

Homily for SJTI Opening Liturgy, 9 February 2017 Mass of the Feast of Josephine Bakhita, Virgin

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St Josephine Bakhita, a Sudanese woman, led from abject slavery to the dignity of being daughter of the heavenly Father and bride of Christ. These are the words of the opening prayer. And how fitting are the words of the first reading from the Prophet Hosea: 'I will speak tenderly to her, [saying] I will espouse you forever ... in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy, in faithfulness ... and you will know the Lord.' These are words we can take to heart to form our own desire to know the Lord and follow his ways.

I thought it would be good to begin this year by noting this feast of St Bakhita and those words of the Lord. I have several related reasons. I want to say something about the most masculine institution in the Catholic Church – the priesthood – and I wanted to balance it with the feminist nuance attached to this feast. SACBC had called for Catholics of the region to turn a prayerful focus to the abuse of woman and children, and gender violence. The Editorial of last week's edition of the Southern Cross suggested that we should all be 'feminists' – calling for a more 'rigorous dialogue' on gender issues in the Church, 'even if we leave aside the thorny issue of female priests' says the editor, the Church has much to address in its governance structure, so attached to those ordained. You can read that editorial for yourself, if you have not done so already.

Another event in recent months caught my attention as President of this Institute. On the 8th of December last year – the feast of the most honoured woman in our faith; and – in my personalized theology – the first priest – the Congregation for the Clergy released the latest *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* with the English title, 'The Gift of the Priestly Vocation'. Out of our 235 students in the second semester of 2016, 221 students were candidates for the priesthood. Although it is our hope and desire to expand the student base to include more female religious and lay people – and we are putting plans in place to achieve this – our primary task remains preparing young men for the priesthood. This is the reason why the Institute began its existence and why we have in particular the Departments of Philosophy and of Theology.

The *Ratio* gives guidelines for the curricula of these departments and a quick glance tells us we are doing very well with our programmes. The details I leave with the Dean and HoDs, for the most part.

I was very interested in what the document says about the stages of formation and the agents of formation – interested in terms of the Institute's vision and programme outcomes, as complementing the formation processes in the communities of consecrated life and the diocesan house that are our own primary stakeholders.

Sometimes the academics might minimize our consciousness of the other aspects of formation, but the religious and priests on the staff are conscious that they are witnessing by their consecration to Christ as agents of formation; some of us are even actively involved in formation as Formators in our communities or indirectly with auxiliary functions like spiritual direction. The Institute community provides a certain level and dynamic of accompaniment to the students for the priesthood and religious life.

What interests me in particular are two terms which are used to describe the periods of philosophical and theological studies. Those in the philosophical phase are said to be in the 'disciple stage' and those in the theological phase are said to be in the 'configuration stage'.

The document says:

The experience and dynamic of discipleship, that lasts ... for the whole of life ... pedagogically requires a specific stage in which all possible efforts are expended to root the seminarian in the *sequela Christi*, listening to his word, keeping it in his heart and putting it into practice. ... Special attention is given to the human dimension, in harmony with spiritual growth, so as to help the seminarian mature in his definitive decision to follow the Lord (62)

The goal is an adequate level of inner freedom and maturity (67)

What is said of the seminarian we can take too for all religious, male and female. As an agent of formation myself and a lecturer in philosophy I was wondering how I and my module in the Philosophy of Science is going to contribute to this. The content might seem quite 'divorced' from aspects of human formation. But certainly students will have opportunities to get – and I quote from the document – 'accustomed to training their character ... grow in their strength of spirit and ... learn human virtues, such as "*sincerity of mind, a constant concern for justice, fidelity to one's promises, refinement in manners, modesty in speech coupled with charity*" (quoting *Optatum Totius*, 11)'

'Philosophers' can get side-tracked with the academic demands which are intellectually challenging; but do not fail to integrate the full journey of formation. There are things in the document for your constant meditation, so you may fully follow the one whose call you experience.

About the 'configuration stage' of theological studies, the document says:

This configuration demands that the seminarian enter profoundly into the contemplation of the person of Jesus Christ It will make the relationship more intimate and personal and, at the same time, will lead to an awareness and assumption of priestly identity.

The content of the theology programme more readily and directly supports the goals of this configuration stage; than the content of the Philosophy programme. Again theologians, do not

get side-tracked with the rigours of academic theology; do not fail to integrate the full journey of formation so that you are completely 'wedded' to Christ.

Our Development Studies programme perhaps has the better balance as it looks both outward – to social development – and inward, to human development providing material for personal growth and formation: discipleship and configuration integrated in one programme.

In the academic pursuits of this year, in the standards we want to maintain and improve, let us not forget why we are here and let us be worthy of our call. The gospel tells us that there are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Not all are called. During this year there will be more discernment and some will discover that religious life and/or priesthood is not the call for them. But all are called to follow Christ.

The intention of the opening prayer expressed that 'by the example of Josephine Bakhita, we may show constant love for the Lord Jesus crucified, remaining steadfast in charity and prompt to show compassion'. Along with our intentions of success; let this be our intention too.

We begin this year then, to configure our lives to the Lord, allow him to speak tenderly to us, so that knowing him, we may work for the dignity of all, men and women, and to do our best to eliminate the gender discrimination even in our Church. Amen.