own priestly ministers and thus also its own seminary in Orchard Lake, which can best meet its expectations.

The seminary is also obliged to remain faithful to its original mission by the fact that it was founded thanks to the efforts of Polonia and is maintained mainly through its support. A change of mission, therefore, would need its approval. The decision cannot be made solely by those employed at the seminary, nor can it be affected by superficial reasons. A change in the mission is equal to a loss of identity and reason for further existence of the seminary according to the intent of its founders. Mission belongs to the constitutive elements of every institution because it defines its goal and justifies its existence.

The basic mission of the Orchard Lake seminary is also not minimized because of the crisis of vocations and lack of candidates from the American Polonia. According to initial assumptions, the seminary was to rest mainly on vocations coming from Polonia. It

was expected that priests of Polish backgrounds and Bishops of dioceses with a large Polish population would be especially helpful in recruiting students. That idealized concept was realized only partially and not by all dioceses. Recently the crisis of priestly vocations in America led to the present state in which the seminary has no candidates from the States. The seminarians are all from Poland. Based on this fact, there are some who conclude that since Polonia does not have its own vocations, the seminary in Orchard Lake lost its reason for further existence and ought to be closed. This would be a rightful judgment if there were no vocations from Poland or if the seminary in Orchard Lake was unable to prepare its candidates for priesthood and ministry in the Church in America. The experience of the last years has shown that the seminary can cope well in this new situation and was able to prepare itself in good time. Hence, the presence of seminarians from Poland not only does not devalue the basic mission of the seminary, but even contributes arguments for its need to continue. In making their decision to come to Orchard Lake, the Polish seminarians are always aware of the possibility of ministering to Polonia. This is their main motive for applying to Orchard Lake. In addition, their upbringing at home and partial seminary formation in Poland and later in Orchard Lake guarantee that they will remain faithful to their intentions. But whether they will actually be directed to ministry only among Polonia depends solely on local diocesan bishops. The seminary can merely request or suggest such an assignment. These issues need to be discussed in mutual contacts between the episcopates of the United States and of Poland. The Orchard Lake seminary can prepare the needed materials and information and implement the decisions reached.

The difficulties associated with the realization of the original mission of the seminary are greater now than in former years because of the lack of vocations from USA and the necessity of recruiting in Poland. The assistance of the Church in Poland is thus a basic condition for the continuation and maybe even existence of the seminary in Orchard Lake. Many difficulties accompany recruitment efforts in Poland. The lack of clear solutions in this regard give rise to voices suggesting recruitment of candidates from other countries. Then indeed there would exist a real threat of abandoning the seminary's original mission and therefore losing its identity. It would then become one of many seminaries not different from the many others in the United States.

The unique role and mission of the seminary in Orchard Lake was noticed and underscored in the reports of both recent visitation bodies: ATS accrediting agency (Oct. 24-27, 1999) and the Bishops' Committee (February 8-13, 2000). Attention was also called to the need for discussion and new consideration of the present role of the seminary in the light of the original intent. That means a deepening of the meaning of the original mission, not its change.

Pope John Paul II in his address in 1987 to the Hamtramck Polonia noted that the seminary in Orchard Lake "always tried to read the 'signs of the times' in the Church." The present discussion of the seminary's mission also needs to refer to the reading of the "present signs of the times" in the Church in the United States, which carries the burden of care for immigrants, including those from Poland and their descendants (Polonia).

Aware of the complex reality of immigrants' lives, the Church advises the founding of specialized seminaries to prepare its seminarians for ministry among the immigrants. The Orchard Lake seminary already fulfills the requirements proposed for such seminaries. This indicates the need of its existence and the unique role that it performs and can perform in the future. Its present "service to the Church and to Polonia" as the most important elements of the original mission, should not be restricted to Polish parishes or other forms of Polish ministry performed in opposition to or isolation from general priestly ministry. Despite the fact that ministry to immigrants has its own specifications and structures, it still always remains a part of the universal priestly ministry in the local Church. Therefore, ministry to specific ethnic groups should not be considered in isolation from the whole Church. This is the direction that needs to be pursued in the current deliberation and discussion on the topic of the contemporary mission of the seminary in Orchard Lake.

What are the impressions and comments of our readers on this topic? We ask for a response. Comments received will be published.