

Considering human and spiritual formation in distance learning: A question of relationality

By Paule Barbeau and Sebastian Mahfood

Every teaching and learning environment is necessarily a formative setting, and the participants within it have to recognize it as such. To develop a formative process, both the teacher and the student must recognize that a relationship between them exists. If this recognition does not occur, then nothing formative is intentionally happening, and neither the appellation of *teacher* nor that of *student* can be appropriately applied within the so-called teaching and learning environment. While online and face-to-face teaching and learning environments employ different modes of delivery, both can be understood as formative settings.

Human formation in online theology courses

The emphasis that Catholic seminaries have traditionally placed on human formation has helped to define and shape the way it is approached across the entire spectrum of theological education. According to the *Program for Priestly Formation*, human formation endeavors to ensure that “the human personality of the [minister] . . . be a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of the human race.”¹ The program specifically describes the outcomes for which Catholic seminaries are looking when they intentionally set out to foster the growth of a seminarian. A seminarian who has been properly formed is

- ♦ a free person;
- ♦ a person of solid moral character with a finely developed moral conscience, a [person] open to and capable of conversion;
- ♦ a prudent and discerning [person];
- ♦ a [person] of communion;
- ♦ a good communicator;
- ♦ a person of affective maturity;
- ♦ a [person] who respects, cares for, and has vigilance over [one’s] body;
- ♦ a [person] who relates well with others, free of overt prejudice and willing to work with people of diverse cultural backgrounds;
- ♦ a good steward of material possessions; and
- ♦ an [individual] who can take on the role of a public person.²

This understanding might meaningfully be broadened to all students in theological formation.

Some would argue that people who engage others solely through online learning communities have fewer opportunities to express empathy. Paul House, professor of divinity at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama, has argued that online education “depersonalizes mentor-student relationships, de-emphasizes collegial student life, marginalizes community worship, isolates faculty, and undercuts collegiality between institutions.”³ In establishing these points, House has in mind a particular kind of distance learning program—what he calls the prevalent kind—which does have these negative impacts.

Spiritual formation, just like human formation, has to be targeted intentionally by faculty and seminarians alike. The initiative should come from faculty who encourage seminarians to engage with the course materials in a prayerful rather than a purely intellectual manner. Seminarians should be encouraged to meditate on the material and to incorporate it into their prayer lives.

Further, since faculty assist seminarians in cultivating these gifts in all kinds of tacit ways, some might find it difficult to envision how online formation might be assessed. When we are able to be present to others *only* through online communications, we have to be more creative in how we measure the quality of relationships



Online discussion forums are a perfect opportunity for seminarians to realize that the knowledge they are acquiring is meant to be shared, and the forums themselves provide them with the venue in which to practice skills of communication related to the evangelization of others. These skills, along with the human formation skills also acquired online, will be invaluable to seminarians who will use them when reaching out to their parishioners in face-to-face encounters and through various communicative media.

that form and the human development of each of the individuals who form them.

The solution to the problems that House enumerates can be effectively addressed, however, in an online program that authentically pursues the human formation outcomes called for in the *Program for Priestly Formation* and measures the degree to which each is achieved. Starting with the most prevalent way in which communities of learners interact with one another (i.e., via asynchronous discussion boards), we might posit for our seminarians that

- ♦ posting on discussion boards may foster the human qualities of truthfulness, respect for others, justice, integrity, affability, generosity, kindness, courtesy, and prudence, as well as the capacity to relate to others in a positive manner and the ability to get along with others and work with them in the community;

- responding to other students' posts may foster good self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-mastery, including emotional self-control, making good judgments, and affective maturity; and
- ♦ entering into continuing dialogue in the postings may additionally foster the capacity to receive and integrate constructive criticism.

We "formators" have to be intentional about the type of interaction we need to pursue with our seminarians in order to create the kind of online teaching and learning environment that enables us to adequately measure their growth.

Spiritual formation in online theology courses

The *Program for Priestly Formation* points out that a bridge exists between human and spiritual formation as the two are linked "by the Incarnate Word and by the fact that grace builds on nature and perfects nature"⁴ and "human formation leads to and finds its completion in spiritual formation."⁵ It is pastoral charity that animates the spiritual life of the priest, and pastoral charity "finds its full expression and its supreme nourishment in the Eucharist . . . In virtue of this pastoral charity the essential and permanent demand for unity between the priest's interior life and all his external actions and the obligations of the ministry can be properly fulfilled."⁶ There is thus a definite link between the priest's prayer life and his mission, which is nourished by the Eucharist. Priestly ministry is one of total self-giving, and consequently, spiritual formation must include a profound understanding of God's presence and love in our world, and the "link between everyday life and spirituality."⁷

Spiritual formation, just like human formation, has to be targeted intentionally by faculty and seminarians alike. The initiative should come from faculty who encourage seminarians to engage with the course materials in a prayerful rather than a purely intellectual manner. Seminarians should be encouraged to meditate on the material and to incorporate it into their prayer lives. Seminarians, for their part, should be seeking opportunities to strengthen their prayer lives. Through a greater devotion to the Eucharist and a more intentional melding of study and prayer life, the seminarians will be drawn into greater communion with Jesus Christ via their increased awareness and knowledge of God's mysteries.

One of the potential benefits of this is the discovery and development by the seminarians within themselves of God's own grace. "Failure to develop this skill of discernment within all seminarians is to send them out to the parish ill equipped to assist the laity in naming their experiences of grace and awakening their receptivity to being taken up in the Paschal Mystery—the birthplace, in faith, of all of life's meaning."⁸

Faculty can play an important role in helping seminarians in this process by highlighting important self-discoveries that they may touch upon in discussion board postings or other assignments, by posing questions that lead the seminarian to further questioning, and by encouraging the seminarian through congratulatory comments on progress in the self-diagnosis process. In this way, seminarians can be led to a "greater appreciation for [the] link between human growth and holiness of life . . . and to notice the movements of God in those moments."⁹

Online discussion forums are a perfect opportunity for seminarians to realize that the knowledge they are acquiring is meant to be shared, and the forums themselves provide them with the venue in which to practice skills of communication related to the evangelization of others. These skills, along with the human formation skills also acquired online, will be invaluable to seminarians who will use them when reaching out to their parishioners in face-to-face encounters and through various communicative media.

Whereas in a traditional setting, spiritual formation outcomes may be assessed subjectively in part by observing a seminarian's behavior and demeanor, assessment of outcomes in distance learning would likely be somewhat different. One would first evaluate the seminarians for changes in affect displayed in online posts and reflection papers, in the way they interact with classmates, and in the topics they bring up in classroom and peripheral discussion boards. While the content of prayer is difficult to evaluate in either situation, the fruits of prayer can be discerned through reflection papers, journaling, real-time text discussions with others, and face-to-face opportunities using technology such as Skype. The question of how to authentically assess an internal transformation is one that must be left up to each faith community.

Conclusion

The presidents and rectors of the member schools of The Association of Theological Schools will gather in June 2012 to consider

whether residency for many programs might be waived, provided the school can demonstrate that it is meeting its outcomes. This very issue of human and spiritual formation in online teaching and learning environments will be among the primary talking points, including methods by which to assess its quality. Faculty members can help provide their institutions with some basis for this conversation by identifying one or two goals each from human and spiritual formation and creating a rubric that makes sense to the particular course each is teaching based on the characteristics of someone who has met these goals. It will be the institutional conversation that comes from this that will provide the basis for assessing the demonstrable outcomes. ♦

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ENDNOTES

1. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Program of Priestly Formation*, 5th ed., sec. 75 (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), 35; and *Pastores dabo vobis*, sec. 43.
2. *Program of Priestly Formation*, sec. 76.
3. Paul R. House, "Hewing to Scripture's Pattern: A Plea for Personal Theological Education," *Colloquy* 18, no. 2 (Spring 2010), 4.
4. *Program of Priestly Formation*, sec. 82.
5. *Program of Priestly Formation*, sec. 106.
6. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992), sec. 23. Available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis_en.html.
7. Very Reverend John Canary, "Spiritual Dimensions of Celibacy Formation," *Seminary Journal* 9, no. 2 (2003), 22.
8. Deacon James Keating, "Priestly Spirituality, Seminary Formation, and Lay Mission," *Seminary Journal* 13, no. 2 (2007), 79.
9. Canary, "Spiritual Dimensions," 23.