



From the Desk of the Executive Director

The spring issue of Volume 13 features a report on the September 2006 symposium on the experience of priests ordained five to nine years, which used as its principal resource the book by Dean Hoge which bears the same title. The event was hosted by the Institute for Priests and Presbyterates (IPP), a program of Saint Meinrad School of Theology. Originally scheduled to be held at Saint Meinrad, the venue was changed to the Galt House in Louisville. When the abbey's renovation schedule changed the Seminary Department was actively involved in planning and helping to fund the event.

I am grateful to Father Kevin Nadolski, OSFS, for providing an overview and naming the connecting points that emerged from the conversation. I also would like to express my appreciation to Father Ronald Knott, director of IPP, and Father Gabriel Hodges, OSB, his assistant, for the investment of time, talent, and financial resources necessary to make the conversation happen. In addition, I would like to acknowledge our principal benefactor, the Religion Division of the Lilly Endowment, for their continued support. Additional funding came from a Catholic foundation that prefers to remain anonymous, but we gratefully acknowledge their investment in this conversation.

Although this report is but a portion of the conversation, hopefully you will find it both enlightening and a practical resource for your ministry and leadership role in the church. As the symposium unfolded, an image emerged that underscored the significance of the conversation. It had less to do with the early years of the priesthood and more to do with the way we are church together, how we interact on difficult issues. In general, I do believe, as church, we are not very good at recognizing and then giving expression to what most deeply challenges this relationship.

The experience, the insight, was truly unexpected. It was, in fact, simply an image, that of an "elephant" in the midst of our assembly—a large, clumsy beast that many did not recognize, and of those who did, almost all refused to acknowledge. After the event, this reality or group dynamic was further enhanced when one

of the participants shared the following poem by Terry Kettering, "The Elephant In The Room." (Reprinted with permission.)

The Elephant In The Room

By Terry Kettering



There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get
around it.
Yet we squeeze by with "How are you?" and "I'm
fine...
And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.
We talk about the weather.
We talk about work.
We talk about everything else...
Except the elephant in the room.
We all know it is there.
We are thinking about the elephant as we talk
together.
It is constantly on our minds.
For, you see, it is a very big elephant.
It has hurt us all.
But we do not talk about the elephant in the
room.
Oh, please, say her name.
Oh, please, say "Barbara" again.
Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the
room.
For if we talk about her death,
Perhaps we can talk about her life.
Can I say "Barbara" to you and not have you look
away:
For if I cannot,
then you are leaving me alone...
in a room...
with an elephant.

This simple reflection is multilayered and applicable to a variety of contexts and group interactions. If you search the Internet for the poem, the context most often referenced is that of critical illness or the mysteries of death and dying. In the Louisville gathering, the beast was spotted early in the meeting but even as the conference ended it was only partially recognized. Actually, we probably had a whole herd of elephants and issues staring at us from the newsprint that lined the walls of the meeting room but failed to give them even the gentlest and least threatening permission to enter into our conversations.

On one level, the image of the “elephant” is a metaphor for whatever is within our communications and interactions that has the potential to be an obstacle and impede progress or keep us from moving forward with strength. The beast, whether one or many, may be perceived as benign, a neutral presence—or the reverse, a hostile influence that threatens to crush our enterprise and carry us down a path of total destruction. In reality, the elephant simply is something that many, if not most, know to be truly important to what we are about, our ministry, our mission as church. In the limited context of this symposium, we made modest efforts at naming and recognition. Hopefully IPP and agencies of the church will continue the process and the conversation.

So, what elephant was named during the symposium? Hopefully that will be the reader’s personal discovery. A beast of burden, or a playful scamp? An ominous presence, or a vehicle for God’s Word and the power of the Spirit to be made manifest?

So, when the conversation stops or breaks down, when the agenda does not unfold as planned, or when the development of a project gets bogged down, the question might well be asked, “Where is the elephant?” What is that very large, imposing and powerful presupposition, bit of information, or personal truth that is not being recognized or allowed to be named. All too frequently in “church” conversations, there is at least one mighty beast hidden from view, but very much present to the majority in the room—and sometimes it is a whole herd!

You will encounter at least one elephant in the symposium proceedings, maybe more. Hopefully, every issue of *Seminary Journal* leads to a similar discovery. That the elephants are named or acknowledged is, in my humble opinion, one of the manifestations of God’s gracious presence active in our midst.

For the symposium on the “Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years” study, it is unfortunate that the energy of this realization was not experienced earlier. I believe it would have further enhanced an already productive conversation on the early years of ordained ministry.



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PLEASE NOTE: On page 58 of the Winter 2006 issue of *Seminary Journal*, a portion of the first sentence of the article by Father Kevin Nadolski, OSFS, was omitted in error. It should read: “Reason and recent history would suggest that any consideration of the church in the United States today be grounded in the impulse of the late Pope John Paul II or the insight of Pope Benedict XVI.”