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Education and Formation of Seminarians in the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church in Ukraine: Recovering Tradition and Making Great Progress

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Introduction and Fundamental Proposal

The formation of clergy is a crucial constituent element of the life of the Church. Axiomatically, if both society and the life of the Church are changing rapidly, as they are, the formation of clergy needs to respond and address these changes. The priest of the future must be a servant of the Church of the future. Contemporary ecclesial challenges require a profound rethinking of the modality of priestly ministry for the coming decades in Ukraine and throughout the world. The Tridentine model of seminaries and priestly formation was remarkably effective for centuries, as was the whole Tridentine way of life in the Church. However, at least since the Second Vatican Council it has become apparent that the Church needs a (re)turn to an evangelical, kerygmatic, liturgical, and social life that will help the faithful live as Christians at a time when culture not

only does not support the Christian experience but, in fact, often opposes it.¹

The comments below cannot be considered a comprehensive response to the fundamental challenges facing the Church and its clergy in the twenty-first century. They serve as an introduction for some concrete proposals. The seminaries have formed many outstanding priests, some even heroic in their virtue and service. In what follows emphasis is placed on what might be improved in seminary life. This in no way detracts from the real progress made and the tireless efforts of those that have contributed to the development of seminary life since the liberation of the Church in Ukraine.

Much of seminary formation in the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church (at least in Ukraine) follows general Catholic models established after the Council of Trent. These models have been life-giving in the past and offer many advantages today. Yet they also have their limitations. Seminarians spend six or seven years living and studying in a confined building/territory with a controlled environment – too long in one limited space/learning context – with clear demarcation from the outside world. The number of (experienced) spiritual directors in proportion to the number of seminarians is relatively low. With 150, 200 or more seminarians, regimentation is necessary to maintain order, making it more difficult to create a personal community with relationships of profound interpersonal ease and trust. Detached to a greater or lesser degree from its surroundings, seminary formation does not always teach future priests to communicate with the world outside the Church.

As a rule, the comportment of seminarians is closely monitored. Although there is great emphasis on the internal life, it is external issues that are most readily noticed by youthful prefects who on occasion act more as disciplinary sergeants than spiritual guides. Some seminarians come to believe that they must “make it through” the years of formation to subsequently enjoy “freedom.” This approach does not always form priests

¹ See, for example, the argumentation in George Weigel, *Evangelical Catholicism: Deep Reform in the 21st-Century Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2013).

that have deeply internalized the gospel teachings and example of Jesus. Not all are ready to give themselves totally and many are afraid or reluctant to assume major responsibility, develop bold evangelizing activity, and undertake courageous missionary efforts. Few embrace celibacy, so that there are not many strong candidates for episcopal service or other ministries facilitated by celibacy. Far too many priests want a secure, quiet life without facing the real challenges of the contemporary world: "For my lifetime in my western Ukrainian parish I will have enough parishioners to keep me going." For some it is a good, honest profession.²

My proposal to the Plenary of the Congregation for Eastern Churches is to help the Eastern Catholic Churches conduct a joint reconsideration of the conditions and modality of their life for the purposes of re-examining the manner in which priests are formed. Such an effort is necessary if the Eastern Catholic Churches are to adequately address the issues arising from increasingly rapid societal and cultural change. The information age, virtuality in relations, the deconstruction of social units such as the family, parish, village, and nation, gender ideology, deracination and destabilization of the work force and entire populations resulting in mass migration and a "nomadic" search for employment have a tremendous impact on the traditional pastoral approaches and institutions of the Church. How the Church responds to a new world where networking is replacing hierarchies depends largely on how priests will respond to this world. A critical and creative response by priests can only come from a critical and creative approach to priestly formation. This is not a suggestion to repeat the Protestant Reformation or those experiments in the Catholic Church after Vatican II that proved to be ill-advised.

On the contrary, the suggestion is based on faith and confidence that the Lord is working in history. Jesus prepared his disciples in a manner that is in many ways different from modern seminary practice. For the first 1500 years of Christian

² Although it is quite common for the son(s) of a priest to go to a seminary it is very rare that a priestly family fosters a monastic vocation. For the approximately 2400 priestly families there are probably less than 10 religious or monastic vocations.