

Forming Religious and Diocesan Priests: Points of Convergence

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Diocesan and religious priesthood clearly constitute distinct vocations. Religious life, for priests, brothers or sisters, is characterized by a vowed commitment to the practice of the evangelical counsels as a means to the perfection of charity, and, for those of the cenobitic tradition, entails dedication to the common life.² Diocesan priesthood is marked by close ties to the local bishop and service to the faithful of a particular church in a specific geographical area (the parish community within the diocese).³ Moreover, these two paths differ not only as regards their identity, but perhaps even more so in the practical demands made on them in living out their vocation. These differences necessarily call for a different sort of preparation in the seminary.

For all their real differences, however, diocesan and religious priests share essentially in the one ministerial priesthood of Jesus Christ.⁴ Because of the ontological conformity of the ordained minister with Jesus Christ the priest, a religious priest is, in a sense, more similar to a diocesan priest than to a religious brother or sister. The common core of the priestly vocation means that priestly formation, be it diocesan or religious, will always comprise a series of essential elements that are critical for the formation of a man as a priest.⁵

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² “Vita consecrata per consiliorum evangelicorum professionem est stabilis vivendi forma qua fideles, Christum sub actione Spiritus Sancti pressius sequentes, Deo summe dilecto totaliter dedicantur ut, in Eius honorem atque Ecclesiae aedificationem mundique salutem novo et peculiari titulo dediti, caritatis perfectionem in servitio Regni Dei consequantur et, praeclarum in Ecclesia signum effecti, caelestem gloriam praenuntiant” (*Codex Iuris Canonici* [hereafter CIC], can. 573, §1). “Institutum religiosum est societas in qua sodales secundum ius proprium vota publica perpetua vel temporaria, elapso tamen tempore renovanda, nuncupant atque vitam fraternam in communi ducunt” (CIC can. 607, §2). See also the Second Vatican Council’s Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, October 28, 1965, no. 1.

³ See, especially, CIC cann. 369, 372 § 1, 374 § 1, 515 § 1,

⁴ In his book on priestly formation, Marcial Maciel writes: “There are obvious differences between forming diocesan priests and forming religious aspirants to the priesthood. ... Doubtless, the priestly formation of religious varies in each institute according to the traits of its own charism: its spirituality and apostolate, customs and lifestyle. Still, the most essential aspects of priestly formation are equally valid for diocesan and religious priests” (Marcial Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests* [Circle Press: New Haven, 1999], p. xix).

⁵ The Conciliar Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius* [hereafter OT], made note of this convergence from the outset. “Because of the very unity of the Catholic priesthood this priestly formation is necessary

The parallels between the training of diocesan and religious priests is borne out historically by the fact that bishops have often entrusted the formation of their clergy to religious communities. The genesis of this practice goes back to the origins of religious life itself. Already in the fourth century, when monastic life was just beginning, the bishop of Vercelli, Saint Eusebius, united monastic with clerical life and led with the clergy of his city a common life modelled upon that of the Eastern cenobites.⁶ Similar practices took place in Verona and Aquileia, and then in the fifth century in Hippo under Saint Augustine. Later, after the Council of Trent decreed the establishment of diocesan seminaries in 1563, Pope Pius IV commended the training of his own seminarians to the Society of Jesus, and under his auspices the Jesuit-run Roman Seminary was opened in February of 1565.

This article seeks to highlight the commonality of the preparation of men for the diocesan and religious priesthood, especially as suggested by the Council's Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius*, and Pope John Paul II's 1990 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. In the latter document, Pope John Paul II noted: "Each priest, whether diocesan or religious, is united to the other members of this presbyterate on the basis of the sacrament of holy orders and by particular bonds of apostolic charity, ministry and fraternity. All priests in fact, whether diocesan or religious, share in the one priesthood of Christ the head and shepherd."⁷

To better understand these points of convergence, I will speak separately of the different dimensions of priestly formation, namely the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions. These aspects of formation are themselves common to all priests, as are many of the specific virtues needed in these different areas. Before looking at these in greater detail, however, I will first briefly examine the nature of the ministerial priesthood itself, which determines the key formative needs of the seminarian.

for all priests, diocesan and religious and of every rite. Wherefore, while these prescriptions directly concern the diocesan clergy, they are to be appropriately adapted to all" (introduction). We find something similar at the beginning of the Council's Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* [hereafter PO], where we read: "What is said here applies to all priests, especially those devoted to the care of souls, with suitable adaptations being made for priests who are religious" (no. 1). In his 1992 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* [hereafter PDV], Pope John Paul II likewise addresses "each and every priest, whether diocesan or religious" (no. 4).

⁶ This according to the testimony of St. Ambrose (See Ep. lxiii, *Ad Vercellenses*, Ep. lxxxix and Serm. lxxxix).

⁷ PDV, 17.

1. The Ministerial Priesthood

In omnibus respice finem, said the ancients, as a reminder that means are determined by ends. A good itinerary can only be drawn up once a destination has been decided upon. Priestly formation, while taking into account the characteristics of the young men being educated, has a specific ideal in mind: the ideal of Christ the priest.⁸ While some of the particular characteristics of priests vary from place to place, from time period to time period, and from the religious to the diocesan vocation, the constitutive components of the ordained priesthood remain the same. The formative work of preparing a young man to receive the gift of the sacrament of orders and then to live this vocation fruitfully and faithfully will always have the ideal in mind. The candidate for the priesthood as well as his formators will have as a constant point of reference the question: Who am I called to be?

The success of formation programs often depends more on the clarity and correctness with which we answer this question than on particular formation strategies.⁹ No doubt the confusion surrounding priestly identity after the Second Vatican Council contributed decisively to the breakdown of priestly formation in many places, both of religious and diocesan priests.¹⁰ Getting this question right, while not assuring successful formation programs, at least offers a sure point of departure and a sound benchmark for priestly training.

The Letter to the Hebrews offers a helpful starting point. There we read the following: “Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.”¹¹ From this succinct description we discern that a priest is above all *chosen*. That is, no one takes this honor and this duty upon himself; he is called by God.¹² The Gospel similarly states

⁸ See, for example, Cardinal Domenico Jorio, *Sacerdos Alter Christus* (Rome, 1933).

⁹ Thus, while Pope John Paul II notes in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* that attention “has shifted from the question of the priest’s identity to that connected with the process of formation for the priesthood and the quality of priestly life” (no. 3), he likewise observes that the problem of priestly formation “cannot be solved without previous reflection upon the goal of formation, that is, the ministerial priesthood, or more precisely, the ministerial priesthood as a participation—in the Church—in the very priesthood of Jesus Christ” (no. 11). Indeed, “knowledge of the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood is an essential presupposition, and at the same time the surest guide and incentive” for “training those called to the ordained ministry” (Ibid.).

¹⁰ See, for example, Hans Urs von Balthasar’s analysis of the breakdown of priestly identity in his article “El sacerdote que yo busco,” *Ecclesia*, 1 (1987), p. 12.

¹¹ Hebrews 5:1.

¹² Ibid. 5:4.

that on selecting his apostles, Jesus “called to himself those whom he wanted.”¹³ The nature of the priesthood as a free divine election requires deep respect on the part of both candidates to the priesthood and those involved with their training. The priesthood is not simply a “career choice” that responds to one’s particular gifts and affinities. Rather, it reflects a mysterious design of the Creator Himself, and thus merits reverence and a deep spirit of faith.

Secondly, the priest is not drawn from a separate race or a gifted priestly caste, but is chosen “from among mortals,” and thus shares in all the frailty of human beings, even after being ordained. It is God Himself who deigns to call weak human beings to participate in his own project of redemption and sanctification. The Father’s decision to “choose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” and to choose “what is weak in the world to shame the strong”¹⁴ underscores both the realism with which formators and candidates should approach the formation process, as well as the need for continual reliance on divine grace. These principles clearly transcend the specificities of the diocesan or religious vocations and touch the heart of the priesthood itself.

Finally, the priest is “put in charge of *things pertaining to God* on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.” Though he may excel in administrative or organizational skills or be particularly astute as a political or economic analyst, such things are nearly irrelevant. The priest is not first and foremost a golf buddy, or an investment counsellor, or a social activist. He is essentially *homo Dei*, a man of God.¹⁵ People will surely approach him for counsel on a variety of subjects, but what they expect above all is to receive Christ from him and to meet Christ through him.¹⁶ They will rightly feel cheated if he does not speak to them of God and bring them to God, not as knowledge he has acquired in books, but as fruit of his own living relationship with his Creator and Redeemer. He is ordained, moreover, “to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins,” above all the holy and perfect sacrifice of the Eucharist, which highlights his central mission as steward of the sacraments.

¹³ Mark 3:13.

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 1:27-28.

¹⁵ See Pope John Paul II, words given in Paul VI Hall on November 1, 1996, on the occasion of his 50th anniversary of priestly ordination.

¹⁶ “The priest is the man of God, the one who belongs to God and makes people think about God... Christians expect to find in the priest not only a man who welcomes them, who listens to them gladly and shows a real interest in them, but also and above all a man who will help them to turn to God, to rise up to him. And so the priest needs to be trained to have a deep intimacy with God” (Pope John Paul II, Angelus Message, [March 4, 1990], 2-3: *L'Osservatore Romano*, March 5-6, 1990).

What is immediately evident from this necessarily summary glance at priestly identity is that the needs of priestly training, both diocesan and religious, flow directly from the nature of the priesthood itself, and not from a particular mode of living out the ordained ministry. The different dimensions of priestly training issue forth like branches from the central trunk of the priesthood itself.

2. Human Formation

Jesus could have selected angels to participate in his priesthood, but he did not. He chose weak, fallible men. The realism imposed on formation personnel by their understanding that priests are chosen “from among mortals” frees them from impossible expectations in their dealings with seminarians. Moreover, it reminds them that the holiness asked of priests does not come about in a vacuum, but requires a solid undergirding in the human virtues.

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II referred to human formation as “the basis of all priestly formation,” and notes that the “whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation” (no. 43). This isn’t to say that human formation takes precedence over, say, spiritual or pastoral formation. Rather, it provides the necessary foundation upon which to build the edifice of the spiritual and pastoral life of a priest. Grace builds upon nature, but does not replace it.¹⁷ Solid piety and pastoral charity cannot be slapped on as a mere veneer over worldly habits and a profane worldview. The entire person—reason and will, internal and external senses, affectivity and sensibility—needs to be integrated into a single priestly personality.

Here, too, both for religious and diocesan seminarians, the model and standard of priestly formation continues to be the person of Jesus Christ. The priest, who is called to be a living image of Jesus Christ, “should seek to reflect in himself, as far as possible, the human perfection which shines forth in the incarnate Son of God and which is reflected with particular liveliness in his attitudes toward others as we see narrated in the

¹⁷ See, for example, Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 8 ad 2.

Gospels.”¹⁸ The Gospels furnish the future priests not only with Christian doctrine, but also become for them a blueprint for their own training and priestly identity.

In considering the human formation of candidates to the priesthood, the Second Vatican Council laid special stress on the acquisition of human maturity as a prerequisite for a fruitful priestly life. This maturity, according to the Council Fathers, should be especially evident in candidates’ stability of mind, in their ability to make weighty decisions, and in their sound evaluation of persons and events.¹⁹ These essential virtues cannot be presupposed, but must be formed. To be deep and lasting, this formation must be in large part “self-formation,” grounded in conviction and not merely in external discipline or a particularly helpful environment.²⁰

Maturity itself has much to do with self-mastery and the ability to use one’s freedom responsibly. Disciplinary norms are meant not to replace the need for personal responsibility, but as a means to the formation of habits that will last long beyond seminary, throughout a priest’s entire life.²¹ Self-dominion in turn relies heavily on the evangelical virtue of self-denial and the habit of joyfully taking up one’s cross. Thus, candidates for the priesthood should be formed “in a simple way of life and in the spirit of self-denial that they are accustomed to giving up willingly even those things which are permitted but are not expedient, and to conform themselves to Christ crucified.”²² These key virtues not only prepare a priest for fidelity in a life that will often be costly, but also offer the lay faithful a model of evangelical simplicity and abnegation that speak more convincingly than carefully crafted homilies and eloquent discourses.

Finally, the Council further recommended that seminarians “learn to esteem those virtues which are held in high regard by men and which recommend a minister of Christ. Such virtues are sincerity of mind, a constant concern for justice, fidelity to one’s promises, refinement in manners, modesty in speech coupled with charity.”²³ These eminently human virtues round out priestly formation and make a truly Christian

¹⁸ PDV, 43.

¹⁹ See OT, 11.

²⁰ Thus *Optatam Totius* notes that “students should be accustomed to work properly at their own development.” Seminary discipline itself seeks “that the students acquire an internal attitude whereby they accept the authority of superiors from personal conviction, that is to say, from a motive of conscience (cf. Rom. 13:5), and for supernatural reasons” (no. 11). *Pastores Dabo Vobis* adds: “All formation, priestly formation included, is ultimately a self formation. No one can replace us in the responsible freedom that we have as individual persons” (no. 69).

²¹ “The norms of discipline are to be applied according to the age of the students so that they themselves, as they gradually learn self-mastery, may become accustomed to use freedom wisely, to act spontaneously and energetically, and to work together harmoniously with their fellows and with the laity” (OT, 11).

²² OT, 9.

²³ OT, 11.

formation possible. They also open doors in dealing with the men and women of our time.²⁴ How often people can be turned off by a rude, impatient or simply ill-refined priest, and how much good can be done through common courtesy and understanding!

Obviously the human formation of a religious will differ in some regards from that of a diocesan seminarian. For example, a religious will often continue to live in community even after his formation period, while a diocesan priest likely will not. Particular virtues and skills needed for different apostolic tasks will also condition formative needs. A diocesan priest must learn to be innovative in seeking out practical ways of fostering priestly fraternity that a religious will enjoy more easily. He must also acquire administrative skills proper to a parish setting that certain religious may not need. Nonetheless, the infrastructure of human virtues needed for the priestly ministry coincides almost exactly for religious and diocesan priests, and therefore formation programs of each should pay special attention to the formation of these qualities.

3. Spiritual Formation

Optatam Totius rightly gives pride of place to the spiritual formation of priests. They are, after all, called to be men of God and other Christs, ministers of divine mysteries that totally transcend merely human activity and capacities. According to the Council, spiritual training “should be imparted in such a way that the students might learn to live in an intimate and unceasing union with the Father through His Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.”²⁵

From the perspective of Christian faith, one does not seek a generic “spirituality” to fill a particular void in one’s psyche. A Christian’s quest is focused on the person of Jesus Christ. Seeking Christ and getting to know, love and follow Him better becomes the passion of the Christian’s existence. If this is true of Christianity as such, it is perforce truer still of candidates for the priesthood, called as they are to be other Christs and to celebrate the divine mysteries “*in persona Christi capitis.*”

²⁴ In this vein Pope John Paul wrote: “In order that his ministry may be humanly as credible and acceptable as possible, it is important that the priest should mold his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of humanity” (PDV 43).

²⁵ OT, 8.

If the human formation of seminarians overlaps so considerably between diocesan and religious, perhaps spiritual formation does so even more. Granted, religious communities bear a particular spiritual stamp proper to their charism, while the parish work of diocesan priests necessarily demands a universality that embraces all the faithful, regardless of the personal devotions of their pastors. Yet participation in the ministerial priesthood of Jesus Christ carries with it exacting spiritual demands that affect all priests equally. There is clearly a spirituality proper to the priesthood in which all priests are called to share. “Spiritual formation... should be structured according to the meanings and connotations which derive from the identity of the priest and his ministry. ...for every priest his spiritual formation is the core which unifies and gives life to his being a priest and his acting as a priest.”²⁶

Unfortunately it is sometimes in this most essential aspect of the priest’s life that diocesan seminarians occasionally distance themselves most from religious. In reference to certain practices of piety such as mental prayer, I have often heard the expression from diocesan seminarians that such activities “are for religious” and at times there seems to be a tacit understanding that a diocesan priest’s spiritual practices could well be limited to the reading of the breviary and perhaps the recitation of the rosary. Even on a practical level diocesan priests have expressed to me on occasion that an active prayer life is a luxury for religious that diocesan priests simply have no time for.

Yet nothing could be further from the mind of the Council or the tradition of the Church. *Optatam Totius* goes on to say: “Conformed to Christ the Priest through their sacred ordination they should be accustomed to adhere to Him as friends, in an intimate companionship, their whole life through.” Moreover, “they should be taught to seek Christ in the faithful meditation on God’s word, in the active participation in the sacred mysteries of the Church, especially in the Eucharist and in the divine office, in the bishop who sends them and in the people to whom they are sent, especially the poor, the children, the sick, the sinners and the unbelievers... Those practices of piety that are commended by the long usage of the Church should be zealously cultivated.”²⁷

A priest is called not only to be a man of prayer but also a “teacher of prayer.” People will turn to him and ask him how to pray, how to enter into deeper communion with God the Father through his Son Jesus in the Holy Spirit. The priest will only be able to train

²⁶ PDV, 45.

²⁷ OT, 8.

others in this school of prayer if he himself has been trained in it and continues to receive its formation.

Again, on a practical level the common life of religious and adherence to regular timetables facilitates the practice of a regular prayer life, while diocesan priests rarely enjoy such benefits. Thus part of the specificity of the spiritual formation of diocesan priests will entail forming habits of piety and helping them to juggle the practical demands of parish life with the all-important contact with God throughout the day in prayer. Though diocesan formation programs ordinarily do not include a period of spiritual training comparable to the “novitiate” period for religious, the practice of setting aside a propaedeutic year to this end is growing in popularity.²⁸

The Council further insisted on the ecclesial dimension of priestly spirituality. “The students should be so saturated with the mystery of the Church,” we read, “that, bound to the Vicar of Christ in a humble and trusting charity and, once ordained priests, adhering to their own bishop as faithful helpers and engaging in a common effort with their fellow-priests, they bear witness to that unity that attracts men to Christ.”²⁹ This teaching perhaps calls most forcefully to religious priests, who may be more tempted than diocesan priests to focus on their own mission within the Church than on the Church herself. Candidates for both diocesan and religious priesthood should be taught to overcome tendencies to ecclesial provincialism in order to “take part with a generous heart in the life of the whole Church in accord with what St. Augustine wrote: ‘to the extent that one loves the Church of Christ, to that extent does he possess the Holy Spirit.’”³⁰

The Council warned against a spiritual formation that consists merely in external practices or religious affectation. Above all, an active spiritual life should bear the fruit of a life according to the Gospel ideal, the practice of the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, and zeal to gain all men for Christ.³¹ It was after all Christ Himself who declared that it is not those who call out “Lord, Lord!” who will enter the Kingdom

²⁸ The Council recommended the possibility of setting aside a time specifically for immersion in the spiritual life. “In order that the spiritual training rest upon a more solid basis and that the students embrace their vocation with a fully deliberate choice, it will be the prerogative of the bishops to establish a fitting period of time for a more intense introduction to the spiritual life” (OT, 12).

²⁹ OT, 9.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See OT, 8. “Like a reliable thermometer, the measure in which we live and grow in the theological virtues indicates the degree to which God is taking possession of us, and the degree in which we are being turned into men of God” (Marcial Maciel, *Integral Formation of Catholic Priests*, [Circle Press: New Haven, 1999], p. 63).

of Heaven, but rather those who do the will of his Father in Heaven.³² For religious and diocesan candidates for the priesthood, the authenticity of prayer is manifested in practical union with the Father's will.

4. Intellectual Formation

In omnibus respice finem. In dealing with the intellectual or academic formation of seminarians we once again must ask ourselves about priestly identity and its relationship to the intellectual life. Putting aside the specific ministry of the small percentage of priests devoted to the academic life, we come face to face again with the nature of the ministerial priesthood as such. A priest is a man of God, an ambassador of Jesus Christ, and his intellectual formation should reflect this ideal. Here there can be no question of erudition for erudition's sake, lest we fall under Paul's righteous reproach: "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies."³³ Rather a priest's knowledge and intellectual training form part of the service that he renders to God's people.

Priests share in Christ's threefold ministry as priest, prophet and king. Because of their prophetic role, all priests are called to be teachers. Again, here there is no essential distinction between diocesan and religious priests. As ministers of God's word, priests are called to faithfully pass on what they have learned from Christ.³⁴ Whether in an official teaching role or in the exercise of the simplest pastoral duties, priests represent the Church and like Christ the master, their teaching is not their own.³⁵ A priest must therefore be thoroughly familiar with Christian doctrine, not just for his own spiritual benefit, but above all since he is called to teach others and to help them come to the fullness of the faith.³⁶ All priests have the duty to catechize and instruct the faithful.³⁷

³² See Matthew 7:21; Luke 6:46.

³³ 1 Corinthians 8:1-3.

³⁴ "To all men, therefore, priests are debtors that the truth of the Gospel which they have may be given to others. And so, whether by entering into profitable dialogue they bring people to the worship of God, whether by openly preaching they proclaim the mystery of Christ, or whether in the light of Christ they treat contemporary problems, they are relying not on their own wisdom for it is the word of Christ they teach, and it is to conversion and holiness that they exhort all men" (PO, 4).

³⁵ "My teaching is not mine but his who sent me" (John 7:16).

³⁶ "Priests therefore, as educators in the faith, must see to it either by themselves or through others that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to a development of their own vocation according to the Gospel, to a sincere and practical charity, and to that freedom with which Christ has made us free" (PO, 6).

³⁷ "All believers have a right to catechesis; all pastors have the duty to provide it" (Pope John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, October 16, 1979, no. 64).

In setting forth the Church's doctrinal and moral teachings, priests must be prepared to go beyond a mere announcement of Christian doctrine. On a whole people are better educated today than ever before and the faithful have a right to an instruction worthy of their intellectual preparation.³⁸ Here, too, distinctions between diocesan and religious priests are not helpful, since the teaching role is proper to the priest by reason of his ordination.³⁹ In addition, when a person approaches a priest with questions about his or her faith, that person seeks the authoritative word of a priest, and has a right to an explanation of what the Church teaches and why. From the very earliest days of seminary, candidates for the priesthood must be aware of their responsibility before God and the Church to know and faithfully represent Church teaching.⁴⁰

Optatam Totius laid down specific guidelines regarding the renewal of priestly intellectual formation. It recommended humanistic and scientific training prior to beginning specifically ecclesiastical subjects, as well as the study of Latin and the liturgical language proper to each rite.⁴¹ It also underlined the need to clearly align all ecclesiastical studies with the goal of "opening more and more the minds of the students to the mystery of Christ."⁴² Philosophical studies, in the other hand, aim to prepare the students "for dialogue with men of their time."⁴³ In my own experience, the importance of philosophical formation both as a preparation for theological studies and in its own right as a pastoral tool is severely underestimated.⁴⁴ Many problems people have in understanding Church teaching stem from philosophical errors such as logical fallacies rather than strictly theological error.

³⁸ "The present situation is heavily marked by religious indifference, by a widespread mistrust regarding the real capacity of reason to reach objective and universal truth, and by fresh problems and questions brought up by scientific and technological discoveries. It strongly demands a high level of intellectual formation, such as will enable priests to proclaim, in a context like this, the changeless Gospel of Christ and to make it credible to the legitimate demands of human reason" (PDV, 51).

³⁹ "The intellectual formation of candidates for the priesthood finds its specific justification in the very nature of the ordained ministry" (PDV, 51).

⁴⁰ "In order, moreover, that they may give apt answers to questions posed by men of this age, it is necessary for priests to know well the doctrines of the magisterium and the councils and documents of the Roman pontiffs and to consult the best of prudent writers of theological science" (PO, 19).

⁴¹ OT, 13.

⁴² OT, 14.

⁴³ OT, 15.

⁴⁴ For its part, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* states: "A proper philosophical training is vital... vis-à-vis an extremely widespread cultural situation which emphasizes subjectivism as a criterion and measure of truth: Only a sound philosophy can help candidates for the priesthood to develop a reflective awareness of the fundamental relationship that exists between the human spirit and truth, that truth which is revealed to us fully in Jesus Christ. Nor must one underestimate the importance of philosophy as a guarantee of that 'certainty of truth' which is the only firm basis for a total giving of oneself to Jesus and to the Church" (no. 52).

For its part, theology “should be so taught that the students will correctly draw out Catholic doctrine from divine revelation, profoundly penetrate it, make it the food of their own spiritual lives, and be enabled to proclaim, explain, and protect it in their priestly ministry.”⁴⁵ Here the connection between study and pastoral application is clearer still.⁴⁶ One learns in order to convey to others the truths one has studied. Or, in the words of the celebrated Dominican adage: *Contemplata aliis tradere*.

The link between the student’s academic study and personal spiritual life should also be highlighted. Theology is, after all, *fides quaerens intellectum*. It starts with faith and leads to a deepening of faith through reason.⁴⁷ Yet if it is not nourished by prayer and contemplation, theology too runs the risk of becoming overly abstract and speculative. Philologists and historians, von Balthasar once wrote, have a certain habit of mental reservation that is inimical to contemplation. People who have invested much time in dissecting a text (von Balthasar compares such study to an autopsy) are in danger of becoming so enmeshed in the study of internal mechanisms that they neglect the animating principle that holds these elements together. The seminarian who approaches theological studies as a praying lover (rather than as a coroner) will devote a minimum of time to unearthing curious details, and concentrate his attention on discerning what God is saying to him.

5. Pastoral Formation

A priest, like Christ the High Priest, is shepherd of souls. Thus *Optatam Totius* could state that “the entire training of the students should be oriented to the formation of true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd.”⁴⁸ The nature of the ministerial priesthood as taking on the mind of Christ as

⁴⁵ OT, 16. This teaching finds an echo in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “In reality, through study, especially the study of theology, the future priest assents to the word of God, grows in his spiritual life and prepares himself to fulfill his pastoral ministry” (PDV, 51).

⁴⁶ “In fact the pastoral nature of theology does not mean that it should be less doctrinal or that it should be completely stripped of its scientific nature. It means, rather, that it enables future priests to proclaim the Gospel message through the cultural modes of their age and to direct pastoral action according to an authentic theological vision” (PDV, 55).

⁴⁷ As Saint Thomas teaches, the whole of theology is ordered to nourishing the faith. See especially *In I Sentent.* Prolog., q. 1, a. 1-5.

⁴⁸ OT, 4.

shepherds of souls is common both to religious and diocesan priests, and the training involved in reaching this goal must follow a similar path for both.

Optatam Totius calls for a pastoral formation that underscores the essence of the priestly mission, the same for diocesan and religious priests. “That pastoral concern which ought to permeate thoroughly the entire training of the students also demands that they be diligently instructed *in those matters which are particularly linked to the sacred ministry*, especially in catechesis and preaching, in liturgical worship and the administration of the sacraments, in works of charity, in assisting the erring and the unbelieving, and in the other pastoral functions.”⁴⁹ The key elements of pastoral formation tie in directly with the essence of the pastoral ministry.

Though they may seem quite unrelated, pastoral formation and spiritual formation are closely linked. Zeal for souls comes as a natural expression of love for God and identification with the heart of Christ.⁵⁰ The more time one spends with Christ and the more his concerns, sentiments, aspirations and criteria become our own, the more his own passion for souls inflames our heart. Christ’s missionary mandate—“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you”⁵¹—though directed to the whole Church, is felt particularly by priests. By identifying with Christ, a priest identifies with His saving mission.

A certain false stereotype of a priest who has foregone love for the sake of an institution is belied by the example of great priest-saints such as Don Bosco, the Curé of Ars and Maximilian Kolbe who poured out their lives for others precisely because they loved much. Priests are not called to love less, but to love more. If it is true, as Pope John Paul II so convincingly proclaimed, that “man cannot live without love,” then priests, too, are called to live in love.⁵² Christ’s summary of the moral law as love of God and love of neighbor is the moral law of priests as well, who are called to live out

⁴⁹ OT, 19. Emphasis added.

⁵⁰ “Pastoral study and action direct one to an inner source, which the work of formation will take care to guard and make good use of: This is the ever-deeper communion with the pastoral charity of Jesus, which—just as it was the principle and driving force of his salvific action—likewise, thanks to the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of orders, should constitute the principle and driving force of the priestly ministry” (PDV, 57).

⁵¹ Matthew 28:19-20.

⁵² “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (Pope John Paul II, encyclical letter *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 10).

this precept with a special intensity and totality. “The priest is called to be the living image of Jesus Christ, the spouse of the Church.”⁵³

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II encapsulated this priestly love of neighbor under the title of “pastoral charity.” Once again, this critical aspect of priestly training draws its impetus from the priestly identity as *alter Christus*. The seminarian contemplates Christ, his model and exemplar, and discovers in Him the Good Shepherd whom he is called to imitate. John Paul put it this way: “His whole life is a continual manifestation of his ‘pastoral charity,’ or rather, a daily enactment of it. He feels compassion for the crowds because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mt. 9:35-36). He goes in search of the straying and scattered sheep (cf. Mt. 18:12-14) and joyfully celebrates their return. He gathers and protects them. He knows them and calls each one by name (cf. Jn. 10:3). He leads them to green pastures and still waters (cf. Ps. 22-23) and spreads a table for them, nourishing them with his own life.”⁵⁴

Finally, the Council strongly encouraged priests in their work of forming, guiding and launching the laity in their own apostolic activity. It asked that seminarians, both religious and diocesan, “be properly instructed in inspiring and fostering the apostolic activity of the laity and in promoting the various and more effective forms of the apostolate.”⁵⁵ This consists not so much in inventing myriad liturgical roles so that each feels he has a special task in the liturgical celebration, but especially in awakening laypersons to the beauty, importance and enormity of their role in the larger mission of the Church, so beautifully summed up by the Council. The laity, we read, “by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God... They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven...”⁵⁶ The priestly role of sanctifying, teaching and guiding takes on a particular meaning in the sustenance of the laity for this mission.

6. Conclusion

Though priestly training programs vary from country to country, epoch to epoch and culture to culture, certain vital elements remain everywhere the same, since they pertain

⁵³ PDV, 22.

⁵⁴ PDV, 22.

⁵⁵ OT, 20.

⁵⁶ Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 31.

to the nature and identity of the Christian priesthood itself. In this regard, all successful efforts to renew priestly formation always end up “going back to the sources,” in remembering that forming priests involves helping young men to “put on the mind of Christ”⁵⁷ by responding faithfully to his personal invitation to follow Him more closely and to share in his own work of redemption.

The lives and pastoral responsibilities of diocesan and religious priests vary, just as those of different religious communities vary among themselves. Nevertheless, the essential elements of the priestly vocation, and thus of priestly formation, transcend particular vocations and belong to the priesthood itself. Efforts to distinguish the formative needs of religious and diocesan clergy can be useful, as long as it remains clear that the points of convergence far outnumber and outweigh the points of divergence. A mutual exchange of gifts can only benefit all.

Especially when we look at the different dimensions of priestly training—human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation—the commonalities become obvious. We begin with a young man who has been called by Christ to be his disciple and to participate in his own priesthood for the edification of the whole Church. We begin with the same ideal of formation: the personality of Christ himself, in all its richness and beauty. We recognize the work to be done so that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the different aspects of the young man’s personality converge on the person of Christ Himself. The continuing renewal of seminary training will depend in large part on our ability to correctly identify these key components of priestly formation and apply them with courage and confidence.

abstract

Though diocesan and religious priesthood clearly constitute distinct vocations, they both share essentially in the one ministerial priesthood of Jesus Christ. This common core means that priestly training, be it diocesan or religious, will always comprise a series of essential elements that are critical for the formation of a man as a priest. This article seeks to highlight the commonality of the preparation of men for the diocesan and religious priesthood, especially as suggested by the Council’s Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius*, and Pope John Paul II’s 1990 post-synodal apostolic

⁵⁷ Philippians 2:5.

exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. To better understand these points of convergence, the different dimensions of priestly formation are examined separately, yet all tied into the nature of the ministerial priesthood itself, which determines the key formative needs of the seminarian.

brief biography

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