

"...and immediately they left their boat and their father, and followed Him." (Matt. 4:26)

For many of you, coming to seminary has involved taking a "leap of faith." Perhaps, it has required leaving a good job, a career, a home, the security of family surroundings, or the familiarity of one's home parish community. For many, the fearful emotions associated with leaving the "familiar" are not often accompanied with certainty of what the future might bring. None of us know what lies ahead.

Certainly, the two sets of brothers in this passage from Matthew's Gospel—Peter and Andrew, and James and John—also followed the call of Jesus without knowing what the future would hold. Nonetheless, they did so. Following the call of Jesus required leaving their boats (the means for their livelihood) and, in the case of James and John, leaving their father as well (their familial anchor).

Following Christ always requires a cost. This should not surprise us, because Jesus Himself forewarned: " And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it?" (Luke 14:27–28)

Often, the decision to leave the familiar and accept the cost of following Christ is made easier by considering the goal, the "end result," no matter how nebulous the interim may be. Many seminarians bear an inner joy as they anticipate heeding the call and serving Christ and His Church. As a seminary graduate, and as a priest for over thirty years, I can bear witness to this joy.

However, the joy comes not through personal success, nor longevity, nor achievement, nor recognition, nor honor. Rather, it springs from the ongoing and gentle assistance of our Savior who helps us leave the safety of our familiar environment to follow Him.

Leaving our "boats and nets"—representing external anchors and material idols—comprises merely the first step toward following Him. As we continue our spiritual journey, internal anchors and idols, hidden and insidious, arise and require our attention. These become more apparent as we move through our seminary career and beyond. The Apostle Peter became aware of his capacity for betrayal only at the end of the Lord's earthly ministry. St. Peter never would have anticipated his horrid future behavior when he left his nets at the Sea of Galilee. "Leaving" and "following" are life-long processes.

Heeding the call to come to seminary and journeying many months here may cause you to discover hidden passions that will hinder your effectiveness for the Lord—bias, desire, fear, anger, vanity, and all manner of other vices. Seminary life, a close communal setting, tends to promote this jarring process of self-discovery. This is good, expected, and saving. Once in motion, however, the process demands spiritual warfare.

As in the Apostle Peter's case, we all will struggle with some of our idols or vices until old age and death. But, by asking for forgiveness from others and by opening ourselves to divine forgiveness, we will recognize our utter weakness and poverty and gain a great virtue—humility. We will begin to understand that we are living between the “already” and the “not yet.” Our lives here will become marked by spiritual warfare, as we try to live faithfully, day by day, in accordance with what Scripture demands.

Often students come to seminary with the expectation of abiding in a heavenly Jerusalem on earth—a full liturgical cycle, interacting with like-minded people, and constant spiritual guidance. These expectations are often dashed.

Instead of heavenly Jerusalem, seminary life can feel like Babylon. Instead of an oasis, seminary life can be as dry a desert. Instead of a place of smooth spiritual growth, seminary life can be a place where less-than-firm foundations (or false foundations) crumble and crash to bits. Seminary life can be fraught with disappointments—both with ourselves and with others.

What can guide us through the perils of seminary life, particularly, and the spiritual life, generally? The answer is simple but not easy: Keep your eyes on Jesus, and when you come face-to-face with the horrors that lurk in your own heart or in the heart of others, leave them, and turn again to follow Him.