

FOUNDATIONS OF PRIESTLY FORMATION

✠ Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong
Archbishop-Bishop Emeritus of Papantla
Secretary for Seminaries
Congregation for the Clergy

The objective of the diocesan seminary is to form shepherds. This simple idea demands that all the other formative elements be subordinated to this end, thus acquiring their proper place in formation. If one wishes to expand this brief description, it can be said that the seminary must form men-disciples and missionaries-shepherds for the people of God. When we put it this way, with hyphens in between, it is clear that we are talking about one and the same process of faith, with a certain complexity, which, departing from a healthy personality and a well cultivated Christian life, prepares the future priests that will guide the people of God.

As Bishops and formators, the main objective of formation must be clear, precisely because the seminary does not intend to form only intellectuals [intellectualism], despite taking the intellectual preparation of the seminarians very seriously. It also does not intend to achieve a monastic type of formation [spiritualism], although it certainly grants a central place to prayer and the sacramental life. It does not intend to form good organizers [“pastoralism”], although it is concerned with offering seminarians the best preparation for pastoral activities. Lastly, it is not concerned with forming only ministers of cult [“liturgism”], although it offers seminarians the best possible liturgical formation.

These types of imbalances, often part of the tradition of our seminaries, tend to deform priestly identity. Therefore, it is convenient that the formators as well as the Episcopal Conference reflect, with certain frequency, on the identity and the spirituality of the diocesan priest. During this intervention, I would like to establish some general principles that serve as the basis for priestly formation.

The subject of formation

The first person responsible for his own formation is the seminarian, because, in the future, he will be the subject of ongoing formation. The new *Ratio Fundamentalis* says: «*each seminarian is the protagonist of his own formation, as has already been mentioned, and is called to a journey of ongoing growth in the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral areas, taking into account his own personal and family background. Seminarians are likewise responsible for establishing and maintaining a climate of formation that is consistent with the values of the Gospel*» (RFIS, 130). In this way, it alludes to the elements that are absolutely necessary in order for good formation to take place.

- **The formative attitude of every seminarian.** This can be described as availability and docility to learn from the different circumstances of his life, in all the dimensions of his personality. It is about achieving a fundamental openness that also promotes, among the seminarians, the sufficient freedom to allow themselves to be accompanied and to receive, positively, the help of their formators. Great attention must be paid to this point so that the formative process does not remain in an almost automatic mode, from one stage to another, but rather, that it becomes an authentic experience of continuous integral development.
- **The communitarian climate** helps in formation. Vocational values are internalized, springing from meaningful experiences that are interwoven in inter-personal relationships. For this motive, what occurs among the seminarians, as a group, has great importance. When a formative climate exists among them, the atmosphere of the seminary itself promotes the human, spiritual and specific growth that is at the base of formation. Those who have been formed in a suitable formative climate in the seminary, will, afterwards, in the presbyterate, be the most probable to bring about ongoing formation.

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* continues by saying: *Seminarians are bound, both individually and as a group, to demonstrate – and not only in their external behavior – that they have internalized an authentically priestly way of life, in humility and in service of their brothers. This is a sign of a mature choice to give themselves to following Christ in a special way* (RFIS, 131).

It is helpful to note that it is a process of **internalization**, in the proper sense, of a priestly lifestyle, which aims to ingrain the values that are proper to life and to priestly ministry in the personality of the candidates for the priesthood. The internalization opposes itself to mere external behavior and more so to the simple fulfillment of a series of norms and requisites.

Various agents of formation contribute to this end: the Bishop, as the one who is ultimately responsible for the entire formative process; the diocesan community and the presbyterate, privileged environments for the transmission of priestly values; the educational community of the seminary, which includes formators, professors, and parents as well as employees; and diocesan priests who have a special relevance since, at every moment, they must assume a formative attitude in their interaction with the seminarians. Some importance must also be attributed to the involvement of the laity and the important contribution of women to the discernment of vocations to priestly ministry. All of those involved must help the seminarian to take his own formation seriously and sustain him so that he can give his “yes” to the Lord in his every day work.

This long list of formative agents allows us to see that the quality of priestly formation depends, in great measure, on the maturity of the particular Church and on the spiritual and material goods it offers to the candidates for the priesthood. A presbyterate that maintains itself in an attitude of ongoing formation and a diocesan community that finds itself on a journey, constitute the ecclesiastically fertile ground in which priestly vocations flourish and makes it possible to guarantee their formation.

It must be clear that, in the end, it is the Holy Spirit who forms through all these mediators. It is, therefore, necessary that all formative means help the seminarians to open themselves up, personally and profoundly, to the sanctifying action of the Spirit, and to form the sense of community which corresponds to the formative process.

Priestly identity

If the purpose of the Seminary is to form shepherds, the activity and organization thereof will depend on the way it conceives priestly identity, the nature of which is theological. Ordained ministry finds its most profound root and origin in the loving design of God, in the New Covenant established in the Blood of Christ and in the gift of the Holy Spirit that consecrates and sends out chosen ones so that, in the name of God, they may lead His people by their ministerial priesthood. This origin in divine will is expressed by the profound cry that the prophet Jeremiah places in the mouth of God: «*I will give them shepherds after my own heart*» (Jer 3, 15). The whole of the priestly formation is oriented to this end: to form shepherds that love and serve the people of God with His same love, which we call «pastoral charity».

The ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood of the faithful and is complemented by it in the harmony of a one-and-only priestly people. This is why the Catholic priest is neither, firstly or mainly, a boss or an authority, but a brother among brothers in the common priesthood, called, like all the faithful, to donate his life as a spiritual offering pleasing to the Father. At the same time he is sent to exercise a fatherly function in the service of authority.

The ministerial priesthood is essentially collegial, in a way that all priests, united to the Bishop, form among themselves a one-and-only presbyterate, always in communion with the Church. This concept is particularly important because upon it is founded the communitarian sense of the ministerial exercise as well as the formative process, which is always carried out in community. The educational community of the seminary and the community that is constituted by the very team of formators, use the «grammar of communion and of mission», which are essential signs of the Church.

The Lord Jesus identified Himself with the figure of the Servant of the prophet Isaiah as well as with the image of the shepherd, and declared that «*He did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*» (Mt 20, 28). The priest, who is configured by the sacrament of Holy Orders as another Christ, must always act according to this spirit, making his ministerial exercise a path of humble service and personal self-

giving for the good of the people of God. Therefore, any form of authoritarianism or of clericalism is totally illegitimate and profoundly contrary to the evangelical values that he proclaims. Consequently, seminarians must be educated in the giving of themselves, ridding their hearts of every type of desire for domination.

Formation as configuration with Christ

Priestly formation implies a process of configuration to Christ the Head, Shepherd, Servant and Spouse (Cfr. RFIS, 35), which consists in a mystical identification with the person of Jesus, just as it is presented in the Gospels. This mystical process is a gift from God that will reach fulfillment through priestly ordination and constitutes a formative journey that will remain valid throughout all the ongoing formation. Every mystical gift demands the counterpart of ascetical practice, which is the human effort that follows the gifts of grace.

Configuration to Christ has, as its basis, a life of discipleship and mission, and starts, substantially, during the last two stages of formation in the seminary. It is the central object of ongoing formation throughout the entirety of priestly life. The formation programme of the seminary must guarantee that this process will be realized by each of the seminarians in the context of a determined culture.

The formation of the interior man

«The pastoral care of the faithful demands that the priest have a solid formation and interior maturity» (RFIS, 41). It is, therefore, about forming the interior man, who is capable of acting with great freedom. This is developed through the formative process alongside a sense of ecclesial communion, with a moral conscience, proper to the shepherd, and corresponding virtuous habits.

To affirm the centrality of the formation of the interior man means that the soul of priestly ministry and of the entirety of formation is pastoral charity. It is about forming the heart so that it will internalize the sentiments and ways of acting of the Son, continuously finding itself consoled by the Holy Spirit. This strong interiority, which not only includes his activity, but also his life and his moral conscience, sustains him in the midst of difficulties and is the profound reason for his fidelity.

The formation of the interior man opposes itself to a formation that is centered on exteriority. It places appearances and formal obedience in the proper place, that is to say, as an expression of the heart. Thus, we distinguish between the soul of formation and its exterior manifestations, two realities among which a profound harmony must exist.

FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

The aforementioned ideas are probably enough to pose an important question regarding priestly formation in the national context:

- Is formation clear and deeply oriented to the pastoral care of the people of God? Is pastoral charity its soul? Does the lifestyle and work of the priests in our country correspond to the theological identity of a shepherd?