



Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations

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Your Eminence/Excellency:

Allow me to take this opportunity at the beginning of the New Year and during National Vocation Awareness Week to extend my fraternal prayers and blessings to you and your priestly ministry. I also take this occasion to convey to you at the request of Cardinal Francis George the attached final report from the Congregation for Catholic Education regarding the Apostolic Visitation of the seminaries and houses of priestly formation in the United States.

It is gratifying to read in the report that our seminaries are generally in a healthy condition that strongly promotes the formation of men for the sacred ministry in this country. This is due in no small part, as the report itself details, to the dedicated service of the rectors and faculties of seminaries, the quality of seminary candidates, and the care and oversight given by individual bishops to their seminaries and seminarians.

As you may recall, and as the report states, the intention of the Visitation was for it to be an act aimed at providing assistance to U.S. Church leaders in our mission of ensuring a sound priestly formation for our candidates to Holy Orders. From the beginning, the Visitation was given a broad focus in its nature and procedure, calling to attention major areas of formation and seminary life: concept of priesthood, governance, admission policies, the four pillars of formation, promotion to Holy Orders, seminarians, etc. At the same time, the Congregation reminds us that the report is a “snapshot” of the general state of the seminaries during the days of visitation, and is to serve as an aid to us who are continually responsible for the seminaries and for the formation that they provide.

The report itself is divided into three parts: 1) a summary of the organization of the Visitation, 2) the conclusions following the outline provided by the Visitation’s *Instrumentum laboris*, and 3) a short, general conclusion. In what follows I note a few points about the document, which is posted in its entirety on the Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocation page of the USCCB website.

The report highlights the bishops’ genuine interest and support of the seminaries. It strongly commends the rectors and staff of the seminaries and encourages the stability of their tenure. In addition, seminaries and their faculties are encouraged to remain focused on their essential activity and task, namely, the formation of candidates for the priesthood. In like manner, the Congregation emphasizes that “necessary resources” should be available for the seminaries, and that “sufficient numbers of properly qualified faculty members and teachers” should be

prepared to staff them. It recommends that an Episcopal Commission be charged with making suitable proposals to our Conference on this matter.

While generally praising the academic standards for both philosophy and theology within the seminaries, the document reports lacunae in some programs, particularly in the areas of Mariology and Patristics, as well as some lack of commitment to *sentire cum Ecclesia* in the area of moral theology. In regard to overall formation, the Congregation asks that there be continued vigilance toward matters of the internal forum; that there be a greater collaboration between bishops and rectors to ensure consistency of formation for seminarians during times of vacation; that mass be celebrated every day in the seminary, including Sunday; that only priest personnel vote for the advancement of candidates; and that there be a check for irregularities and impediments of candidates at the start of formation.

The general conclusions of the Visitation are positive. The Congregation conveys a sense of satisfaction and gratitude toward the seminary system in the United States: "Let bishops, major superiors and rectors, as well as all who are involved in running the nations' seminaries and religious houses of formation, take comfort in the notable improvements that have taken place, and spare no effort in ensuring that those generous young men who offer themselves today for the priesthood –whether diocesan or religious – receive a formation that is equal to the generosity they are showing."

I am sure that all bishops and religious superiors will take seriously the observations and recommendations of the Congregation that will further strengthen our seminaries and houses of formation. We commend the good and holy priests in leadership at our seminaries, and we thank God for the young men who continue to respond generously and courageously to the call of God to the priesthood. May we continue to deepen our love for Jesus Christ, the high priest, and for our own vocation. If you have any questions or concerns about the Apostolic Visitation, do not hesitate to contact me or Father Jim Steffes, Executive Director of the Secretariat for Clergy Consecrated Life and Vocations.

With an assurance of my prayers for you and those whom you serve, I remain,
Fraternally yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sean O'Malley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a cross at the beginning.

Sean Cardinal O'Malley, OFM Cap
Archbishop of Boston
Chairman