

INTRODUCTION

PRIESTLY FORMATION: ONE, INTEGRAL, GROUNDED IN COMMUNITY, AND MISSIONARY IN SPIRIT

- 10 The journey of priestly formation begins at Baptism, when the new disciple of Jesus Christ begins to live the call to follow Christ in holiness. It is the same call disciples of Jesus have received since the foundation of the Church. St. John Paul II described seminary formation as “a continuation in the Church of the apostolic community gathered about Jesus, listening to his word, proceeding toward the Easter experience, awaiting the gift of the Spirit for the mission.”⁸ This singular “journey of discipleship,” begun in Baptism, “comes to be appreciated as the center of one’s life at the beginning of Seminary formation, and continues through the whole of life.”⁹
- 11 Priestly formation is an integral journey in which the four dimensions of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation are woven together in such a way that, while identified as distinct dimensions, they can be seen as an “integrated journey of the disciple called to priesthood.”¹⁰
- 12 This integrated journey of discipleship is aimed at conforming the heart to the heart of Christ.¹¹ Being thus conformed to Christ leads the priest to pastoral charity, which animates all aspects of the life of the priest.¹²
- 13 The call to priesthood is essentially communitarian in nature. It is within the community of the family, parish, or ecclesial movement, or through interaction with an institute of consecrated life or society

8 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 60.

9 *Ratio Fundamentalis*, Introduction, no. 3.

10 *Ratio Fundamentalis*, Introduction, no. 3.

11 See *Ratio Fundamentalis*, no. 89; *Optatam Totius*, no. 4; *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 57.

12 See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 57.

of apostolic life, that a vocation to priesthood is discovered. This vocation is discerned and nurtured within the seminary community. “This community leads the seminarian, through ordination, to become part of the ‘family’ of the presbyterate, at the service of a particular community.”¹³

- 14 All Christians are prompted by the Holy Spirit to share the love of Jesus Christ with others; they are called to missionary discipleship. Baptism and Confirmation equip them to evangelize in all that they say and do.¹⁴ Ministerial priesthood flows from this same call to missionary discipleship yet remains distinct.¹⁵ The goal of priestly formation is to form missionary disciples so that they are ready for consecration as shepherds for God’s People, sharing in the authority of Christ the Redeemer, who sent the Apostles to preach and heal.¹⁶ In this way, priestly formation clearly must have a missionary character.¹⁷
- 15 Priestly formation today continues in the spirit of the response of the first disciples and their communion of life. The Gospel foundation of priestly formation precedes programs, structures, and plans. What was vital and essential for that first community of disciples remains so today for those engaged in priestly formation: “As he was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, ‘Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.’ At once they left their nets and followed him” (Mt 4:18-20).
- 16 The Church continues to place the highest value on the work of priestly formation, because it is linked to the very mission of the

13 *Ratio Fundamentalis*, Introduction, no. 3.

14 See *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 120-121.

15 See *Lumen Gentium*, no. 10.

16 See Lk 9:1-6, Mt 10:1-15, Mk 6:7-13.

17 See *Ratio Fundamentalis*, Introduction, no. 3.

Church, especially the evangelization of humanity:¹⁸ “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19). The apostolic origins of the Church, which bind all believers in communion with the Lord and his mission, motivate those who engage in the ministry of priestly formation, underscore the urgency of their task, and remind them of their great responsibility.

PRIESTLY FORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE WORLD AND THE CHURCH TODAY

- 17 Priestly formation takes place in a given ecclesial and historical context. Identifying that context is a critical task for giving specific shape to particular programs of formation. The importance of context is highlighted in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “God always calls his priests from specific human and ecclesial contexts, which inevitably influence them; and to these same contexts the priest is sent for the service of Christ’s Gospel.”¹⁹
- 18 Worldwide, the current secular culture—“the economy of exclusion, the idolatry of money, the iniquity that generates violence, the primacy of appearance over being, postmodern individualism and globalization, as well as the reality of ethical relativism and religious indifference”²⁰—presents many questions and challenges.
- 19 There are also many significant challenges, blessings, and opportunities that are particular to the United States in the twenty-first century. These play an important part in shaping seminary formation today. They also set the horizon for priestly ministry in the years ahead. Some of the more significant challenges are related to (1) American culture, (2) the Catholic Church in the United States, and (3) the discerners and seminarians themselves.

18 See *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 2.

19 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 5.

20 *Ratio Fundamentalis*, no. 175.

20 (1) First, as it relates to American culture:

a. The United States is a nation with a rich cultural heritage of freedom, equality, justice for the oppressed, and open dialogue.²¹ However, an “economy of exclusion and inequality” leaves many families trapped in a cycle of poverty.²² Migrants and refugees fleeing hardship and violence continue to arrive in US communities. The evil of racism continues to be a factor in the social fabric of the United States; Catholic institutions are not immune to the persistence of racism in society.²³

b. In most areas of the United States, the norm is a high level of cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity. Continued Catholic immigration has situated numerous newly arrived people, who present their own economic and religious issues, alongside numerous other Catholic laity who are native-born. Both groups share a common Church, have very different backgrounds, and can be mutually enriched by the exchange of their gifts.

c. In the United States at this time, there is the paradox of a widespread thirst for spirituality and, at the same time, a prevailing secular ethos. From another perspective, the nation finds itself more intensely called to build a “civilization of life and love,” even as it struggles against a “culture of death.” In United States society at large, many persons are unchurched or unaffiliated with any denomination or faith tradition but remain open to evangelization. So too, there is a growing number of persons, particularly young people, who are unchurched and who have rejected religious beliefs as irrelevant to their lives.

21 Pope Francis recognized this in his address to the US Congress during his 2015 papal visit: “A nation can be considered great when it defends liberty as [Abraham] Lincoln did, when it fosters a culture which enables people to ‘dream’ of full rights for all their brothers and sisters, as Martin Luther King sought to do; when it strives for justice and the cause of the oppressed, as Dorothy Day did by her tireless work, the fruit of a faith which becomes dialogue and sows peace in the contemplative style of Thomas Merton.” Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress” (address, US Capitol, Washington, DC, September 24, 2015), www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/september/documents/papa-francesco_20150924_usa-us-congress.html (accessed December 23, 2021).

22 *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53; see Francis, “Visit to the Joint Session of the United States Congress.”

23 See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53.

d. Weaknesses of ethical standards and a moral relativism have a corrosive effect on American public life as seen, for example, in marriage and family life, in business, and in politics.

e. The redefinition of marriage in culture and civil law and shifting understandings of gender and sexuality have transformed society such that the anthropological presuppositions that were once commonly shared are being called into question, making it more difficult for the seeds of the Gospel to take root and sprout.

f. Advances in technology have brought great progress to humanity but at the same time present new challenges.²⁴ These challenges are particularly present to young adults, who seem alienated from any authority or institution and who are accustomed to virtual relationships and constant recourse to social media. In addition, the widespread availability of pornography on the internet is a pervasive reality and a pernicious threat to human and moral development.

21 (2) Second, many factors within the Catholic Church in the United States also present opportunities and challenges that directly affect seminary formation:

a. The Catholic Church in the United States is reinvigorated especially by the new ecclesial realities born of the Second Vatican Council, which have offered a more positive context for vocations.

b. With a renewed sense of mission, the Church wants to engage in the new evangelization in these areas: evangelization through ordinary pastoral ministry, evangelization through ministry to the baptized who lack a relationship with the Church, and evangelization to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ or who have rejected him.²⁵

²⁴ "The gift of discernment has become all the more necessary today, since contemporary life offers immense possibilities for action and distraction, and the world presents all of them as valid and good. All of us, but especially the young, are immersed in a culture of zapping. We can navigate simultaneously on two or more screens and interact at the same time with two or three virtual scenarios. Without the wisdom of discernment, we can easily become prey to every passing trend." *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 167. See also *Laudato Si'*, no. 47; Pope Benedict XVI, Vespers Homily, Pastoral Visit to Lamezia Terme and Serra San Bruno, October 9, 2011, w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20111009_vespri-serra-san-bruno.html (accessed May 5, 2018).

²⁵ See *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 15.