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Seminary Formation

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Over the past few years a lot of attention has been given to the renewal of priests and also to forming the laity for a more active part in the life and mission of the Church. It seems, however, that not enough attention has been given to the question of formation for diocesan priesthood. In particular, there has not been enough questioning of the assumptions on which seminaries are structuring their formation programmes. I will comment on some of those assumptions and attempt to offer some suggestions about formation for priesthood today.

WHO IS BEING FORMED?

A slogan used by adult educators today is 'take people where they are at'. It would seem that many seminaries are still trying to operate as if the students who come to them are at the same stage in their social, moral and religious development as those who came to them twenty or thirty years ago. There does not appear to be sufficient concern with the fact that the assumptions of the past are no longer valid, whether from the social or religious point of view.

Until about fifteen or twenty years ago one could assume that the seminarian came from a reasonably stable home background, where prayer was part of family life and where the teaching of the Church was readily accepted. One could assume that the school environment was such as to promote prayer and practice of the faith. In fact, a majority of seminarians came from a junior seminary where daily prayer and Mass were part of an undisputed horarium. Late vocations were the rare exception.

Furthermore, one could assume that there was substantial peer and wide social support for the young man who decided to study for the priesthood.

The modern seminarian comes from a very different background. Many come from homes where there is little or no prayer, where maybe a parent or most likely siblings are not practising. A significant number come from homes where there are relational

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difficulties, stress or marital breakdown . In some cases there may be little support for the son's vocational choice.

Few seminarians today have been boarders in the old style junior seminary or diocesan college. Even those who come from these colleges are not familiar with a schedule where daily prayer and Mass are part of the accepted routine . They are more likely to come from a situation where many of their peers are non-practising and who regard their vocational choice as curious. Nor is the wider society likely to be particularly enthusiastic about their choice.

On average contemporary seminarians are less qualified academically than in the past and certainly there are fewer outstanding students. This is a serious consideration for formators because there may be some students so intellectually weak as not be capable of assessing the seriousness of the vocational choice which they are making .

The modern seminarian is more likely to be informed in his values by the media than by the Church. Therefore, his attitude to authority is critical with high expectations of those who exercise it. His views on sexual morality are often ambivalent, a fact sometimes reflected in the range of his sexual experiences. Therefore, the questions of inter-personal relationships, intimacy and celibacy require more serious consideration than ever before.

Most students come from a social environment of noise and constant activity, where one's value is found in work, personal initiative and aggressive competition. Therefore, many of them have been robbed of the opportunity to savour the mystery of life in quiet reflection and prayer. The presence of significant numbers of late vocations in seminaries means that many of them are involved in major adjustments in their life style which can sometimes put undue pressure on younger entrants.

Many of these observations may appear to cast modern seminarians in a very negative light. This is not the intention here, nor are the virtues and sound personal qualities of the majority of them being underestimated. Rather, the purpose is to focus the attention of seminaries and formators on the fact that modern seminarians come with different needs from those who came in the not-too-distant past. Consequently seminaries may need to make more adjustments than they have made if they are to respond adequately to those new needs.

In the light of the observations made above, the following questions seem worth asking:

- (i) Do seminaries still operate as if the faith were deeply rooted in the lives of its students when they arrive?
- (ii) Do they still, albeit unconsciously , regard themselves as continuing the good work begun in junior seminaries?

- (iii) What responses are made in the light of different attitudes towards Church, authority, celibacy, interpersonal relationships, sexuality, commitment and perseverance?
- (iv) What support system has the seminary to offer those who come with difficulties created by family or relational experiences in the past?
- (v) Have seminaries forgotten that in the past students moved from the more strict to the less strict and that today a student moves from the very open, unstructured to the more structured and constricting?
- (vi) How do seminaries cope with the fact that those who come are not used to quiet, silence and stability but prefer noise and movement?

FORMED FOR WHAT?

It is a brave person who would give a definitive description of the priesthood for which the contemporary seminarian is being prepared. The lessons of history show that the profile of the priest has changed significantly at various stages in the Church's development. However, two elements which remain important are the priest's own relationship with Christ and his role of leadership in the Church. The Church's own self-understanding seems to provide a basis on which we might begin to articulate the nature of priesthood for the future.

Vatican II described the Church 'as a kind of sacrament'. This implies an inward and an outward aspect. The inward refers to the life of the Holy Spirit with which it has been gifted and which sustains it. The outward aspect is today being best described by the image 'community of disciples'. Therefore keeping in mind the sacramentality of the Church, I would like to focus more sharply on the notion of Church as community of disciples. This will have important consequences for an understanding of priesthood and formation .

To describe the Church as the community of disciples is to use a simple but powerful image. It immediately stresses the continuity which exists between the initial community gathered by Jesus and the Church today. It highlights the fact that all have been called by Jesus into an apprenticeship in the trade of the Master. It underscores the equality of membership in the Church and the fact that all are called to participate in the mission of Jesus to make the kingdom of God a reality in their own lives and in the contemporary world. Therefore, I would suggest that the priest is primarily a disciple and secondarily one who exercises a role of leadership and ordering in a community of disciples.

DISCIPLESHIP

I will suggest six characteristics of discipleship which are based for the most part on the Gospels.

Faith

The first disciples received a personal call from Jesus to follow him. Their faith was expressed in a relationship of love and trust in the face of opposition, conflict and suffering. Their response was in terms of total commitment of themselves to Jesus and his way of life even unto the cross. Today's disciple, too, is called into a personal relationship with Christ and invited to trust him absolutely. Faith is more relational than intellectual and finds its expression more in the quality of one's life than in the statement of ideas or doctrines.

Understanding

The disciple is one who knows Jesus: 'but who do you say that I am?' (Mk 8:29). Jesus is constantly trying to deepen the disciples' understanding of who he is and what following him involves (cf. the sons of Zebedee). The way of discipleship is the way of the cross. Today's disciple needs to know who Jesus is in his own life and to know what sharing in the mission of Jesus entails.

Understanding implies a knowledge of the community of disciples to which one belongs. One needs to be familiar with the life and needs of the Church today. This includes a familiarity with the current theological and pastoral developments in the Church: the role of the laity, the role of women and their perceptions of the Church, the various movements for liberation and renewal. I would also include here a lively awareness of current social, political, economic and ecological issues which concern the world at large.

All of these concerns are integral to the business of discipleship because they provide avenues by which one finds one's way to God. They will concern the leader of the community even more since he will be expected to help others find their way to God in the midst of the complex web of spiritual, social, economic and political relationships which constitute the world.

Prayer

Prayer was Jesus' life-line to the Father and the source of his discernment. It was, in fact, an integral part of his ministry. He taught his disciples the way of prayer through word and example.

The prayer of the disciple is an attentive listening to God. It is also the place where God unfolds his plan to those who seek it in their lives. It is through prayer that one discovers where God is leading one and how one can best co-operate with his ongoing plan of reconciliation and peace.

The priest's prayer is necessarily multifaceted. It involves the prayer of discernment common to all disciples. It also involves more intercessory prayer and liturgical prayer than may be the case for most others and, for this reason, it is an integral part of his whole ministerial activity.

Service

Jesus served the needs of the people who came to him and through his service restored their dignity and value. In this he revealed to them and to the world the compassion of the Father. The disciples were given an example of service which they were invited to imitate. The contemporary disciple receives the same invitation to radiate the compassion of God through a life of service to others. This service is both material and spiritual. The important consideration for the disciple is that his service contributes to the ongoing expression of God's own regard for his people and is therefore more than altruism. In the community of disciples leadership is a humble service, building up and sustaining others in their loyalty to Jesus Christ. It has none of the trappings of secular power nor is it exercised for personal advantage.

Prophetic Witness

St Luke portrays Jesus in the light of his prophetic role. He is the fulfilment of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is prophetic because he speaks out for God, for God's vision of reality which is always a challenge to the *status quo*, any institution or ideology which regards itself as in some sense necessary or definitive. Jesus also invited his disciples to proclaim the Gospel with courage. They were to be the light to the nations, the *lumen gentium*.

Again contemporary disciples are called to lives of prophetic witness. The Church is to be a sign community for the world of what God's designs for it are. The priest of today and the future will have to be seen to be on the side of the poor and vulnerable. At present we tend to represent for most people a middle class Church with middle class values and a middle class vocabulary to convey the Gospel. Consequently, we are in a very weak position to offer a sustainable or credible critique of so many current trends which undermine the dignity of people and make them subservient to the concern for profitability and efficiency. The disciple of today and the future will have to be sensitive in word and deed to issues of justice, liberation and ecology if he is to be a prophetic presence in the world.

Community

Although Jesus called individuals he called them into a community

and as such he established them. It is rarely that one finds Jesus alone in the gospels; he is usually accompanied by his companions. In Luke's gospel this community is the new Israel and is given the gift of the prophetic Spirit. This community is characterised by service, commitment, selfless sharing of goods, mutual love and a strong sense of mission. Those who are to be great in the community are to be the servants of others.

Today's disciples are called to live as a community which will give credible witness to the life and work of Jesus. The quality of their life together should be such as to lead others to join them and to encourage the faint-hearted.

Every community requires leadership and in the community of disciples the priest fulfils this special role. Brian Nolan described the situation of the modern priest aptly:

If the priest was often a one-man band, the new presbyter is the leader of an orchestra. He draws vitality from his daily discipleship of Jesus Christ, his awareness of the Holy Spirit moving him, his relationship with his bishop and the presbyterium, and the faithful whom he serves. If all the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ as members of his Body, the presbyter does so as the embodiment or sacrament of the Church (*All Hallows Studies*, 1983, p. 34).

Therefore, the future priest needs to be prepared for a role of leadership in a believing community and capable of leading people into a life of prayer and faith in a way which shows a familiarity with the growing commitment of so many people to a deep, apostolic spirituality. As Rahner says 'he must be the mystagogue in faith for the parish'.

HOW CAN THIS FORMATION BE ACHIEVED?

I propose that this formation can be achieved by an adaptation of the RCIA process of initial Christian formation. Such a process would respect the faith level with which the student comes to the seminary. It would facilitate the process of discernment in which the student himself has to engage as well as providing a sound ecclesial base from which the Christian community can perform its own essential task of discernment. The traditional tasks effecting conversion of life and sound theological formation are incorporated and it may also provide the framework for some continuing help on the part of the seminary for recently ordained priests.

The RCIA is a formation process for those who feel drawn to become full members of the Church. It is designed to last several years depending on the readiness and suitability of the candidate for full membership. Similarly, a programme of formation in a seminary is a process extending over many years, during which the

candidate has time to purify his motives and dispositions in the context of a community striving to live the life of discipleship. The community, too, plays an important role in assessing the candidate's suitability for ministry. The formation is divided into four periods: Enquiry, Catechumenate, Purification and Enlightenment and finally Mystagogia. Each of these in turn will be examined to highlight its possibilities for seminary formation.

However, before looking at the details of the process, it may be worth noting that the suggestion is merely to take the outline and the underlying principles of the RCIA into consideration in structuring a programme of priestly formation. Obviously much more will be required in the formation for leadership in the Christian community than for initial membership.

The Period of Enquiry

The RCIA begins by giving the prospective member time to enquire about the life and responsibilities of Christian discipleship. This initial period also affords the receiving community and its leaders the opportunity to assess the motivation and the readiness of enquirer for membership. It is of no fixed duration so as not to put any pressure on the candidate.

In the context of formation for diocesan priesthood this could take place away from the seminary before the student makes even an initial commitment to formation. The emphasis during this time may be on listening to the student telling his personal and faith story, hearing why he wants priesthood and assessing his general suitability. It would allow time, too, for the student to hear a little more about what is involved in living the life of Christian-discipleship, in formation for ministry and finally priesthood itself. This might involve some initial spiritual direction to deepen the man's faith, to help him develop some prayer and reflectiveness and thus enable him to make a sound discernment about entering the seminary.

Such a programme may not involve the seminary staff very much but instead avail of priests and other reliable guides who are known or accessible to the man at his current location. It is also a period during which issues of personal difficulty and human development could be addressed. The duration of this process could be very flexible. By making use of this Enquiry Period a student could be helped to acquire a rootedness in faith which previous experience may not have provided. It might also create a support system which may be lacking for many young people today as they agonise over a decision about a vocation to fulltime ministry.

The Period for the Catechumenate

Once a person has made a formal commitment to seek further and deeper formation in the Christian life and has been accepted by the community, a second period of the RCIA formation begins. The stress is on deepening faith and acquiring a sound understanding of it. It involves a certain catechetical formation with an emphasis on living out gospel values.

If adapted for priestly formation this could begin when the student actually enters the seminary or house of formation. It would follow his initial commitment to prepare for priesthood. As in the RCIA it may be marked by some simple liturgical rite such as signing the register or presentation of a symbol indicating the step being taken.

This would involve a programme of studies in which he became familiar with the faith story of the community of disciples and in which he would begin to make that faith more his own. It would provide a deep understanding of life and faith which was mentioned in the outline of requirements for discipleship. Here I would suggest that a student would become much more *au fait* with the faith experience of other believers who are not priests or religious. At this stage, too, students should be made aware theoretically and experientially of the demands of living in a situation where they have to provide for themselves.

Further attention should be given during this time to human development and issues of personal growth. In this context, and in the light of what has been said earlier, the questions of intimacy, friendship and celibacy need to be addressed in a very serious and professional way.

The spiritual formation in this period would need to be rooted in the wider experience of the whole Christian community. At present our model of spirituality has not escaped as far from the monastic model as we might care to think. It is not a model that will endure in a busy life of active ministry. Spirituality at this point needs to be properly connected to the theological and general academic formation taking place. The student should be growing in confidence about his own spirituality to the extent that he is capable of leading others into a deeper experience of faith, prayer and the presence of God in their lives.

As well as spirituality being rooted in the wider Christian community so too should pastoral practice. In order to prepare for a collaborative style of ministry future priests need to grow in their appreciation of the pastoral skills and roles of so many other people in the community. Thus, pastoral placements should be in situations where students work side by side with other Christians who are not ordained ministers. The pastoral reflections, which are

an integral part of the pastoral assignment, should then take place in that wider context.

The Period of Enlightenment and Purification

In the RCIA scheme it is a time of more immediate preparation for full incorporation into the Church, usually corresponding with the Lenten period before the final initiation ceremony. For the seminarian it may be a time of immediate preparation for major orders. In other words, it would be a time for final discernment with regard to choice of vocation. It may include some time spent away from the seminary, actively involved in some form of demanding pastoral ministry. It might also include a long retreat or some substantial period for deep reflection. This could be the period when a student is encouraged to look at the prophetic quality of his own life and his ability to give prophetic witness in the Christian community.

The Mystagogia

This is the post-baptismal period in the RCIA. It is a time for adjustment - helping people to settle into the christian community and to find their identity within it. There is need for a similar after-care service for the newly ordained priest. He may need a lot of help in adjusting to his role of leadership and co-responsibility in the community to which he has been sent. The seminary could provide some support during the first year of ministry particularly in the area of spiritual direction and pastoral supervision.

CONCLUSION

I have considered the kind of person who comes to the seminary today, the kind of ministry for which he is being formed, the kind of Church in which he is likely to work and finally, a way of forming the person for that ecclesial ministry. The model which seems to answer the needs of today, while at the same time respecting the wide range of candidates who present themselves to the seminary, is an adaptation of the RCIA. It is anchored in the faith experience of the wider Christian community and therefore escapes the narrow monastic model to which we still cling. It involves the community more because it is their faith which will sustain the diocesan priest and in turn give him the support which he will need if he is to be a leader in faith and discipleship. The model also takes into account a greater integration of the spiritual, pastoral and academic formation of the student. Spirituality cannot be an isolated, esoteric aspect of formation. Rather, it must be the means of integrating all areas of activity in one's life so that one finds one's way to God through them. Finally, the model outlined here takes into account

the fact that for many, when they leave the seminary, their new identity and role overwhelm them and there is no one to whom they can confidently turn for reassurance and support. Formation begins before one enters the seminary and continues after ordination but in every aspect of it the seminary has a vital role to play, one which needs to be assessed afresh.

A misunderstood asceticism. Last of all, we should not forget the value and the importance of those moments of encounter for recreation, togetherness, and just sitting around the same table, which are characteristic of friendship. These moments are useful in rediscovering oneself, in breaking out of one's shell, in moving away a bit from demanding projects and fixed routines - moments which perhaps a misunderstood asceticism has caused to be ignored for some time. While they enable one to come down from his pedestal and make another feel acknowledged and well-received, brotherly *agapes* fill all with a greater joy . . . 'It's good that priests freely gather to pass together in joy a moment of relaxation and rest' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 8c).

-CARLO BERTOLA, *I Have Called You Friends* . . . (Alba House, New York), p. 94.