

Reflection on Internal and External Forum

Discussions about what exactly constitutes the line of demarcation between internal and external forum are fraught with ambiguity. Some canonical texts give the impression that any discussion touching on the interior life is reserved to the internal forum. Some formational texts require that those responsible for recommending a man's advancement or ordination ask about his interiority – for example, his commitment to and motivation for celibacy.

In the midst of those tensions, the simple fact of the matter is that it's impossible to do the work of formation: a) if a man doesn't feel free to discuss aspects of his interior life with his formation advisor, and b) if the formation advisor doesn't know how to receive the self-revelation of the man regarding his interior life.

We know that different documents say and require different things, and do not intend to resolve all the difficulties of interpreting those texts. What we propose is this: **from the perspective of the seminarian's experience**, it's most fruitful to think of internal and external forum in terms of relationships rather than content.¹ For example, if a seminarian discusses his recent retreat experience with his spiritual director, the discussion is clearly in the internal forum. But if the same seminarian discusses his recent retreat experience with a faculty member over lunch, the discussion is in the external forum. The primary issue is not the *content of the discussion*, but the *modality of authority in the relationship*.

A quick measure of how a man is growing, and how a formation program is doing, is an increasing freedom to share aspects of the interior life with people in ways that are appropriate to the situation (spiritual director, formation advisor, faculty member, friend, parishioner, etc.), and for those self-revelations to be received in a way that gives it due reverence in the context of those varied relationships.

An important perspective on this approach comes from the PPF (6th ed.) when it says, quoting the 2016 *Ratio*: “The fundamental idea is that seminaries should form missionary disciples who are in love with the Master.”² This ‘being in love’ needs an appropriate form of evidence in the external forum. Very simply: Jesus did not violate the internal forum when he spoke of the Father's love. Neither does the seminarian. A man will tie himself up in knots if he doesn't have the freedom to discuss the interior life with anyone except his spiritual director.

From a formator's perspective, too, we see what happens when content becomes the line of demarcation between the internal and external forum: unnecessary tension is created, as the formator

¹ The 6th edition of the PPF seems to take a mediating position on this matter by describing the **same kinds** of *content* when talking about the discussions that take place in the internal and external forum, but placing those discussions in the context of different *relationships* with different modalities of authority. See paragraphs 93-94. “The Church has a right and responsibility to know the man she is ordaining, and therefore the seminarians has a corresponding responsibility to let himself be known. These discussions generally include, but are not limited to, **vocational discernment, growth in maturity in all four dimensions, integration and behaviors regarding interior freedom, and behaviors related to the promises of prayer, obedience, and celibacy**... The primary relationship in the internal forum is that between a seminarian and his spiritual director... These discussions generally include, but are not limited to, movements in prayer, **vocational discernment, growth in interior freedom, and struggles and growth in preparation for the promises of prayer, obedience, and celibacy**.”

² PPF (6th edition), #3.

and seminarian wrestle with “what’s appropriate” or “what can be shared” in this or that forum. Such internal gymnastics do not permit the kind of trusting relationships that can be truly formative.

To be clear, the man has a real right to privacy. He is constantly learning how to reveal himself, and what’s appropriate in what context. In that sense there can be sins of commission, and they can come from both the seminarian and the formator.

To be equally clear, however, a man does not have a right to a secret life or a double life, which the Church has been painfully realizing for several decades. If a man is going to be a missionary disciple and form missionary disciples, then he needs to be able to speak of his love for the Master and the Master’s love for him in a way that’s appropriate to the external forum. In that sense we need to be aware of sins of omission as well.

Internal-External Forum Experience – Described and distinguished

While we contend that the question of “who” is involved in the seminarian’s self-revelation should be more determinate of the forum than the “what” or content of the discussion, it may be helpful to describe further the “how” of this inquiry. The question can be put this way: *If both the spiritual director and the formation advisor discuss matters that touch on the interior life, how is the seminarian’s experience different in each case?*

The experience of the two may be distinguished in the following manner.

Formation Advisor: *Invites* the man to reveal himself.
Seminarian: Reveals himself *to the extent that he trusts* the formator.
Formation Advisor: *Expects only* that the man will reveal himself to the extent that he trusts.

The key here is to realize that inquiry is not coercion or inducement. Inquiry is an invitation to self-revelation. The dynamic of “invitation and trusting self-revelation” is the basic agreement between the seminarian and those who are in the external forum. That dynamic needs to be revered by the formation advisor and the entire seminary.

On the other hand:

Spiritual Director: *Expects* the man to reveal himself.
Seminarian: Reveals himself *to the extent that he is able*.
Spiritual Director: Expects that the man will reveal himself to the extent that he is able.

The basic agreement between the director and the directee is one of an “entrusted secret.” This dynamic also needs to be revered by the entire seminary community.

Whether or not formation can happen depends, in large measure, on whether a seminary can build trusting relationships that support the seminarian’s self-revelation. It’s a simple fact that healthy freedom in formation results in a man revealing aspects of his interior life to those in the external forum. Therefore it’s important for everyone to be clear about the character of discussions about the interior life. Realizing that inquiry is not coercion or inducement helps us to walk the fine line between sins of commission and sins of omission.