



*“The World Awaits Saints”:  
Reflections on the Formation of Holy Priests  
and the New Evangelization of Culture*

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Friends, I’m very happy to be here this evening. As many of you know, this topic of calling and forming men for the priesthood is close to my heart.

A few years ago, I wrote a little book called *Men of Brave Heart*.<sup>1</sup> In it, I talked about the need for us to form our priests in the virtues, based on St. Thomas Aquinas’ theological anthropology. That book is coming out later this year in a Spanish edition. My hope is that it will help us in forming our Hispanic seminary candidates.

I’ve been asked to offer some views on priestly formation in a multicultural context, including questions of cultural integration and the use of psychology in our seminaries. I’m glad for the chance to do that.

I also think we need to talk about the wider challenges we face in our culture today.

Because we’re not forming men in a vacuum. Men today are trying to hear God’s call and follow it within the environment of our dominant American culture. And we’re forming them in order to send them out as apostles to this culture. This highly diversified and secularized culture in which God has become irrelevant to so many of our brothers and sisters.

To start our conversation today, I want to mention an important new film that just came out last week, “For Greater Glory.”

It’s a good strong movie about the “Cristeros” — the men and women who defended our Catholic faith when the Church was being persecuted by the Mexican government in the 1920s and 1930s.

The Cristeros included many priests whom the Church has since canonized and beatified, many as martyrs. These priests were some of my heroes when I was a young priest. And I hope this movie will help more people know their stories. Because they are inspiring models of what the priesthood is meant to be.

I have special devotion to one of them, St. Rafael Guízar Valencia. He was also a bishop. In fact, he became the first bishop born in the Americas to be made a saint.

During the persecution, the government forced St. Rafael to shut down his seminary. So he did what he was told. At least on the surface. What he really did was start an “underground” seminary.

For the next 15 years, he ran this secret seminary. It was the only seminary in the whole country. He formed more than 300 priests. These priests, through heroic charity and sacrifices, risked their lives to keep the faith alive in Mexico in a very dark time.

St. Rafael said: “A bishop can do without the miter, the crosier and even without the cathedral. But he cannot do without the seminary, since the future of his diocese depends on it.”<sup>ii</sup>

I’ve always taken his words seriously in my apostolic ministry as a bishop.

As I see it, there is no more important work in the Church today than the spiritual preparation of men for the priesthood. So the work you are doing is absolutely crucial to the Church’s mission. To the mission of Jesus Christ.

Last Saturday, I had the joy of ordaining four new priests at our Cathedral.

These are really good guys. They are solid men with good hearts. They are men of prayer with a zeal to be God’s messengers and to be shepherds to his people.

What’s interesting is that they come from totally different backgrounds. One was born in Seoul, South Korea; another in Jalisco, Mexico; the other two came from Ohio and Arizona — one is Mexican-American and the other is Anglo. They’re different ages — from 27 to 53 — and they come from all different walks of life — engineering, management; one was doing prison ministry.

In a way, these newest priests in L.A. fit the “profile” of the types of good men that God is raising up all over our country so that our Church is able to meet the demands for the new evangelization in our time.

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI has said: “The origins of a priestly vocation are nowadays more varied and disparate than in the past. Today the decision to become a priest often takes shape after one has already entered upon a secular profession.”

And as a result, the Pope says, “candidates for the priesthood often live on very different spiritual continents.”<sup>iii</sup>

That’s true. Our seminarians today are not only from different “spiritual” continents. In many seminaries we have candidates from almost every *geographical* continent, and from many ethnic, cultural and socio-economic backgrounds.

Everywhere in our country, we're aware that our American Church is becoming more multicultural. That means that our formation of priests needs to become more multicultural, also.

We need to work hard to find ways to integrate and build community in our seminaries. And we need to be sensitive to cultural differences in our education and formation programs.

Many of our traditional assumptions about spirituality and prayer were formed over the centuries in a European context. But we are more aware nowadays that cultural backgrounds have a big influence on the way people pray and see the world.

For instance, we know that Anglos think, pray, and see the world much differently than Hispanics do. Anglos tend to be rugged individualists. They have a big independent streak. They say, "Let me know what I have to do, and then I'll go and do it." They want guidance. But then they want to be left alone to do things themselves, on their own.

Hispanics are different. They're more communitarian. They say, "Let me know what I have to do, and then let's do it together." They need to be "accompanied" in making progress in spiritual direction. They need to feel that they are members of a family, part of a community.

We don't have separate seminaries for each nationality and immigrant group, like we used to have national Parishes in America. That's good. It's better that we're studying together and learning each other's languages and traditions.

The seeds of the Gospel have been sown in every culture. And from every cultural soil these seeds have borne rich fruit. Every culture has yielded its own distinctive brand of popular Catholic literature and art, songs and customs, patron saints, pious devotions, and feast days.

The challenge for us is to learn together from all of our Catholics traditions. The challenge is to be open to take advantage of this rich variety, and to celebrate and share our traditions. First among ourselves and then with our culture.

Because our Catholic traditions of piety are not only cultural or personal devotions. They are a part of the good news that the Church is called to bring to the men and women of our world today.

So we want to make sure that we don't impose in our seminaries a "one size fits all" model of spiritual direction, formation and piety.

We have to be especially sensitive about cultural differences in our use of psychology.

Personally, I think psychology can be a very good instrument. But it's not the only aspect for deciding whom to select and admit to the priesthood.

We have to remember that most of our psychological tests and other instruments were also largely developed in Anglo and European contexts.

So we have to keep that in mind when we're evaluating and interpreting the findings we get from these measures. For example, if you apply the standard U.S. psychological test to Hispanic candidates and base your admissions decisions only on that, it may not work too well!

What's important is to remember that *everything we do* in the seminary must be based on a sound *Christian anthropology*.

The Vatican's Congregation for Education reminds us that the psychology we use must always be "inspired by an anthropology that openly shares the Christian vision about the human person, sexuality, as well as vocation to the priesthood and to celibacy."

Used properly, good Christian psychology can help us a lot in the human formation of our future priests.

Psychology can help us promote men who love the truth. Men who are loyal and compassionate and respectful. Men with a sense of justice, generosity, and a readiness to serve. Men of human maturity whose sexuality is integrated into their whole personality. Men with what Pope Benedict describes as "the right balance of heart and mind, reason and feeling, body and soul."<sup>iv</sup>

This human formation is important.<sup>v</sup> Because the priest's humanity is what will make his ministry attractive and credible in the eyes of others.

Blessed John Paul II put it beautifully. He said the priest's human personality should be "a *bridge* and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of humanity."<sup>vi</sup>

So those are some of my thoughts on psychology and cultural integration in priestly formation. I want to turn now to talk about the wider cultural context of our formation efforts.

Friends, culture is crucial to the new evangelization. I don't think we spend enough time thinking about it. We talk a lot about "multiculturalism" — and that's an important reality, as I just pointed out. But we should also be talking about "*counter-culturalism*" and what our Holy Father has called "*inter-culturalism*."<sup>vii</sup>

This is not the place for me to offer a theory of culture or a critique of American culture. But we need to understand two things for our formation and evangelization.

First, culture matters. A lot.

Culture influences how people think and what they think about. Culture shapes people's assumptions about human nature, and about what they can hope for and what they should aspire to.

Second, we need to understand that the new evangelization is the evangelization of *culture*. The Church's mission has always been — to make disciples of all nations.<sup>viii</sup> That means transforming every culture so that those cultures serve the human person in his search for the living God and for salvation.

The first missionaries to America were serious students of the indigenous cultures they found here. I'm thinking of pioneering priests like Blessed Junípero Serra and Father Eusebio Kino on the Pacific Coast and in the American Southwest.

I'm also thinking about Bishop Frederic Baraga in the Midwest. Just last month our Holy Father declared him a Venerable. Venerable Baraga was an amazing missionary priest. He wrote catechisms and prayer books in the Ottawa and Chippewa languages.

These early missionaries studied these cultures in order to transform them. In order to lead people to the encounter with Jesus Christ — *through* and *within* these cultures.

We have to be thinking the same way, my friends.

The future of priestly formation in America will be and must be *multi-cultural*. But at the same time it must also be *counter-cultural* and *inter-cultural*.

We need to prepare priests who can *counteract* our American culture — by their preaching, by their pastoral care, by their style of life. We need to form priests who can purify and sanctify our culture with the values and vision of the Gospel.

We all know that there are many negative tendencies in American culture today. Secularism and moral relativism. A highly sexualized and materialistic outlook. Radical individualism. Family breakdown. Crises in marriage and fatherhood and personal commitment. Religious indifferentism and the "eclipse of God."

We are confronted with a culture in which more and more people are living as if God does not exist or as if he doesn't matter. It's a culture in which even good people seem to be creating "Gods" in their own image — based on their own desires to feel good about themselves.

So in our philosophical and theological formation of future priests, we need to find ways to help them to understand the new realities that the Church confronts in our culture.

I think we all need to be better students of American culture. We need to understand our culture's worldview. We need to understand this culture's values and assumptions. We need to understand the impact this culture is having on our Catholic identity. On our people's faith and their ability to know and believe in Jesus.

We need to understand our culture — in order to convert it. In order to lead men and women toward the truth.

I want to leave you with one last consideration.

The final point I want to make tonight is this: The world will be converted — not by words and programs — but by witnesses.

Everything we do in our efforts to promote vocations and to form priests should have this goal. To create faithful and credible witnesses — to the reality of Jesus Christ and to the power of his Gospel to change lives and save souls.

That's why the most important part of a priest's formation will always be his personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ.

We need to do everything we can to promote our seminarians' growth in intimacy with God. Through *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of the sacred Scriptures. Through adoration of the Blessed Eucharist. And above all through their constant conversation with God in prayer.

Blessed Pope John XXIII once told a gathering of seminarians and their teachers:

“In view of the mission with which you will be entrusted for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, this is the purpose of your education: forming the mind, sanctifying the will. *The world awaits saints: this above all.* Before cultured, eloquent, up-to-date priests, there is a need of holy priests who sanctify.”<sup>ix</sup>

That's the whole point, my friends. That's the purpose of everything we do in our vocation and formation efforts. This above all. *To make saints.*

We are here to accompany men on their journey to the priesthood. To work with the grace of God to form their minds and sanctify their wills. To form their souls so that they are holy priests who thirst to make others holy — through the holiness of their own lives. We are here to make true men of God — in whom the men and women of our time can see Jesus Christ.

I started this evening by saying that the Cristeros priests were the kind of holy men of God that we should be trying to form in our seminaries. So let me finish my remarks by invoking one of them — Blessed Miguel Pro.

During the persecutions, when priests were being shot on sight, Blessed Miguel took his ministry underground. Sometimes he would dress like a mechanic and other times like a dashing playboy. He'd ride around Mexico City on his brother's bike — hearing confessions and celebrating Mass secretly in people's homes. He gave alms to the poor. He encouraged people to live their faith in the face of an atheist culture.

Growing up, we had prayer cards made from a grainy photograph of Blessed Miguel's martyrdom. The authorities thought it would frighten other priests if they photographed his execution. They expected him to crumble and to beg for his life.

Instead, Blessed Miguel stood before the firing squad without a blindfold, his arms stretched wide like Jesus on the cross. And he cried out his last words: ¡Viva Cristo Rey! (“Long live Christ the King!”)

Friends, this is the kind of future priests we want. Men who preach the Gospel with their lives. Who live the mystery they celebrate at the altar. Who make themselves a total gift. For the love of God and the love of souls. Men who present their bodies as a holy and living sacrifice to God.<sup>x</sup>

This is the spirituality that you and I are called to foster and to promote in our seminaries. Thank you again, my friends, for your service to our Lord.

And thank you for your attention, this evening. I look forward to our conversation.

I entrust us all to the maternal care and guidance of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of priests and the mother of the new evangelization.

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<sup>i</sup> Archbishop José H. Gomez, *Men of Brace Heart: The Virtue of Courage in the Priestly Life* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009). *Hombres con corazon valiente* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Homily (October 15, 2006).

<sup>iii</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to Seminarians* (October 18, 2010), 7.

<sup>iv</sup> *Letter to Priests*, 6.

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Bishops, Program for Priestly Formation, 5th ed. (2006), 51.

<sup>vi</sup> Blessed Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (“I Will Give You Shepherds”), Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day (March 25, 1992), 43.

<sup>vii</sup> Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (Ignatius, 2003).

<sup>viii</sup> Matt. 28:19–20.

<sup>ix</sup> Quoted in Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Three Regional Seminaries of Italy (January 27, 2012).

<sup>x</sup> Rom. 12:1.