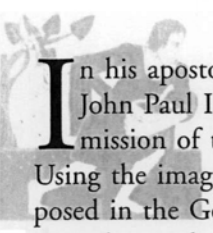


# Not the Privilege of a Few? The Overlooked Potential of the High School Seminary Model

Tobias A. Harkleroad



In his apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, Pope John Paul II (1988) focuses on the vocation and mission of the laity in the church and in the world. Using the imagery of the vineyard that Christ proposed in the Gospel of Matthew (20:1-16), John Paul strongly re-echoes the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that working toward building up the Kingdom of God is the universal vocation of all Christians (John Paul II, 1988, no. 2). In the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, the Council (1965) itself specifically extends that vocation to young people when it states, “young people should feel that this call is directed to them in particular, and they should respond to it eagerly” (no. 33). The Council declares that training children for the vocation of building the Kingdom of God should begin at the earliest ages and that “formation must be perfected throughout their whole life in keeping with the demands of new responsibilities” (no. 30). The Council describes the task of formation for this universal vocation as an obligation of Catholic education (no. 30). In *Christifideles Laici*, John Paul further defines the church’s obligation by stating that “[f]ormation is not the privilege of a few, but a right and duty of all” (no. 63), but he rhetorically wonders: “Where are the lay faithful formed? What are the means of their formation? Who are the persons and communities called upon to assume the task of a totally integrated formation of the lay faithful?” (no. 61).

The Holy Father rightfully places the primary responsibility for the task of formation on the shoulders of parents (John Paul II, 1988, no. 62). In his exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul (1981) describes parents’ obligation to form their children for a Christian

life as an extension of their initial act of giving their children biological life. He states, “by begetting in love and for love a new person who has within himself or herself the vocation to growth and development, parents by that very fact take on the task of helping that person effectively to live a fully human life” (no. 36). In *Christifideles Laici*, the Holy Father (1988) admonishes the whole Catholic Church, and especially the Catholic educational system, to be mindful of its equally weighty responsibility to assist parents in forming all young people in a way that will allow them to take up their share of the work in building up the Kingdom (no. 62). Is this task being accomplished by the church today? Is a totally integrated formation really available to Catholic youth in America? These questions must be explored if the fullness of the church’s teachings is to be truly applied to the formation of young people.

A recent study of the religiosity of American teens conducted by sociologist Christian Smith (2005) found that Catholic teens have the least influence by and interaction with their church of any Christian denomination in the United States. Professor Smith found that the lack of religiosity in Catholic youth stems from two sources: a lack of parental involvement in the church and an apparent lack of commitment to youth formation by the church. If the church is to regain its influence over young people, Smith urges the church to “invest a great deal more attention, creativity and institutional resources into its young members—and therefore into its own life” (in Filteau, 2005).

There is an effective model for comprehensive adolescent faith formation that has nearly been lost in the turmoil of the Catholic education and vocations crises

that have developed over the last 40 years. According to the National Catholic Educational Association (1966) there were 21,501 young men in 264 high school level seminary programs across the United States in 1966 (i, iii). These programs were based on a model of ministerial formation first developed after the Council of Trent in the 1500s that sought to set young men who had the inkling of priestly vocations apart from the world so that their vocations might be cultivated in a special environment (Waterworth, 1848, pp. 188-189). With the changes in philosophy concerning religious life, the role of the priest, and the vocation of the laity brought on by the Second Vatican Council coupled with growing cultural pressures in the United States and the Western world in general and a decrease in the number of priests and consecrated religious, these institutions have all but disappeared from the landscape of American Catholic education (Perry, 2004, p. 37 and Thorn, 2004, pp. 45-46).

In the fall of 2006 the Archdiocese of Chicago announced the impending closure of Archbishop Quigley Preparatory Seminary, one of only nine high school seminaries that still operated in the U.S., educating a total of approximately 763 young men (Gautier, 2006, p. 16). The stated reason for the closure was that, using a cost/benefit analysis, the Archdiocese of Chicago decided that the number of graduates who have gone on to become priests for the archdiocese in recent years was too low in relationship to the high cost of operating the 101-year-old institution (Donovan, 2006). Louis Wappel, the former principal of Divine Word Seminary, describes similar cost/benefit motives when the Divine Word Missionaries decided to close that high school program in the early 1990s (L. Wappel, personal email, November 21, 2006). Bishop Joseph Perry (2004) describes lack of support from dioceses and religious orders along with decreasing admissions as additional reasons why so many of these institutions have permanently closed their doors.

The annals of the now defunct Minor Seminary Conference reveal that as early as 1968 the leaders of the high school (or minor) seminary movement in the United States were openly wondering what the appropriate role of the high school seminary model should be in the life of the modern Catholic Church. Msgr. John O'Donnell (1968) strongly advocated that in light of the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, high school seminaries should use more complex ways of measuring their success than solely the number of priests they produce; he advocated a broader sense of purpose

for the schools. Msgr. O'Donnell specifically commended the idea of adapting the high school seminary model for greater inclusion of students who either have a weaker sense of priestly vocation or who have no sense of a priestly vocation. Father William Philbin (1968) urged the leaders of high school seminaries to abandon the mindset of seeing those students who drop out or who never reach priestly ordination as vocational mortalities. Rather, Father Philbin argued that these men are, in fact, also the successes of the high school seminary model, but due to tunnel vision that sees priests only as successes the leaders of the church have viewed these well-formed, committed, active Catholic laymen as failures (pp. 100-101).

**“The mindset that fails to see discernment and formation as valuable in and of themselves fails to fully appreciate the fullness of the church’s teachings about the universal call to holiness. The term seminary implies a place of planting seeds.”**

In the past, the church celebrated the high school seminary model as part of its overall priestly formation system. In 1968, when the number of high school seminaries had already begun to drastically decline, 63% of those preparing to be ordained as diocesan priests had graduated from a high school seminary (Lonsway, 1968, pp. 32-33). There is no evidence that the high school seminary model ever produced more priests than lay men. The pattern of formation at the height of the church’s seminary enrollment was a pyramid structure with a large number of boys entering formation as freshmen in high school seminaries and the numbers of those who discerned a priestly vocation decreasing as young men moved from high school to college to major seminaries. With so many men discerning vocations other than priesthood throughout this 12-year system of formation it is tempting to call the whole system ineffective, or at least inefficient. The mindset that fails to see discernment and formation as valuable in and of

themselves fails to fully appreciate the fullness of the church's teachings about the universal call to holiness. The term seminary implies a place of planting seeds. It is shortsighted to judge the high school seminary model negatively because the seeds it planted produced two good kinds of fruit rather than just one.

While numerous studies have been conducted concerning the effectiveness of the formational programs of major seminaries on graduates who go on to be ordained priests (see Hoge, 2006) there are very few studies of how those same formational programs affect the lives of those who do not go on to become priests. Those who have studied the effects of formation on former seminarians who have not gone on to the priesthood have typically sought to study why they did not go on so that seminaries might increase their retention and ordination rates (see Potvin & Muncada, 1990). Even fewer studies have been done on those who have attended high school seminaries and either went on to priesthood or lay life (see Greene, 1967 and Callahan & Wauck, 1969).

**“Those who have attended major seminary programs and gone on to lay lives report many unique positive effects from having such an intense formational experience.”**

Anecdotally, those who have attended major seminary programs and gone on to lay lives report many unique positive effects from having such an intense formational experience. For example, one devout, successful layman who is a former Trinitarian friar notes that everything he is as an adult person is affected by his seminary experience (personal interview, former Trinitarian, November 20, 2006). Similar anecdotal evidence of the value of intensive formation for those men who eventually discerned the lay life can be found in the experiences of those who graduated from high school seminaries in the 1960s (Hendrickson, 1983) as well as those who graduated in the 1990s (Harkleroad, 2004) and the 2000s (Salm, 2003), as well as in the experiences of those graduates who became priests (Greeley, 2006 and

Perry, 2004). Only two significant studies are known to ever have been conducted on the effects of high school seminary formation on those who graduated but did not pursue priesthood; both studies were done in conjunction with the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph's thoughtful deliberations on whether to continue operation of their own high school seminary, St. Lawrence Seminary (Craig, 1982, pp. 2-4 and Baer, 2005, p.269).

According to Father Paul Craig (1982), in response to the type of cost/benefit questions pondered over the years by so many religious orders and dioceses that have operated high school seminaries, the Capuchin Province of St. Joseph, in their 1981 chapter, decided to enter into lengthy discussions as to whether the large amount of resources, human and financial, that the province devoted to St. Lawrence Seminary was worthwhile given the decreasing number of priests and religious that the seminary was producing. The friars prayerfully decided that they could not make a decision about the seminary's future without analyzing the effects of St. Lawrence's formation program on its lay alumni. Father Craig chose to study those graduates of St. Lawrence from 1969-1975 who did not become priests or religious brothers. Father Craig found that when he compared those men's responses to national studies conducted by Father Andrew Greeley and Princeton University he found that by and large St. Lawrence's program of formation had significantly influenced its lay alumni in the areas of church membership and attendance, sacramental activity, personal prayer, behavior, and outlook and opinions, especially in terms of opinions about social justice (pp. 50-54). For instance, 96% of the alumni Father Craig studied indicated that their Catholic faith influenced their daily speech and 88% said their Catholic faith influenced their daily actions (p. 52).

According to Father Champion Baer (2005), Father Craig's research persuaded the friars of the province to renew their commitment to the high school seminary model of formation, though they called for further research on the effects of formation on lay alumni (pp. 268-269). According to Father Baer, in 1987 the Province of St. Joseph revisited the question of St. Lawrence's mission as a high school seminary. Under the leadership of Father Keith Clark as president of the seminary, St. Lawrence completed a formal study of alumni from 1971-1981. According to Father Clark (personal email, K. Clark, November 18, 2006), the study, conducted by a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, looked at a representative sample of seminary alumni, including those who were priests,

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deacons, brothers, and lay men and compared them with men whom they identified as classmates in eighth grade who went on to regular high schools. According to Father Clark (2004) the study found beyond a doubt that regardless of whether an alumnus was a priest, deacon, brother, or lay man his “personal relationship with God that he developed at St. Lawrence inspired the [life he] lived as [an adult]” (p. 15). Furthermore the study found that St. Lawrence graduates were more adjusted to real adult life than their counterparts who had not attended a high school seminary (personal email, K. Clark, November 18, 2006).

The University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh study led Father Clark and the friars of the Province of St. Joseph to adapt St. Lawrence Seminary’s mission statement to reflect the fact that its program of formation sought to prepare not only those who might become priests or religious, but also those students who were unsure of their future vocation, and those who did not believe they had a priestly or religious vocation but who nonetheless were attracted to the kind of formation St. Lawrence offers. In many ways the modification of the mission statement at St. Lawrence to one more in line with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council concerning the vocations

of the priesthood and the laity, and the formation of both future priests and lay faithful, was also a return to the model first implemented after St. Lawrence’s founding in the 1860s, a model that proved to be quite successful. Repeatedly, however, officials within the general administration of the Capuchin order sought to have St. Lawrence dedicate its limited resources solely to the preparation of future Capuchin priests. It was only through determined efforts that seminary administrators managed to resist those dictates and maintain a school that saw value in educating future lay and clerical Catholic men in the same formational program (Clark, 2004, pp. 12-14). In 1906, Father Antoine Wilmer specifically outlined the mission of St. Lawrence as preparing students “to enter any lay profession or to continue successfully their preparation for ordination” (Clark, 2004, p. 13). According to the current rector of St. Lawrence Seminary, Father Dennis Druggan, more than 5,000 men have graduated from the seminary since 1860 and over 1,500 have become priests. He describes the more than 3,500 lay alumni as men who have been actively involved in the church and its ministries (personal letter, D. Druggan, 2006).

**“The conception that the high school seminary model might be useful for the formation of both future lay and ordained men was even formally promoted in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (1971) *Program of Priestly Formation.*”**

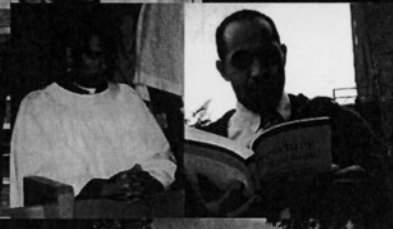
The conception that the high school seminary model might be useful for the formation of both future lay and ordained men was even formally promoted in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ (1971) *Program of Priestly Formation*, which received the approval of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. The bishops’ *Program* included three separate high



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school seminary models: the *traditional high school* seminary which students can attend only if they have a solid vocation to the priesthood and have to leave if they no longer feel called to the priesthood, the *modified high school seminary* model which allows that students who initially have solid vocations to the priesthood but who lose them can continue to be formed by the seminary in preparation for lay life, and the *school of Christian leadership and service* model which seeks to provide the traditional high school seminary formational model to students regardless of their vocational intentions (p. 79).

Despite the availability of these adaptations of the high school seminary model, by the 1970s and '80s few dioceses and religious orders had enough commitment to the high school seminary model to invest the great human and financial resources necessary to operate seminaries whose stated objectives included the reality that some students would only become well-formed lay Catholics. High school seminaries, as well as college and major seminaries, continued to close throughout the decades following the height of seminary enrollment in the United States in 1966 (Gautier, 2006, pp.1-2). Father Keith Clark (2004), in his reflection on St. Lawrence Seminary's near 150 years of service to the church,

openly wonders why leaders in the church "once provided and promoted high school seminaries for young men as an early preparation for a life of ministry to which they were dubiously called; why have we become reluctant to provide and promote high school seminary programs which give young people an early preparation for a life of ministry to which they are certainly called?" (p. 18).

Despite the many setbacks high school seminaries have faced in the United States since 1966, many lessons can be learned from these venerable institutions about how Catholic education might provide more holistic Christian formation for young men and women. Psychologist John Mayer (2004), who works as a clinician with families and teens and a consultant to schools, praises high school seminaries as places where adolescents can step away from the bombardment of the many pressures that the modern world places upon them and can actively engage in a process of intellectual, emotional, and spiritual discernment. Sheila Liaugminas (2004) praises today's high school seminaries for not focusing on outcomes, as is the trend in most public and even Catholic schools, so much as on the quality of the formation program itself. Liaugminas notes that

**“Cathedral Preparatory Seminary has had but one hope—that all who enter will know, love, and serve Christ better when they leave.”**

**—Father Calise**

she and her family decided to allow their sons to enroll in Chicago’s Quigley Preparatory Seminary precisely because she was impressed that the seminary “invite[s] young men to consider priesthood and give[s] them the opportunity to learn more about the priestly ministry, [as it also] prepares each one for his ultimate vocation as a good Catholic Christian” (p. 53).

James Cardinal Hickey (1967), who once served as the rector of a high school seminary, described their purpose as “an intensive spiritual, intellectual, psychological, and apostolic experience in which the candidate may grow to Christian maturity fostering and developing their [*sic*] initial aspirations to serve the Church” (p. 23). Father Joseph Calise (2004), the rector of the Diocese of Brooklyn’s Cathedral Preparatory Seminary, describes his seminary as “an integrated program of prayer, study and activities” designed to help students become “mature in mind, heart, and soul” (p. 19). Father Calise states that the seminary’s formation program seeks to ensure that each student is “prepared for the challenge of further study, as well as to become prayerful and active members of their parishes, responsible citizens of their nation, [and] generous members of society, no matter what choice they make regarding their lives” (p. 19). The rector sums up his seminary’s mission in this way: “Cathedral Preparatory Seminary has had but one hope—that all who enter will know, love, and serve Christ better when they leave” (Calise, 2004, p. 23).

Father Peter Snieg (2004), the rector of Quigley Preparatory Seminary, reiterates the goals expressed by his colleagues by describing Quigley’s formation program as designed to enable “young men to understand and love Catholicism, its faith, and the church; to be open to God’s call in their life; and to ponder if this call could be the priesthood” (p. 25). Professor William Thorn (2004) strongly advocates the value of the high school seminary model in the modern church. Thorn sees their greatest value, especially those utilizing a residential format, as providing their students with the abil-

ity to “understand they are called to be signs of contradiction in a hedonistic, consumerist society, high school students benefit enormously from the kind of seminary experience in which every aspect of life is shaped by Christ’s call” (pp. 44-45).

In its pastoral letter *Teach Them*, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (1977) states that a Catholic school is “not simply an institution which offers instruction of high quality, but even more important, is an effective vehicle of total Christian formation” (no. 9). In its *National Directory for Catechesis* the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2005) outlines some of the many challenges to providing excellent Christian formation in the United States (pp. 12-17). High school seminary programs are highly aware of these challenges; in many ways they are the same challenges that the Fathers of the Council Trent sought to combat when they recommended the creation of seminaries for adolescent boys in the 1500s. The bishops clearly state that the “most effective catechetical programs for adolescents are integrated into a comprehensive program of pastoral ministry for youth that includes catechesis, community life, evangelization, justice and service, leadership development, pastoral care, and prayer and worship” (USCCB, 2005, p. 201).

The ideal program described in the *National Directory for Catechesis* has been most fully realized in the United States by the modern high school seminaries. The current fifth edition of the *Program of Priestly Formation* (USCCB, 2006) continues to advocate the use of high school seminaries. The current *Program’s* focus on holistic formation using the framework of the four formational pillars enunciated by Pope John Paul II (1992) in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* stands out as an excellent tool for adolescent formation. The norms of formation (USCCB, 2006, nos. 76, 80, 110, 112, 142-145, 164, 169, 239, 256, 257) outlined in the *Program of Priestly Formation* could even be adapted for use in regular Catholic high schools as standards for whole person formation.

In a *Milwaukee Catholic Herald* article on the remaining high school seminary programs, Sam Lucero (2002) reports resounding support for these institutions from all associated with them. When posed with the question of whether the church needs more schools like St. Lawrence Seminary, its rector, Father Dennis Drugan, replied, “I wish there were 100 of them—50 for boys and 50 for girls” (in Lucero, 2002). Professor William Thorn (2004) expresses similar sentiments that the high school seminary model would be highly useful for providing a high quality, whole-person Christian for-

mation for young women as well (p. 44). Father Peter Snieg (2004) openly acknowledges that the high school seminary formation program would be “wonderful and appropriate for high school women” and that he “would whole-heartedly support a formational high school for women, focusing on [vocation to] religious life” (p. 32). Father Dennis Druggan (2004) believes that a renaissance of the high school seminary model would not necessarily stave off the current priest shortage, or for that matter the growing shortage of consecrated religious, but he does “think that vocational discernment ministry with young people is being neglected and will need to be revisited by the church if we are going to see vocations to the priesthood and religious life increase” (p. 11).

**“Narrow understandings of the potential of high school seminaries, the role of the laity, and the universal vocation of all Christians have caused many to overlook the potential that the high school seminary model has in meeting John Paul’s challenge for formation of all of the faithful.”**

While Pope John Paul II (1998) firmly stated that formation is not a privilege, but rather the right of all, the church continues to struggle in trying to grasp the depth of this teaching. Narrow understandings of the potential of high school seminaries, the role of the laity, and the universal vocation of all Christians have caused many to overlook the potential that the high school seminary model has in meeting John Paul’s challenge for formation of all of the faithful. Evidence seems to show the great value of the methods used by the high school seminary model in forming adolescents. Perhaps this model should be reevaluated by church leaders in light of a more robust understanding of the benefits that it provides. The lessons of the high school seminary model

should be shared widely throughout the Catholic educational community so that Catholic schools, catechetical programs, and youth ministry programs might be able to accomplish their role in helping parents form all young people. As Father Keith Clark (2004) has noted, very much reechoing *Christifideles Laici*, the church has the responsibility to “give young people an early preparation for a life of ministry to which they are certainly called” (p. 18), and as Professor Christian Smith (2005) notes this preparation will not take place unless the church devotes great resources to the formation of young people.

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