

## Reflections on “The Gift of Priestly Vocation”

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A recent Roman document titled, “The Gift of Priestly Vocation,” spells out new guidelines for the priestly formation. It was issued by the Congregation for the Clergy on December 8, 2016. It is a thoroughly revised plan for priestly formation which was first issued in 1970 and then revised in 1980. Because of the rapid changes in “historical, socio-cultural and ecclesiastical contexts, the guidelines “needed to be revamped, renewed and restored to the centre,” said Cardinal Beniamino Stella, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy. He added that “inspiration was drawn from Pope Francis’s teaching and spirituality, especially regarding temptations tied to money, to authoritarian exercise of power, to rigid legalism and to vain glory.” He is of the view that “in the life of the Church innovations are never separate from tradition, but, on the contrary, integrate it and enhance it.” The Cardinal also pointed that the document was greatly influenced by St. Pope John Paul II’s *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, published in 1992, which seeks to promote an “integral formation,” that is, “the ability to unite, in a balanced way, the human as well as the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions, through a gradual instructional personalised course.”

## **Priestly Vocation**

Among the many vocations which the Holy Spirit calls forth in the People of God, the vocation to the ministerial priesthood calls one to “participate in the hierarchical priesthood of Christ.” As St. Pope John Paul II teaches, it is the mission of the Church “to care for the birth, discernment and fostering of vocations, particularly those to the priesthood. Hence vocation promotion is an important ministry of the Church, especially the local church. Bishops, priests and the laity, particularly parents and teachers, have to cooperate in this activity. Remembering that the Church has asked us to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send labourers into his harvest, the entire people of God should seriously and unceasingly pray for vocations, especially those to the priesthood.

## **Priestly Identity**

In order that the formation imparted in our Major Seminaries may be effective, we need to have a clear idea of the identity of the priesthood. Vatican II reminds us that nature and mission of priests must be understood within the Church, the People of God. The entire People of God participates in the saving work of Christ and are in fact a priestly people. The ministerial priesthood is to be understood as a service to the glory of God and to the brothers and sisters in their baptismal priesthood. In communion with the order of Bishops, priests are inseparably part of the ecclesial community and, at the same time, by the will of Christ and in continuance of the work of the Apostles, have been constituted pastors and leaders in the Church.

As the document points out, “the priest is called to cultivate missionary zeal, exercising his pastoral responsibility with humility as an authoritative leader, teacher of the word and minister of the sacraments, practising his spiritual fatherhood fruitfully.” As Pope Francis clearly states: “Every

authority is exercised in a spirit of service, as ‘*amoris officium*’ (office of love) and unpretentious dedication for the good of the flock.”

In the introduction the document makes two important assertions:

1. The journey of priestly formation has four characteristic elements “one, integral, grounded in community and missionary in spirit. Formation must be seen through a unifying lens, which takes into account the four dimensions of formation – human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral.” The entire journey of formation must never be reduced to a single aspect to the detriment of others, but it must always be an integrated journey of the disciple called to the priesthood. The formation of priests has an eminently communitarian character. Vocation to the priesthood is a gift that God gives to the Church and to the world. Such a vocation is discovered and accepted within a community. And formation to the priesthood takes place in the Seminary in the context of an educating community. This community enables the seminarian to become part of the family of the presbyterate, which is primarily at the service a particular community. In order to be effective in their ministry, priest formators “must consider themselves to be a formative community, sharing a common responsibility, with regard ‘to the duties entrusted to each one.’” Finally, formation is clearly missionary in character since its goal is participation in the mission of evangelization entrusted by Christ to the Church. Hence, Seminarians have to become missionary disciples, who are in love with the Master, shepherds with the “smell of the sheep,” who live in their midst to bring the mercy of God to them.

2. Within this single integrated formation, two phases can be identified: the initial and the ongoing. The “initial” formation is divided into various stages: the propaedeutic stage; the study of philosophy or the discipleship stage; the study of theology or the configurative stage, and pastoral stage or that of vocational integration stage.

### **The Propaedeutic Stage**

The propaedeutic stage is a preparatory stage which is thought to be necessary because of the experience of recent decades. It should last no less than one year and no more than two years. Its principal objective is to provide a solid basis for the spiritual life of the candidate and to nurture greater self-awareness for his personal growth. It is a time to become personally convinced of one’s vocation to the priesthood.

### **Study of Philosophy and Theology**

It is quite significant that the formation imparted in the Major Seminaries is conceived in deeply spiritual terms. The first two years during which the seminarian will study philosophy is called the discipleship stage. The disciple is one whom the Lord has called “to stay with him” (See Mk 3:14), to follow him and to become a missionary of the Gospel. Each day he will learn to enter into the secrets of the Kingdom of God. Staying with Jesus becomes a spiritual journey that transforms the life of the seminarian. The dynamic discipleship which lasts for the whole of life and includes all priestly formation pedagogically requires a specific stage when all possible efforts are made to root the seminarian in the *sequela Christi*, listening to his word, keeping it in his heart and putting into practice.

The last four years of formation in the Major Seminary during which the seminarian will do theology is termed

the “configuration” stage. During this stage formation concentrates on the configuration of the seminarian to Christ, Shepherd and Servant, so that united to him he can make a gift of self to others. This configuration demands that the seminarians enter profoundly into the contemplation of the person of Jesus Christ, sent by the Father, as shepherd of the people of God. It will make the relationship with Christ more intimate and personal, and, at the same time, will lead to an awareness and acceptance of his priestly identity. This state calls for a constant responsibility in living the theological and cardinal virtues and the evangelical counsels. It demands docility to the action of God. It also seeks for a gradual recreation of one’s own personal history in the light of pastoral charity, which animates, forms and motivates the life of a priest.

## **The Foundations of Formation**

There is a whole chapter (III) in the document which deals with the foundations of formation. To begin with, there is the person of the seminarian. “On the one hand, he is characterised by talents and gifts that have been moulded by grace; on the other, he is marked by his limits and frailty.” The task of formation is to enable the seminarian to integrate these two aspects of his personality with the help of the Holy Spirit and grow into a balanced person, avoiding fragmentation, superficiality and partiality. The time of priestly formation is a period of testing, maturing and discernment by both the seminarian and his formators.

The seminarian is called to go out of himself and journey in Christ towards the Father and towards others embracing his vocation to the priesthood; he has to work with the Holy Spirit to “achieve a serene and creative interior synthesis between his strengths and weaknesses. The formation process helps

the seminarian to bring all dimensions of his personality to Christ, who will enable him consciously to be free for God and for others. “In fact it is only in the Crucified and Risen Christ that this path of integration finds meaning and completion.” Effective pastoral care of the people demands that the priest have a solid formation and interior maturity. It is not enough for him to have the appearance of a virtuous person, who practises merely external obedience to abstract principle. He is called to act with great inner freedom. He has to internalise, day after day, the spirit of the Gospel and to establish a deep personal friendship with Christ, leading him to imbibe his sentiments and attitudes.

By this intimate relationship with Christ and by their fraternal communion, seminarian will be helped to recognise and correct “spiritual worldliness: obsession with personal appearances, a presumed theological and spiritual certainty, narcissism and authoritarianism, the attempt to dominate others, a merely external and ostentatious preoccupation with the liturgy, vain glory, individualism, the inability to listen to others and every form of careerism.” Instead they have to be formed in simplicity, sobriety, serene dialogue and authenticity. As disciples of the Master, they should learn to live and act with the pastoral charity, that flows from being “servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (See 1Cor 4:1).

## **Dimensions of Formation**

There is a certain freshness in the way the document deals with the four dimensions of formation – the human, the spiritual, the intellectual and the pastoral.

To begin with human formation: As the document states: “The divine call engages and involves the ‘concrete’ human person. Formation for the priesthood must necessarily

provide adequate means to allow for maturation in view of an authentic exercise of priestly ministry. To that end, the seminarian is called upon to develop his personality, having Christ, the perfect man, as his model!”

A correct and harmonious spirituality demand as well-structured humanity, since grace builds on nature. It does not cancel nature, but perfects it. Hence it is necessary for the seminarian to acquire such qualities as humility, courage, common sense, magnanimity, right judgement and discretion, tolerance and transparency, love of truth and honesty.

Human formation, which is the foundation of all priestly formation, has to promote the integral growth of the person and allow the integration of all its dimensions – the physical, the psychological, the moral and the aesthetic. It should foster the establishment of a stable personality, characterised by emotional balance, self-control and a well-integrated sexuality. It has to enable the seminarian to arrive gradually at a well-formed conscience. This means that he has become a responsible person able to make right decision gifted with right judgement and able to have an objective perception of persons and events. Such a perspective should lead the seminarian to have a balanced sense of self-respect. It is also important for him to cultivate a sense of beauty.

For an effective human formation, it is necessary that the seminarian is aware of his life history and be ready to share with his formators. This will enable them to plan their personal accompaniment in such a way that it is really helpful to the seminarian.

An unmistakable sign of the harmonious development of the personality of the seminarian is his mature capacity to relate with men and women of different ages and social conditions. It is important that the formators take into consid-

eration the relationship between the seminarian and women since it affects “the seminarian not only in the sphere of his personal life but also with a view to his future ministry.”

The understanding and familiarity with the feminine are beneficial to the human growth of the seminarian. It is important that a seminarian learns from women and lets himself be influenced by the feminine genius.

Through the human formation, he has received, the seminarian becomes capable of self-determination and living with responsibility through an awareness of his own weaknesses which are always present in his personality. From what has been said about human formation is it quite clear that only a good and mature person can be good priest and an effective pastor.

As the document makes it clear, “the spiritual formation is aimed at nourishing and sustaining communion with God and with our brothers and sisters, in friendship with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and with an attitude of docility to the Holy Spirit.”

This formation should foster a personal union with Christ which is born and sustained by prolonged and silent prayer. This union will enable the seminarian to be like Christ totally committed to the will of the Father.

Besides, the liturgical year enables the seminarian to absorb its spirituality by interiorising the scriptural texts and liturgical prayers. A seminarian should cultivate a healthy relationship to the Holy Eucharist.

Regular and frequent celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, for which the seminarian should prepare by a daily examination of conscience, becomes an occasion to recognise with humility his own sins and frailties.



Spiritual direction is a means for the integral growth of the person. The seminarian should be let free to choose his spiritual director from among those who are made available by the Seminary. A high quality of spiritual accompaniment is necessary for the effectiveness of the whole process of formation.

The intellectual formation is aimed at helping the seminarian to acquire real competence in philosophy and theology, along with a more general education which will enable the seminarian to proclaim the Gospel message to people of our day in a manner that is credible. It seeks to help them to enter into dialogue with the contemporary world, and to uphold the truth of faith by the light of reason, thereby revealing its beauty. Candidates for the priesthood must diligently strive to deepen their knowledge of philosophical and theological sciences, with a good introduction to canon law, social science and history. The intellectual formation seeks to give a reason for hope (See 1 Pet 3:15) and to allow Divine Revelation to become known.

Pastoral formation is vitally important. In fact, the entire priestly formation must be permeated by a pastoral spirit. This will enable the seminarian to demonstrate the same compassion, generosity, love for all, especially the poor and zeal for the Kingdom of God, that characterised the ministry of Jesus Christ. The pastoral formation should be such as to help the seminarian to acquire the inner freedom to live the apostolate as service, able to see the work of God in the hearts and lives of the people. Gradually, the seminarian will begin to see himself as a group leader and as a man of communion. He will do so by attentive listening and careful discernment of situations, as well as cooperating with others.

It is noteworthy that, according to this document, pastoral formation is not primarily meant to help the seminarian