Chronological Issues Commonly Arising During Seminary

Junior Year - Fall Semester

- **Separation**

Everyone who comes to VTS comes from somewhere else, and often leaving that other "place" causes real pain. It may be the separation from a lovely home that was sold. It may be leaving behind one's friends, family or neighbors; one's former work; one's parish family; access to a favorite recreational spot. The list is endless. Separation often leads to anger or grief. It may seem irrational, but that does not take away its sting. In a family one person may respond quite differently from another to the same issue - separation from the familiar, the valued, and loved. At VTS the student often gets very involved in the new venture and ignores these feelings while others in the family are less enthusiastic about the new venture and secretly long for the good old days.

- **Inclusion**

Just as we are faced with what has been left behind, so too we face the need to be included in a new community. There is for some a difficulty in feeling at home (even finding which road leads to home!) in the Washington area. Interstate highways, large impersonal shopping malls, a city that has had a dubious reputation for personal safety, all add up to a feeling of loneliness and fright for some.

We need to feel included at VTS too. Worship may be different, every face is new yet everyone else seems to know everybody; the Dean said this and that and the Librarian this and that; the professor said not to buy it all, and the Book Store says buy now while they last! To feel included takes time, more time for some than others. William C. Schutz defines it this way:

The interpersonal need for inclusion is the need to establish and relationship with people with respect to interaction and association. [William C. Schutz, PH.D. The FIRO Scales. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1967]

Positive inclusion means that we feel we belong; we mingle, we communicate, feel together with others, pay attention to them. The failure to feel included leads to feelings of being excluded, isolated, an outsider, lonely, detached, withdrawn, ignored. One who feels included not only participates in regular community worship, for instance, but also feels a responsibility toward others for this regular participation. It is very similar to Paul's metaphor of the Body of Christ, the Church. All members have their part and are mutually interdependent.

- **Role Reversals**

This has two foci. First, for all students who have been employed and making their own way in life, whether single or married, there is a certain shock in being a student again. Traditional educational systems have enforced the idea that the student is in a passive, receptive mode, and no longer is in charge of his or her life. This "please-the- professor," passive stance is ultimately
self-destructive. To move from a wage-earner, active decision-maker role, to the passive student role is a reversal that can engender anger and resistance. There is much to be learned by students from professors, but the student must continually affirm that he or she is in charge of the learning process even when it is within an established learning environment with known procedures and expectations.

A second role reversal is that which married students sometimes experience when the former wage-earner becomes dependent on the spouse's income-producing ability. For some male students this is felt as a diminution of their masculinity. Some spouses feel put upon to have to supply the income when only a few months earlier they were the recipients of the other's income-producing work.

- **Unreal Expectations**

Coming to seminary may conjure up in one's mind many expectations not grounded in reality. Some seminarians are alarmed that many other seminarians seem so "worldly." Others are upset that many appear so "other-worldly." A community free of sin - no conflict, everyone perfect, with the Kingdom just bubbling along serenely - is expected by many. Entering seminary carries a certain idealism with it, but sin is not simply a theological concept in books or "out there." Original sin (not so "original" in its manifestations!) is among us and it will topple our idealistic expectations.

- **The Threat of New Knowledge**

Each person who comes to seminary has deep within a moment of revelation or a cluster of significant events, questions, affirmations, and/or persons around which and out of which has come both one's call to ministry and one's personal identity as "one who is called." For some a particular biblical passage is the key. For others, it is a particular and specific understanding of Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Others come because the Gospel means a new society or the best of all philosophies. Whatever is held dearest is at some point bound to be challenged. VTS stands in an Anglican tradition which affirms that God's revelation of Himself stands on a three-legged stool of (1) Holy Scripture, (2) the tradition of the church through the ages, and (3) human reason. For the philosopher among us the particularity and historicity of the biblical revelation may be offensive. On the other hand, one who, after a charismatic conversion, has held the Bible to be inerrant will find critical methodologies of biblical exegesis to be intolerable at first. The new knowledge challenges at the very core of a person's reason for being here. That is the issue, and the promise is that through this knowledge and challenge a person's call is ultimately deepened and made more secure.

- **Personal Discipline**

VTS is a structured community. Within its life of daily worship in chapel, required courses, evaluations, common meals, and a common goal of ordination for most students, the atmosphere can at times feel oppressive. One solution is to flee; e.g., not attend chapel regularly, skip meals, and avoid dialogue with peers and faculty. Another solution is to fulfill all requirements to the letter of the law, blindly ignoring one's need for family or personal time, solitude, and private
prayer and meditation. Personal discipline that keeps a creative tension between responsible and free participation in community life and personal freedom to pursue other interests and commitments does not come automatically, but it is an important dimension in preparation for ordained ministry.

**Junior Year - Spring Semester**

- **Personal Worth Before God**

The first semester exhilaration of having answered God's call and being in theological seminary is waning. As in all institutions, a "pecking order" is being established. The bright and the struggling have been identified among peers and faculty. One's faith is being challenged not only in class but by other students in discussion. In a sense, one's personal "halo" is being tarnished by new knowledge and discourse. For a few, academic failure has placed them on academic probation. Others may have experienced difficulty in being placed for CPE or Field Education, and in some measure, receiving each negative decision as a personal failure or rejection. The annual evaluation by the Faculty for "Personal Qualifications to Exercise the Ordained Ministry of the Church," required by the Canons of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church, looms as a threat equaling end-of-the-semester course grades.

In its most severe form the accumulative anxiety running through all of this leads the student to question his or her personal worth before God. "Am I worthy to seek ordination?" Often, and perhaps of more concern, the question is never articulated, and the student takes on a defensive posture which defiantly proclaims, "I am worthy." The wise student will be open about the anxiety, weighing and sifting all experiences - positive and negative - with another person in confidence. The Gospel affirms our personal worthiness before God regardless of grades or evaluations. One's personal worth and professional worthiness need not be confused.

- **Experience of the VTS Community**

Expectations undergo some realignment in the second semester. Chapel services are not as bad (or good) as expected. Dorm life, classes, people, all are something a little different, either positively or negatively, than was expected. Self expectations need to be brought in line with reality. Often some seminarians have expected too much of themselves. It is also true that some have expected too little of themselves.

In all of this, each student makes the responsible decisions without which a community cannot exist. Every individual decides, for example, whether daily worship is important for himself or herself. Within this decision is the discovery that what others decide is important too, for in the Body the "eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" (I Cor. 12:21) So realignment takes place, but the major issue is that we are a community of diverse persons in need of one another at every level. A preacher may preach, but not to an empty house. A teacher may teach, but learners are needed. The cost of being a member of an interdependent community is one of responsible participation, a perseverance on the part of all.

- **Anxiety About Clinical Pastoral Education**
A particular form of anxiety concerns looking ahead to the summer CPE experience. "War stories" told by middlers and seniors are, on the one hand, a mild form of hazing. On the other hand, many are valid descriptions intended to convey the positive value of CPE to juniors and provide moments for middlers to celebrate growth. However, for the junior hearing about a confrontation between supervisor or patient and student, the positive value is sometimes lost. There is the legitimate anxiety of wondering how well one will function pastorally in a crisis situation. There is the fear of gaining deeper self-knowledge about the "shadow side" of oneself. There is legitimate grief about leaving familiar friends and territory at VTS, and facing again the issue of inclusion into a new group of people in a "strange land."

**Summer Following the Junior Year**

- **CPE Issues**

About half the students in CPE will remain in the Washington area. Usually, single students are willing to apply for CPE placements outside the local area, since married students will probably experience greater hardship if required to leave for the summer. Although local placement cannot be guaranteed, over the past decade most married students who desired it received it.

Therefore, when student life is discussed, there is a difference for those who continue to live in their homes locally and those who have had to move from a dormitory into another locale and new housing. For the student who moves away for CPE there may be excitement and frustration related to being in a new place. For those who remain here, there may be the promise of support among spouses and classmates experiencing more or less the same thing. There also may be some sense of frustration as a classmate expounds on CPE's virtues while the listener has experienced only its vicissitudes.

In almost every CPE setting the student is faced with crisis situations of illness, dying, death, or grief. These provoke strong feelings in the student. As one passes through the "valley of the shadow of death" with another, feelings of inadequacy as a pastor sometimes emerge. From this, one often senses a loss of self-esteem. Sometimes conflict between the supervisor and student or between peers in the CPE group challenges self-esteem. In viewing the issue of self-esteem one is tempted, in self-defense, to ignore or be insensitive to the "shadow side" of oneself - those thoughts, feelings, and actions that are neither pretty nor pastoral as we relate to others.

The ability to relate to people of all sorts and conditions in an open, caring, serving manner is not always easy for the best of pastors. The CPE student will be challenged more than once to enter a significant relationship that it would be easier to avoid.

Finally, CPE students face the issue of learning how to protect themselves without becoming closed and defensive. Setting appropriate limits is the learning needed. The pastor who is a doormat, or one so open and vulnerable as to be eaten up alive by never-ending or impossible demands, is of little use to anyone, much less one in need of a pastor. To be able to give up a "Messiah complex" to save the world, and yet still to serve, to be able to set realistic and responsible limits for the use of one's time and energy are important life issues for the CPE student.
Middle Year - Fall Semester

- **CPE Postscript**

The intense CPE experience sets an internal agenda in the lives of a number of students. Some may feel elated, "freed up," joyful in ways never before experienced. Some few may feel depressed, burdened with unresolved anger. There is a need to leave CPE behind without shelving or forgetting the learnings. Positive new behavior needs to be re-enforced through practice, and the new learnings translated into the more normative settings of parish, family and school.

Often there is a need to reaffirm one's commitment to the expectations of the VTS community such as regular study, daily chapel, and the life of the community. An immature response to these responsibilities is to say, "In CPE I learned to be free of what others expect of me!" A more mature response is to embrace one's new found freedom of self, offering oneself responsibly and freely within the framework of this community.

To be able to come out of CPE and make a distinction between one's personal agenda for continued growth and one's continued professional and academic growth is essential. To be able to say, "I'm working on some anger within me toward authority," may be a sign of genuine personal growth. Not to turn in a required paper on time or failure to be on time for a supervisory session because of unresolved anger is to confuse personal growth trauma with professional growth needs.

Often students find a counseling relationship helpful in meeting their personal growth needs. This takes energy away from study and field work. But it is a constructive use of energy compared with the draining, de-energizing effect of "emotional wheel-spinning." The Chaplain is available to help students think through decisions about entering counseling.

- **Establishing Time Priorities and Setting Limits**

The middle year is without question the heaviest - academically, emotionally, and in time demanded by field commitments. It requires the student to set priorities for use of time and to set limits for involvement. So much opens up as one becomes involved in the field parish. So much has opened up internally as a result of CPE. So much is opening up as theological study deepens. A middler's common response is "I can't handle it." True and false. It is true, in that we cannot pursue every possibility or demand made upon us. It is false, in that each person has the ability and responsibility to set priorities and limits. No one can set priorities in a static sense, e.g., family needs are always more important than study. For some occasions that's true. For others, not. Setting priorities is a function of goals, perceiving the whole, looking ahead, and clear communication with one's spouse, if married. Setting limits usually boils down to knowing that God loves you (and so might a person asking you to do something) even if you say "No." We all have our limits and to acknowledge them is to be human.
Middle Year - Spring Semester

- **Fatigue**

Second semester middlers are often tired. Working through the demands of classes, field work, family, and internal growth takes its toll.

- **Control Needs**

Just as inclusion needs dominated the agenda of first semester juniors and again appeared in the context of the first semester middler entering a new field training parish, so now control needs become primary. That is, after a student is "in," has some turf in which he or she belongs, then the issue becomes what do I do with this? The interpersonal need for control is the need to establish and maintain a satisfactory relationship with people with respect to control and power. Control behavior refers to the decision-making process between people. Some terms that connot aspects of primarily positive control are, "power, authority, dominance, influence, control, ruler, supervisor, officer, leader." Aspects of negative control are connoted by "rebellion, resistance, follower, anarchy, submissive, henpecked, milquetoasts." [William C. Schultz. *The FIRO Scales Manual.* (Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1967) p. 5.]

It is obvious that control needs need not wait till this semester to emerge. However, field supervisors have noted for several years the pattern of seminarians' inclusion needs in the first semester and control needs in the second semester. In the field parish the student begins to take hold of his or her ministry there as one where he or she is "not a student," i.e., the student feels a genuine sense of having power to affect the outcome in a particular ministry. To help students gain this sense of "not a student" (that is, not being in a dependent, passive state) is a positive accomplishment in the educational process. Being "not a student" is very different from "not being a student."

- **Integrating, Solidifying, Celebrating**

As the middle year comes to a close, most of the students begin to see it all coming together in a meaningful pattern. Integrating conceptual knowledge and experiential learning is occurring. Some may feel quite lost, however, and for them more time in preparation may be needed. A few students find an Intern Year between the middle and senior years a helpful experience, one that provides opportunity both for more experiential involvement in ministry and for reflective, cognitive learning from study at a less-hurried pace. Students who wish to explore a year of work in a parish or some other field setting for an official internship should contact the Field Education Office to discover what is available. In doing an official Intern Year, the student's health insurance continues and no readmittance to seminary procedure is required.
Summer Following the Middle Year

- **Making Money**

Some students must take secular jobs to make ends meet financially. This necessity may close the door on other options, such as some special training programs, but must be faced realistically.

- **Rest**

Whatever a student does, it is important for the student to obtain adequate rest and recreation to recuperate from the middle year and to charge the batteries for the senior year.

- **Spending Time with the Family**

Adequate time for family life should not be postponed until summer. However, it is true that summer provides a good time to be with one's family in a less-pressured manner. It is especially good for the parent-student to use the time to be with his or her children.

Senior Year - Fall Semester

- **General Ordination Exams (GOEs)**

The GOEs are given in January. This national examination is taken by seminarians from most dioceses. (It is the decision of a bishop whether or not seminarians from that diocese take GOEs.) It is a demanding exam. One part is a fairly brief closed-book test. The other part is a lengthier open-book response to essay questions and case-type situations. Drawing on all areas of theological study, seminarians spend five days responding to the questions. They are then graded "proficient" or "not proficient" in seven areas of theological training. Seminarians prepare rigorously for GOEs, because failure in any area of knowledge, such as theology, scripture, or contemporary society may mean further examination in the home diocese, re-taking of one or more GOE sections, and sometimes delay of ordination to the diaconate.

- **Affection Needs**

Like inclusion and control needs, we all have needs for affection. In the senior year, these have in most cases been met both at the seminary and in the field site. That is, strong emotional ties have been formed.

The interpersonal need for affection is the need to establish and maintain a satisfactory relationship with respect to love and affection. Some terms that connote aspects of primarily positive affection are "love, like, emotionally close, personal, intimate, friend." Aspects of negative affection are connoted by "hate, cool, dislike, emotionally distant, rejecting." [William C. Schutz. The FIRO Scales. Palo Alto: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1967, p. 5]

The senior year is both the crown of these intimate relationships and also the end of them, for graduation comes quicker than most anticipate.
• **Seeking Balance Between Academic and Field Work**

Often the senior finds affection needs strongly met in the field parish, and this encourages the student to spend more than the contracted twelve hours there. Sometimes students will cut class, skip chapel or lunch, because the "pull" of field work is so great. Classes, scheduled VTS worship, and meals take precedence over field work. Students who violate this are being irresponsible to their own prior commitments to the VTS community. The issue is to find the proper balance between academic and field work. Both are important. As one nears ordination, the temptation is to give up one for the other. A few students will err on one side or the other of this tension.

• **Being King or Queen of the Mountain**

Seniors here as everywhere enjoy that exalted place of being at the top. The temptation is to ignore new students. The positive opportunity is to ease the way of new students by sharing deeply and genuinely from one's own journey at VTS. Seniors can help juniors become familiar with a parish training site for potential field placement, and they may give juniors a more balanced view of CPE than middlers who still stand very close to the intense CPE experience.

• **Developing and Practicing a Life of Private Prayer**

This does not have to wait (hopefully it does not wait) for the senior year. But those seniors who still struggle toward helpful private devotional practice see the need as they approach the day of no longer being in the rich environment of daily worship in a community.

**Senior Year - Spring Semester**

• **Job Hunting**

A number of students each year find themselves released by their sponsoring Bishop to find jobs anywhere in the Church. Some are assured jobs by their Bishops but most wait until late Spring before knowing their first assignment. Both situations produce anxiety. Not knowing where you will move to but knowing you must move is difficult.

• **GOE Results**

The agony of taking GOEs is perhaps surpassed only in waiting for the results, which usually come in March.

• **Ennui**

After GOEs and the job are nailed down satisfactorily, a listless feeling often sets in. As Spring fever arrives, seniors sometimes catch fatal cases. Life seems to stand still until Commencement and moving day and ordination. All demands by classes, field work, and whomever seem to be an unjust imposition.
• **Closure**

Being able to say good-bye to friends at seminary and in field parishes is important. Closure needs to be intentional. That is, we need to say our thank-you's, express our disappointments, regrets, joys, fulfillments in a straightforward manner. Not to do so is to discover later that though the body may have moved on the spirit is still back at VTS or the field parish. Liturgizing closure through farewell parties, services of worship celebrating the past time together, and simple handshakes, embraces, or personal notes is valuable. In order to be free to enter a new ministry after ordination, it is essential to close the field-site ministry gracefully and straightforwardly.

• **Celebration**

Commencement day and the events leading up to it are occasions for celebration. Each seminarian who has earned the degree of Master in Divinity is ready to continue further ministry according to the supervisors, lay committees, and faculty. Family and friends gather, along with members of the field education sites, alumni, alumnae, and others in the seminary community. On the evening preceding commencement, the Eucharist is celebrated in the context of *A Service for the Mission of the Church*. This is an appropriate consummation of a process of forming Christian pastors who in their daily chapel worship at VTS have seen over the altar window the Gospel words, "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel."