

**Inauguration Mass of Fr. John Selemela
As Rector of St. John Vianney Seminary
26 May 2019
Bishop S. Sipuka**

Yesterday we inaugurated a president whose roots can be traced to Limpopo, and today we are inaugurating a rector from the same province. If this coincidence suggests any kind of exclusion of other people in favour of Limpopo people, the readings seem to be suggesting the opposite; they suggest inclusion.

Yet from today's first reading (Acts 15: 1-2. 22-29), we learn that Christianity from its inception was never in favour of making the embrace of faith conditional to rejection of one's culture or conditional to acceptance of the culture of those who are evangelizing, like the Jewish Christians that we hear about who were telling the gentile believers that "unless you have yourselves circumcised you cannot be saved".

In response to this and in total rejection of equating culture with faith, the Apostles addressed an endearing letter to the believers of gentile origin, I quote "The Apostles and elders, your brothers, send greetings to the brothers of pagan birth in Antioch". The first believers were mainly Jewish because they called themselves brothers and sisters. And what I find endearing about this address is that now this brotherhood and sisterhood is not limited to people of Jewish origin but extends to all.

The opening address says, "The apostles and elders, your brothers", the apostles and elders, who are Jewish, send greetings to the "brothers of pagan". With faith in Jesus the people of Jewish origin and people with gentile origin have become brothers. People of different origin and culture equally belong to the brotherhood.

The brothers of gentile origin are so positively viewed and respected, that the elders do not only send a letter, but they also send highly respected delegates like Paul and Barnabas to bring and talk of the letter in person. This situation calls to mind what Paul was to later remind the Galatians, that there is no longer Greek or Jew, slave or free, male or female Gal. (3:28). It reminds us of the inclusive mission of Jesus during his time on earth, and his inclusive universal availability to all, now that he is risen.

Today's responsorial Psalm, "Let the people praise you, O God, let all the peoples praise also alludes to inclusion. This inclusion is also suggested in the 2nd reading (Rev 21: 10-14. 22-23), where we hear about the vision of the city with entrance gates from the four corners of the earth, "on the East there were three gates, on the north there were three gates, on the south there were three gates and on the west there were three gates", people from all these directions are welcome to enter into the city of God, they are included, no one is excluded.

In the Gospel (John 4:23), this inclusion is suggested by the condition that Jesus puts to be loved by God. Those who are loved by God are not the cultural or racially privileged, but those who keep his word. "If anyone loves me (anyone, regardless of whether he is a Jew or Greek), my father will love him.

Yet in spite of this clear positive affirmation of inclusion from today's readings, this inclusion is often missing in our life experience, exclusion and alienation, instead, appear to be the order of the day. In the missionary activity of the Church, exactly what is described in today's first reading was repeated centuries later. The preaching of the faith has been made to be conditional to the blanket negation of values and beliefs of the peoples of the mission countries, in other words the newly introduced to the faith were obliged to abandon their values, beliefs and culture even if they were not contradictory to the essence of Christian faith.

Indeed even today, if Pope Francis' exhortation letter *Amoris Laetitia* is anything to go by, there are people who are excluded in the Church. While in the exhortation the Pope does not propose annihilation or disregard of the norms or teachings of the Church, *Amoris Laetitia* calls us as pastors to agonise, to be disturbed, and so to discern and to pray seriously for inspiration as the Apostles did in today's first reading on how best can these people whose situation of life fail to meet the ideal, how can they somehow be included in the Church instead of just relying on the law alone, which leads to exclusion.

This is what I think the Pope is calling us to do in *Amoris Laetitia*, to want to do the best we can in order to include, rather than choosing the easiest of excluding by resorting to the law, without suggesting that we should disregard the law. What I think he is saying is that we should be more pastoral than legalistic.

Pope Francis addresses himself not only to the problem of exclusion in the Church, but also to the problem of exclusion in other spheres of life namely, political exclusion, economic exclusion, social exclusion and cultural exclusion. In our country, the most glaring exclusions, as indicated by the new president in his speech yesterday are political and economical exclusion. Chapter two of his *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis, addresses specifically the problem of economic exclusion, a big problem in our country, which has seen many people voting on their feet by not exercising their right to vote. Only about 65% of South Africans voted, and a big majority of the remaining 35% was disillusioned by political lies manipulations and lies and thus did not vote.

While we are free to vote, some of those we vote for are not accountable, they do as they like and manipulate the people to serve their own personal interests and those close to them. The present commissions of enquiry and revelations of obscene abuse of public funds by those in power is just one indication of abuse of political power leading to exclusion of many of our people from a life of dignity because leaders are stealing the money.

Instead of full inclusion by empowering the people, they present themselves as doing things for people so that they control them while they enrich themselves. Back where I come from in the rural areas people tend to put their vote on the hope of what will be done for them, and become perpetual objects of delivery and charity instead of calling for inclusion in the economic system so that they develop their potential and make contribution as equally dignified as those who lead them. Instead of demanding empowerment from the government, they hope for a government that will increase their grant, and politicians are happy

to promise that. We will do well to form students in such a way that they become conscious of these exclusions and learn to align themselves with efforts for inclusion of all.

In their formation here in the seminary, and our own formation as staff, we should continue to include students because they too are not empty of the Holy Spirit, they may not be full of the Holy Spirit, but they are not empty of him. The fact that they are here means that God is working in them.

As Frs. Joel, Ncedo, Sello, Mbhele and Zulu, who are now formators, can attest, when they were here as students, and with me trying to be rector, we had robust engagements, so robust at times that we agreed to differ, but those engagements led mutual growth, growth of the students and growth of the staff members and the rector because the students also have something to contribute, underline contribute and not dictate.

As we try to form the students, they also form us, as we analyse them, they are also analyzing us, as we size them up, they are also sizing us up, when we preach to them, they watch what we do. As we form the students, the students are also forming us, so that on account of having been with the students, we become better persons than we would have been had we not been working in the seminary. And I guess that is why some of those who work in the seminary end up being bishops because the students have properly formed them.

~~And~~ Fr. John, please spare a thought for seminarians on this aspect of inclusion. In my work in the seminary, I realized that a good number of students, do not have an experience of inclusion. At best some of them have known who their father is, but they have no bond with him, and at worst some of them have never even seen their father. Some of them have been raised up by their grandmothers and have not sentimental connections with their mothers.

Without suggesting that you should mother the seminarians, in the context of their background of lack of inclusion and belonging, particularly the lack of a father figure in their lives, as much it is possible, please avail yourself to offer that experience to them because when you do that, you will be enabling them to offer a similar experience to those that they will be ministering to in the future. Be able to say with St. Paul “we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves received from God through the staff members (2 Cor. 1:4).

And so this lack of inclusion in the lives of the seminarians forms part of the background to the plea that is often made to you staff members to be zealous about ministry of presence to the students. That you will not only be present to them for official activities of learning in class, celebration of Mass, and formal formation meetings but that you will also eat with them and waste time with them because their fathers were never there to play with them, to eat with them and informally chat with them. As priests you should be having parishioners, rendering pastoral work to them, but God has destined that you should be among these laymen called students who are discerning the vocation to the priesthood, and presently they are your parishioners, and you are called not only to teach them but also to pastor them.

And hopefully when you give them this sense of inclusion, they will become compassionate priests who will want to journey with the people in their existential situations of life, instead of just being happy to apply minimalistic *ex opera operato* ministry by virtue of ordination without any passionate, personal and pastoral disposition.

Seminarians, however, must not live in the future, and tell themselves that one day when they are priests they will facilitate inclusiveness while they are not practicing it here in the seminary. They must not look to the day when they are priest to practice inclusiveness, but they must begin now. They are invited while they are still in the seminary to be inclusive, to avoid cliques that exclude others.

On behalf of the bishops, I thank you and your bishop for accepting this ministry of leading the seminary and I congratulate you. In the light of today's readings, however, I wish to point out that it is a ministry that you cannot do alone. Continue to include the staff, include the students, include the admin staff, and include the domestic staff, for they too are not empty of the Holy Spirit.

This inclusive approach will hopefully lead the students to appreciate the dignity and talent of each other while they are still here in the seminary, and to recognize and encourage the gifts of the Holy Spirit among the faithful for the good of the building up of the Church and for the glory of God. Congratulations, and may God bless you and those you will be working with.