

TITLE

A season of discovery: dimensions of formation in seminaries

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Seminary formation

Inevitably, once it is known that I teach in a Catholic seminary, I am inundated with checks and requests: do the seminarians learn how to cook, do first aid, do they know about climate change, they should be taught about the role of women in the church, the lives of people with disabilities, with dementia, with mental health issues, what it is really like to look after a family, finances and building maintenance. They should be up to date on safeguarding and protection of vulnerable people against abuse. These are all valid and important requests, and they should be factored into seminary studies. But they do not go to the heart of seminary formation. Formation in the seminary is more than about acquiring information or gaining theological expertise or being culturally aware or developing the tools needed for running a parish, as important as all of these are. And formation is not directed towards forming good seminarians. Seminary formation is forming men for priestly life and ministry, for serving the people of God. This is not to ignore significant concerns about what seminarians should know. Rather, if we get formation right, then the other important issues will also slot into place.

Formation: transforming the heart, soul and mind

The first hurdle to overcome is the view that intellectual formation, understood merely as ‘knowing stuff’, being informed, is the main aim of seminary formation. There is no doubt that the intellectual programme in seminaries is rigorous: generally, seminarians study two years of philosophy followed by three or four years of theology. However, intellectual formation is not the same as the intellectual academic programme. Intellectual formation is one of four aspects of formation, the other three being human, spiritual and pastoral. These four aspects create an integrated whole, for instance, intellectual formation provides the rational tools to understand what it is to serve in pastoral ministry and how to communicate the faith, and it impacts on the seminarian’s human and spiritual formation; pastoral formation makes possible a fruitful service and it directs the intellectual, human and spiritual aspects towards that service; spiritual formation helps shape the quality of priestly ministry as it centres the seminarian on God and ensures that the other aspects do not simply become social work or intellectual activity for its own sake; human formation enables the seminarian to make a true gift of himself in God’s service through a deepening of his psychological, intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation.

The four aspects of formation – spiritual, human, intellectual, and pastoral – also stand as pillars of formation in their own right. Spiritual formation aims at nourishing and sustaining communion with God and with others. In spiritual formation the person moves towards a personal union with Christ through prayer, reading scripture, the sacraments, liturgy, and especially participation in the celebration of the Eucharist.¹ Human formation recognises that the subject of formation is not a generalised theory but a particular man, with his own character, strengths and weaknesses, talents and frailties. In human formation the person is encouraged to grow towards God in all areas of his life. This includes developing appropriate and balanced relationships, embracing and making his own a life-long commitment to celibacy, learning what it means to be obedient not to his own will but to the will of his bishop, developing an ability to cope with his own company, integrating his past history and weaknesses, and responding to the call to constant conversion.² Intellectual formation helps the person listen profoundly to the Word and the church community in order

¹ (*Ratio*) *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* 101-106

<http://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/Ratio%20Fundamentalis/The%20Gift%20of%20the%20Priestly%20Vocation.pdf>

² *Ratio* 93-96.

to read and respond to the signs of the times. In intellectual formation the person learns how to interpret questions and challenges in the light of faith.³ Pastoral formation enables a growth in pastoral discernment so that the person can ‘listen deeply’ to real situations and be able to judge situations carefully. Pastoral formation encourages a spirit of pastoral charity, of compassion, generosity, love, and zeal for the Kingdom so that the person can truly and effectively accompany others on their faith journey.⁴ Through pastoral formation he develops a ‘pastoral heart’ and a heartfelt commitment to the humble service of the people of God. Integrated together, the four dimensions of formation are aimed at transforming the heart into the image of the heart of Christ.⁵

Forming missionary disciples

The four dimensions of formation are outlined in full in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, (the *Ratio*) produced in 2016 by the Congregation for the Clergy.⁶ The *Ratio* sets out the fundamental principles of priestly formation. Called *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, the *Ratio* built upon previous church documents on the formation of future priests, notably Pope St John Paul II’s 1992 apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. Pope St John Paul’s exhortation was the fruit of the 1990 synod of bishops on vocations to the priesthood. The aim of the *Ratio* is to deepen the idea that ‘Seminaries should form 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.’⁷ Formation then is not a list of tasks to be undertaken and ticked off when achieved, still less a series of hoops to go through until the goal of priesthood is reached. Instead, the seminarian and then the priest is a ‘disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation, understood as a continuous configuration to Christ.’⁸ In this journey the *Ratio* identifies two principal moments: initial formation in the seminary and ongoing formation in priestly life.

Pope Francis calls seminary formation a ‘season of discovery’ where ‘uncut diamonds’ allow themselves to be polished⁹ and where they discover new strengths and gifts that will be central to their future life as priests. Formation begins with a call from God to the vocation to the priesthood and grows into allowing the heart to be ‘more closely united to Christ’s heart.’¹⁰ When a man first comes forward the central questions is, has this man experienced a call from God to the priesthood? As Jesus says to his first disciples, ‘you did not choose me, but I chose you.’¹¹ The fact that priesthood is a specific calling and not a career choice or a right or something a person feels they would like to undertake is fundamental to understanding formation. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the primary formator, the seminarian is gradually transformed into another Christ, *in persona Christi*.

The *Ratio* speaks of four stages of initial formation: the propaedeutic stage, discipleship stage, configuration stage and pastoral stage. Although each stage has a particular intellectual focus, the stages themselves are more reflective of a deepening of the relationships the seminarian has with Christ, the Church and the faithful. The propaedeutic stage helps the man to appreciate that Christ is the centre of his life. This is when the man interrogates his vocation: am I truly being called to priesthood? This stage provides the

³ *Ratio* 116-118.

⁴ *Ratio* 119-121.

⁵ (*Ratio*) *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* 89.

⁶ (*Ratio*) *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*

⁷ *Ratio* 3.

⁸ *Ratio* 3.

⁹ *Ratio* 1.

¹⁰ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130707_omelia-seminaristi-novizie.html

¹¹ John 15:16.

opportunity to begin to embed spirituality as a way of life, to look at areas of his life that need work, to begin to be intellectually equipped as a Catholic, and to appreciate that faith is not simply about theory. It is also a time of discernment, and this may include the seminarian discerning that he is not called to ministerial priesthood but to another vocation.

Although discipleship lasts for a lifetime, in the specific formation stage of discipleship there is a focus on staying with Christ and deepening a relationship with Him. Following Christ and growing in relationship with Him inevitably requires attention to human and spiritual formation. Intellectual formation is characterized by philosophical studies. These studies help seminarians to engage in thoughtful dialogue with the world and with others, and to develop the tools needed to convey the gospel message in a way that is credible and easily understood. The studies also enable seminarians to reflect critically on all that influences their formation, including influences outside the seminary. As Pope St John Paul pointed out faith and reason are ‘like two wings’ that help people contemplate the truth about themselves and the world.¹² The configuration stage, also known as the theological stage, concerns the deepening of the awareness of priestly identity and the spirituality of a priest. Reflection on priestly identity as a theological and biblical reality is an important aspect of formation. As with all the baptised, the priest is a member of the holy People of God. At the same time, he is a leader at the service of his flock. Appreciating the theological nature of priesthood is necessary in order to avoid the danger of seeing the work of the priest as simply social work or the job of merely a human institution.¹³ This theological stage gives the seminarian a firm grounding into growing into the likeness of the Good Shepherd. The stage of vocational synthesis is the pastoral stage where the seminarian becomes more aware of the pastoral responsibilities of priesthood in a spirit of service.

However, formation does not end at the pastoral stage. Ongoing formation is not a process of simply updating. Rather it is ‘an interior attitude’ of openness to the will of God, ‘a continuous conversion of heart, the capacity to see one’s life and its events in the light of faith and, above all, of pastoral charity, by way of a total gift of self to the Church, according to the design of God.’¹⁴ Formation is ongoing, it lasts a life time, and demands not only continuous conversion but also nourishment to feed the fire that gives ‘light’ and ‘warmth’ to the priest’s ministry.¹⁵

Accompaniment in formation

The *Ratio* states that the seminarian is ‘a mystery to himself.’ This is not to suggest he is a curiosity. Rather, as with all people, the seminarian has been graced by God with certain talents and gifts, and also has limits and frailty. The ‘task’ of formation is to help the person integrate these aspects ‘under the influence of the Holy Spirit.’¹⁶ This process of integration takes a realistic standpoint: people do have strengths and weaknesses, and God can work with people with soft rather than hard hearts. Indeed, God often works through people’s weaknesses. As the saying goes, God loves us as we are, He just does not want to leave us that way. Discernment and human formation have real significance because holiness is built on working humbly on the self to learn about the self and one’s motivations, limits and abilities, to live a life of virtue, to grow in affective and social maturity, and to develop self-control that fosters a capacity for a sincere gift of the self.¹⁷ This is assisted and brought about

¹² Pope St John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* 1998.

¹³ *Ratio* 30-34.

¹⁴ *Ratio* 56.

¹⁵ *Ratio* 80-81.

¹⁶ *Ratio* 28.

¹⁷ *Ratio* 63.

by grace, prayer, critical reflection and a growing spirituality. By integrating the four aspects of formation – the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral – into his life, the person grows in an interior life of maturity, is inspired by gospel values, has an emotional independence. Working on the self, he becomes a man of discernment of himself and of others, ‘able to read the reality of human life in the light of the Spirit.’¹⁸ First and foremost, the seminarian and later the priest ‘is a necessary and irreplaceable agent in his own formation,’ yet at the same time the principle agent is the Holy Trinity, working through the presence of Christ in the Word and the sacraments, through the community, and through the actions of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

Personal and community accompaniment

Formation demands personal evaluation and external evaluation to demonstrate that the man is honest and open to becoming more and more configured to Christ the Good Shepherd, made possible of course by the workings of grace. Allowing oneself to be accompanied by another is not easy. In this process it is not only expected but also necessary that the seminarian ‘should know himself and let himself be known.’ He is asked to relate to those in charge of his formation ‘with sincerity and transparency’. Many of those who are eager for the great prize of priesthood ahead of them become frustrated at the apparently less important demands placed on them especially in their human formation; they may worry over the inevitable evaluations that sit alongside accompaniment; they fear the prize may be taken away from them, that they will not be found good enough. When heart and soul and mind are wrapped up in the burning desire to serve God then coming under the judgement of other human beings becomes a real fear. It is easy to forget that the process of accompaniment has as its goal ‘docibilitas’, allowing oneself to be led by the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Certainly, much work has been done to provide criteria for evaluation, to ensure that accompaniment respects the other person, to develop relationships of mutual trust and understanding. But ultimately those accompanying the seminarian also fall under the goal of docibilitas since they too seek to be led by the Holy Spirit.

Formation also has a community dimension. The seminarian discovers his vocation in a community, he belongs to the community in the seminary, and after ordination he is sent to be at the service of a particular community. This community dimension is a clear indication that formation for the priesthood is not merely a matter of individual sanctification. Rather formation is a matter of the gift of the self to the Church.²¹ This is one reason why pastoral reports from placements in parishes are invaluable as sources to inform the process of formation. Pope Francis reminds us that lay people, families, and especially women should be part of the seminary process and priestly life since they help to keep people ‘well grounded in reality’, and they promote a deeper appreciation of the diversity and complementarity of different vocations in the Church.²² Notably, when a candidate is presented for ordination as a priest the rector of the seminary is asked, ‘Do you judge him to be worthy?’ and the rector replies, ‘after inquiry among the people of Christ and upon recommendation of those concerned with his training, I testify that he has been found worthy.’

I will give you shepherds after my own heart

¹⁸ *Ratio* 43.

¹⁹ *Ratio* 53 quoting Pope St John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 1992:69; *Ratio* 125.

²⁰ *Ratio* 45.

²¹ *Ratio* 3.

²² Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 2016:203.

Pastores Dabo Vobis begins with God's promise that He will never leave his people 'without shepherds to gather them together and guide them.' Moreover, 'by faith we know that the Lord's promise cannot fail.'²³ Pope Benedict XVI tells those who have been called to the priesthood, 'do not be afraid to say "yes" to Jesus.'²⁴ But just as this 'yes' to Jesus is not simply an individual path to holiness, so too are the community called to support and pray for those being formed for priesthood, and to pray that the Lord sends labourers to the harvest.

²³ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1.

²⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Homily* 20th July, 2008.