Priestly Formation at the National Seminary of Sri Lanka: Shaping Religious Vocations with Social Commitments

Dr Bernardo Brown
Asia Research Institute of NUS

Abstract
More than twenty Catholic priests are ordained every year at the National Seminary located in the bucolic hills of Kandy, Sri Lanka. Among them, many travel overseas to pursue higher degrees, serve the resettled Sri Lankan migrant and refugee communities, as well as to compensate for the scarcity of religious vocations across the northern hemisphere. These migrant priests are welcomed by receiving communities who often commend them for their dedicated pastoral work and their keen awareness of human suffering and social maladies. Although it is commonly held that a particular South Asian cultural sensibility is responsible for their pastoral success with non-Sri Lankans, my research suggests that there are complex pedagogical, ideological and theological underpinnings that inform the education that Catholic priests receive at the Seminary. In this exploratory paper, I will draw on fieldwork in Kandy and Milan to examine some of the specific activities and methods designed to shape the religious vocation of young men with a particular orientation towards community service and social activism. ‘Formators’ at the Seminary develop sophisticated fieldwork experiences with the objective of preparing a clergy that not only has sound theological and pastoral training, but a thorough firsthand exposure to the concerns and anxieties of workers in South Asia and beyond. I argue that this engaged and socially-committed model of priesthood has important historical precedents in the country, which have often placed Sri Lankan Catholic clergy in the midst of delicate political conflicts over the last four decades.

About the Speaker
Bernardo Brown is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Asia Research Institute of NUS, affiliated with the Religion & Globalization and the Asian Migration clusters. He is currently working on an ethnographic book project that focuses on the formation of Catholic priests at the National Seminary of Sri Lanka. His earlier work on return migration has appeared in *Contemporary South Asia* (2014) and *Ethnography* (2015) and a related project on Sri Lankan Catholicism during the ethnic conflict in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* (2015). At ARI he is working on the publication of a volume co-edited with Brenda Yeoh, *Asian Migrants and Religious Experience. Transnational Religious Mobility* (AUP), and a special issue of TAJA with Michael Feener, *Configuring Catholicism in the Anthropology of Christianity*. He received an MA from the New School for Social Research and a PhD in Cultural Anthropology from Cornell University. Before joining ARI he held a postdoctoral fellowship at the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden.

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Time
3.00pm to 4.30pm

Venue
Malay Studies Seminar Room, AS7 #04-13, Kent Ridge Campus, NUS

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