

## «HE KEPT TRYING TO SEE WHO JESUS WAS» (LUKE 19,3)

### A PROPOSAL FOR THE MINOR SEMINARY

*Here we present an interesting vocational ministry experience recently launched in the Diocese of Como, which aims to propose an innovative form of the nowadays little-used 'minor seminary'. Here Don Michele Gianola, director of the diocesan service for vocations in the Diocese of Como, Italy, talks about the project, highlighting the ideas which inspired it and the organizational formulas. The proposal provides young people who are eager to find their true vocation with the time and space that they need, in an intimate and homely environment which has a clear religious character but at the same time is not separated from the reality of everyday life. This is how the Sycamore experience came into being: a semi-residential community of Christian and fraternal life, where children from a given area stay for one week each month, accompanied in their journey of faith and vocational development by a team of educators composed of a priest and a married couple.*

The Gospel of Luke tells us about a man, small in stature, his desire to see Jesus, and a tree that serves as a ladder. A sycamore tree, with low branches that almost touch the ground, becomes the space of Zacchaeus' curiosity and the place of his encounter with the Lord. The Sycamore we are talking about here - a new minor seminary project - has the same characteristics: it is a place where small men, teenagers eager to see Jesus, can come to look for him and where they can listen to His Word and get to know their own real name (Luke 19,5), their vocation.

As in other dioceses, the minor seminary in Como closed its doors a few years ago due to a lack of pupils and new requests counting less than the fingers on one hand. However, during a pastoral visit to the seminary, the bishop and educators asked themselves about the possibility of reopening, looking for a new and more appropriate approach suited to the current context. I was given the task of thinking about and developing a way to continue offering adolescents the chance to discern their vocation and grow in faith to follow Christ, and so Sycamore<sup>1</sup> came into being.

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri nella Chiesa italiana. Orientamenti e norme per i seminari* (terza edizione), Città del Vaticano 2007, 35.

## A story which is evolving

In the form that we have known up to recent years<sup>2</sup>, minor seminary as we have known it up until recent years began with the Council of Trent in 1563. The Council Fathers were concerned about addressing the poor formation of the clergy and wanted to ensure an adequate number of future ministers for the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the dioceses in Italy took their time implementing the Decrees of the Council of Trent regarding the minor seminaries and it was only in the early twentieth century, under the pontificate of Pius X, that the seminary became the sole place for the formation of the clergy<sup>4</sup>. Five hundred years later, in the document on priestly formation, the concern of the Council Fathers would remain unchanged with respect to the need for education<sup>5</sup>, but it would change in regarding its orientation. The Second Vatican Council, drawing from some indications of previous Popes<sup>6</sup>, outlined the purpose of minor seminaries: «cultivate the seeds of vocations» so that teenagers can prepare to «follow Christ Redeemer with a generous spirit and a pure heart» regardless - as far as studies are concerned - of future life choices<sup>7</sup>. Subsequent attempts at adaptation can be found from the late '60s in both the documents of the Italian Bishop's Conference<sup>8</sup> and in the life of most of our seminaries.

The community of the minor seminary<sup>9</sup> is at the service of the complete growth of the boy in his progressive vocational discernment and, therefore, holds high the calling of Christians to a life of holiness, service, witness, following Jesus, and to the discovery of his own state of life.

The Church definitely aims to make the minor seminary a vocational community in the broadest sense of the word, a place where teenagers, maturing in faith and in their relationship with Christ, will recognize their identity and their mission by

<sup>2</sup> GUASCO, M., *La formazione del clero: i seminari*, in G. CHITTOLINI – G. MICCOLI (a cura di), *Storia d'Italia. La Chiesa e il potere politico dal Medioevo all'età contemporanea*, Annali IX, Torino 1986, 634-649.

<sup>3</sup> CONCILIIUM TRIDENTINUM, Sess. XXIII, Can. XVIII, in G. ALBERIGO (a cura di), *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, Bologna 1991, 20022, 751.

<sup>4</sup> M. GUASCO, *La formazione del clero: i seminari*, 631.

<sup>5</sup> CONCILIIUM TRIDENTINUM, Sess. XXIII, Can. XVIII, 751.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Pius XII, «Menti Nostrae», AAS 42 (1950), 685; Cf. Also M. Guasco, M. GUASCO, *La formazione del clero: i seminari*, 711-712

<sup>7</sup> «Studies undertaken by the students should be so arranged that they can easily continue them elsewhere should they choose a different state of life.» See. Vatican II, Decree on Priestly Formation *Optatam Totius*, AAS 58 (1966), Nr. 3.

<sup>8</sup> S. Panizzolo, «Il seminario minore alla luce dell'insegnamento conciliare e postconciliare», *Seminarium* LI (2011/3), 601-627.

<sup>9</sup> CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri nella Chiesa italiana*, 36.

learning to listen to the One who knows them (Jer 12,3; Ps 139,3; Jn 10,3) and calls them by their new name (Is 62,2; Rev 2,17; 3,2). As with all life in its infancy, the vocation of young boys in the minor seminary is not yet clearly recognisable<sup>10</sup>, it needs to be cultivated so it can grow and take on its own individual character. A service that is centred on the «complete growth of the boy» will be successful if educational activities remain oriented in this very broad perspective which teaches life as a vocation.

Nevertheless the Sycamore is not for everyone and «before welcoming a boy, educators are required to carefully evaluate the presence of certain conditions required by the vocational purpose of the minor seminary»<sup>11</sup> such as the freedom of choice in adhering to the proposal, willingness to be involved in its initiatives, the first steps along a journey of faith, and participation in the life of the church, even though the «desire to know one's vocation and an openness to the vocational journey of the seminary» are, as the Italian Bishops tell us, «sufficient criteria to enter the seminary.»<sup>12</sup>.

Some boys decide to climb the Sycamore because they already perceive the first signs of a possible vocation to the priesthood, while others are attracted by the initiative or are personally invited by the parish priests<sup>13</sup> who recognise in them a person who can respond positively to the experience. The journey begins in the early years of secondary school and is structured as a journey of faith, of self-knowledge through an encounter with the Lord, and continues, unless it is decided otherwise, until they prepare to make their first choices regarding university, work or specific vocation.

### **Small communities on the territory**

Nestled between the lake and the mountains, the Diocese of Como occupies almost the entire northern border of Lombardy. The city that lends its name to the Episcopal See is in the far southwest corner and is connected to the rest of the territory by roads and picturesque routes, pleasant to travel when you are not in a hurry or need to get somewhere fast. In this kind of setting the traditional minor seminary showed its shortcomings: not only the distance but also social and cultural

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<sup>10</sup> « 61% (three of five) seminarians claim to have had this first perception of their vocation in adolescence places this first perception in adolescence». L. BRESSAN, «Seminaristi del nuovo millennio, preti per il nuovo millennio», *Credere Oggi* 28 (2008/6), 23.

<sup>11</sup> CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri*, 40.

<sup>12</sup> CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri*, 41.

<sup>13</sup> «The figure of the parish priest (or a priest) is almost the only promoter of vocations, far exceeding the other institutions: family (mother), teachers, catechists, religious, friends.» See. L. BRESSAN, «Preti del nuovo millennio», *La Scuola Cattolica* 134 (2006/3), p. 411.

factors, as teenagers were uprooted from their environment, their families, and their own «original educational function»<sup>14</sup> to be entrusted to a kind of 'proxy' for most of the year; so too the parish experience, the size of the school size, the network of friendships and relationships were in danger of being vested 'ahead of time' in the role of seminarian that does not facilitate integral growth and discernment. For these and other reasons we started to think about the new project by imagining smaller communities scattered throughout the diocese, built around educational centres or the most populated centres. So, after studies and comparisons carried out by seminary educators and priests from the area, we began in Bormio in a beautiful house offered to us by the Congregation of “*Sorelle di Maria Bambina*” (Sisters of the Holy Child Mary) with a group of five boys and a surprise.

When imagining the project, I envisioned a family-like community, not so much regarding numbers as atmosphere. My experience as an educator during the last years of the old minor seminary had helped me understand the difficulty of living with young boys. Unfortunately, despite the sincere efforts of the children and educators, the proximity of fraternal life, usually the most fertile of soils, became a burden in the long white corridors of the seminary on the hill. So I thought that to form a family, we needed the help of a married couple. The Sycamore is therefore a semi-residential community of Christian and fraternal life which hosts children from a given area for one week a month, accompanied in their journey of faith and vocational development by a team of educators composed of a priest and a married couple.

### **A priest and a married couple**

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that the Orders and Marriage are sacraments which «if they contribute to personal salvation, it is through service to others.»<sup>15</sup> This is as if to say that anyone who becomes a priest and anyone who marries, fulfils his/her vocation, finds fullness of life, and enjoys the fruits of Grace only through commitment to the work for which the sacrament, the identity and the mission were received, that is, to grow and uplift the People of God. The synergy between the priest and the married couple offers an even more fertile soil where the vocational seeds in the lives of young people and teenagers can be cultivated: the familiar and fraternal atmosphere that is created within the community, the friendship and fruitful exchange within the *team*, the educational approach that is made even more complete by the presence of a woman, and the greater harmony that the

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<sup>14</sup> CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri*, 38.

<sup>15</sup> «Two other sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are oriented to the salvation of others. If they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the people of God. » John Paul II, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Vatican City 1992, 1999, n. 1534.

presence of a married couple brings to the families of the boys, are only some of the strengths and positive aspects of this choice. The couples are chosen (so far without any particular difficulties) after discussion with the local clergy, meetings with the project leader, and an official appointment by the bishop who entrusts the formation of seminarians to the whole team. The couples are men and women of faith, a few years older than the boys' parents, not only so as to avoid any form of comparison, which however has never happened, but also so as to be able to benefit from the practical wisdom of those who have already raised children. Some of them are still working, others are retired, all have adult children who have already chosen their paths in life (marriage and priesthood) or who still live at home and are involved in their parents' decision to dedicate a considerable amount of time to raising other younger 'brothers'. Thanks to the presence of the couple, the relationship with the families of the boys also runs through informal channels: the fact that everybody lives in the same area means it is normal for them to meet in town or at the supermarket and chat informally, growing in «fundamental authentic relationships of authentic cooperation. »<sup>16</sup>.

### **A fraternal life**

Although less than in other parts of Italy, vines can be found growing on the terraces of the Rhaetian slopes of Valtellina. As any winemaker or wine enthusiast will know, the same grape variety can be used to produce different wines, depending on the place and the way in which it is grown. So too the Sycamore: although it has its own particular structure and a shared project and identity, it grows and matures to reflect the context in which it is sown. Starting a new community is a group effort that involves the local priest, parish councils, and the families of the boys who are interested in the project. The proposal is therefore not perceived as an extrinsic initiative but it is taken on board and looked after as if it were their own. At the beginning of every year, each team assesses the situation, in constant dialogue with the seminary's Vocational leader who is also the project leader, and defines the training program according to the needs and characteristics of their community.

Life at the Sycamore is structured according to a weekly schedule that runs from Sunday evening to Friday evening and takes into account the school schedules and extracurricular commitments of each child. The day is marked by the rhythms of daily life: after morning prayer, it is time to go to school; back in the community, lunch is eaten together or at different times according to each child's schedule, followed by a time for *relaxation* and personal study because - as our Rule of life says - «this is the work that everyone is called to carry out in peace (2 Thess 3,12) with due care and attention»; daily Mass in the parish; dinner is followed by a time

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<sup>16</sup>CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA, *La formazione dei presbiteri*, 38.

for games, watching films, completing any unfinished work, and finally the Compline (night prayer) closes the day. Once a week we meet to listen to the Word of God. The itinerary of this journey is the fruit of the common prayer and efforts of all the priests who work in the various communities in order to prepare the ground, preparing hearts and ears to listen, so that the sheep learn to recognise the Shepherd's voice (Jn 10,4). «The Eucharistic presence of the Risen Lord is kept in the chapel of Sycamore, and every day anyone who wishes can go in person to talk to Jesus about his life, the good and bad things that move in his heart. » This journey does not replace the parish catechesis but runs in parallel, adapting to their particular situation; In this way the boys at Sycamore participate in the same church activities as their peers in their own parishes, keeping their appointments as if they were living in at home. The same is true for other extracurricular commitments (sports, music lessons, language courses ...) which are maintained as long as they don't get in the way of the experience of community life.

Whoever lives in Sycamore, chooses it as a priority in organizing the commitments of the week and is able to give up personal activities in favour of community life [...]. The house of Sycamore is everyone's responsibility and must be kept in order (Gen 1), starting with your bed and your personal belongings, and including the rooms and common possessions. At Sycamore everyone collaborates (2 Cor 1,24) in cleaning, serving at table (Jn 13,34), learning to understand needs before they are pointed out and maintaining a willingness to serve (1 Pt 5,2) .

During the week the children are invited to have a personal conversation with the priest in charge to check their own journey of faith and discern the progress of their vocational orientation. This discernment also involves the married couple and the project leader who ultimately accepts or decides the eventual resignation of the boys from their formation. Before being formally welcomed by the project leader, teenagers who decide to start this journey are asked whether their intention is serious: one cannot have a "trial week". The choice to enter implies a commitment to staying for the whole year. Obviously, the freedom to interrupt the journey at any time is granted to all. In these years no one has left during the year. Some have realized that their vocational lies elsewhere and have made other choices. Some have been invited to interrupt the experience due to the absence of the essential conditions (the desire to know their vocation and the welcoming of the vocational journey of the seminary). The physical proximity to the families means that you can accompany the children on their journey of faith during the remaining three weeks of life spent with the family: «Whoever lives in Sycamore knows that in one month there are four weeks and even at home you can pray, study, be of service, be with others, attend the parish events and find a moment of dialogue with the priest. The dialogue with the families, which is constantly maintained by the team and in three annual meetings where the project

leader is also present, not only offers all the essential elements for the boys' growth, but also gives the adults an opportunity to develop friendships and to share with one another.

### **A House in the city**

The houses that are hosting us are parish houses that are no longer in use due to the formation of the pastoral communities, or facilities that have generously been made available by institutes of consecrated life. They are positioned in a parish setting at the centre of the city or town so that the minor seminary is not perceived as a closed community, detached from reality. The houses of Sycamore are open: the boys' classmates can come in the afternoon to study with them, parents can come and sign school reports, accompany the boys by car to their extracurricular activities or just come to bring a cake for dinner, maybe even enjoying the presence of one of the parish priests who from time to time come to visit the children and share a meal with them. Even the presence of theology seminarians is appreciated and desired by the young teenagers of the Sycamore who see them as older brothers, so from time to time some of them come to visit the communities. To date there are five 'Sycamores' in the diocese, hosting about thirty teenagers. Three other areas of the diocese have welcomed the idea of opening a Sycamore and have already chosen their teams and found their houses. In two other areas the idea is being evaluated by the local presbytery and pastoral councils.

Finally, in order to protect educators from a legal point of view, to stipulate insurance contracts, loans, and to guarantee transparency in the financial management of the houses, it was decided to set up an association which is based at the Diocesan Seminary in Como, consisting of a board of directors made up of five founding members: the Vocational leader of the seminary (who is its president), the rector of the seminary, the Director of the Diocesan Vocations Centre, and two lay members, including an accountant who is the treasurer. In addition to the educators and students who are automatically members of the association, there are also benefactors and supporters, both religious and lay people, who currently count more than one hundred - a sign of good support, not only from an economic point of view but also for the initiative itself.

### Three further points

In the late 60's a national study group formed by religious and diocesan clergy to address the problem of declining vocations was formed<sup>17</sup> and the same happened in the following years in many Italian dioceses, and so pastoral vocation<sup>18</sup> was formed. Initially entrusted to some experts, «vocations should become more a concern of the whole community, [...] of every priest or consecrated person or believer, and for all vocations in every phase of life».<sup>19</sup> The birth of a pastoral 'sector' in this regard is really interesting because pastoral care is vocational by nature. Understood correctly, in fact, everything that the Church does should be vocational, in that it should devote its attention to the integral growth of the person, to introduce, protect, and help growth of his relationship with God, in his personal history of salvation so we can all become living stones (1 Peter 2.5) in establishing the Kingdom of God.

The Sycamore has the virtue of reminding pastors, the faithful, and communities who live together in a particular area, about the primary purpose of their ministry (see CCC 1543), thus fostering in them a renewed desire to take care of others, to accompany them, to help them grow in the faith that gives life (Jn 17,3), and in so doing bring life to our very communities, rediscovering the vitality of that proclamation that we know is able to generate lives (Acts 4,36). The Sycamore invites - perhaps more directly us priests - to assume our role as fathers which, when accepted and practiced, bears fruit for all.

It is from this desire - especially among the couples and priests involved directly in the project – that the need for more training arises. In this way the Sycamore becomes a fertile ground for new courses of study and sharing on topics, issues and educational techniques, regularly accompanying the teams in discussions, to share their experience on the ground (and in the course of life), reading from the documents of the Church and other essays. The text of the rule of life and the journey of formation for the boys is thought out together, under the coordination of the project

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<sup>17</sup> DAL N. MOLIN, «Le grandi coordinate della pastorale vocazionale nel percorso della Chiesa italiana», [https://www.chiesacattolica.it/cc\\_i\\_new\\_v3/allegati/177/Dossier%20011.pdf](https://www.chiesacattolica.it/cc_i_new_v3/allegati/177/Dossier%20011.pdf), accesso 19 ottobre 2014.

<sup>18</sup> «If vocations promotion arose as an emergency related to a situation of crisis or shortage of vocations [...] and if at one time the objective seemed to be recruitment [...] now it must be made ever clearer that the purpose is the service of giving *to the person*, so that he might be able to discern God's plan for his life for the edification of the Church, and in this recognise and realise his own truth.» PONTIFICIA OPERA PER LE VOCAZIONI ECCLESIASTICHE, *Nuove vocazioni per una nuova Europa. Documento finale Benedetto sia del Congresso sulle Vocazioni al Sacerdozio e alla Vita Consacrata in Europa (Roma, 5-10.5.1997)*, «Enchiridion Vaticanum», 16, Bologna 1997, 1568.

<sup>19</sup> PONTIFICIA OPERA PER LE VOCAZIONI ECCLESIASTICHE, *Nuove vocazioni per una nuova Europa*, 1568.

leader. Loneliness is not written in the plan of creation because man is created for company (Gen. 1,27), being alone is not good, this is the first lesson that Scripture tells us (Gen 2,18). John Paul II taught this concept prophetically at the beginning of this millennium, viewing it not so much as a way to better serve the structures of the Church, but as Her foundation<sup>20</sup>. From this group effort, from the beauty of a shared ministry, and from many other signs that can only be known from within, we breathe that hope that is my reason for telling our story.

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<sup>20</sup>John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, AAS, 93 (2001), p. 43.