

Approaches to Priestly Formation

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Introduction

“I shall not call you
servants any more, because
servants do not know
what their master is about.
Instead, I have called you **friends**,
since I have made known
to you everything,
I learned from my **Father**.
You did not choose me;
it was I who chose you.....”

(Jn 15:15, 16a)

Priestly ministry in the Church derives its origin from the unique and eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ, who was consecrated by the Father and sent into the world (Jn 10, 36) that all may have life and have it abundantly (Jn. 10, 10). Formation for such a priestly ministry will always answer the pastoral requirements of the context in which the ministry is to be exercised (OT 1).¹ According to the Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, “In recent years, some have voiced the view of a need to return to the theme of the priesthood, treating it from a relatively new point of view, one that was more adapted to present ecclesial and cultural circumstances. 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. The new generation of those called to the ministerial priesthood display different characteristics in comparison with those of their immediate predecessors. In addition, they live in a world, which, in many respects,

is new and undergoing rapid and continual evolution. All of this cannot be ignored when it comes to programming and carrying out the various phases of formation for those approaching the ministerial priesthood".²

1. Formation of Priests

The object of priestly training must be to make the priests men of God, true shepherds of souls after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ – Teacher, Priest and Shepherd. They should be trained for the ministry of the Word, ministry of worship, sanctification of souls and ministry of shepherding because “The teachings of the Catholic Church speak of the three functions of Priests, namely teaching, sanctifying and guiding the people of God”.³

People expect a priest to be first of all a man of God, a man of prayer and a man for the other or poor, rooted in God, with some God experience so that he can speak with authority to the community. Following the pattern of Jesus the priest is at the service of the wholeness of life, truth and charity. He is a prophet of God and a man of faith. He is a minister of reconciliation in a divided world by working for justice. In order to prepare, train and form this priest what are the approaches we follow today?

2. The Reality of Priestly Formation Today

With due respect, critical look and appreciation to the past historical developments of priestly formation in the Church, I personally would like to concentrate on the formation after Vatican II, for the last 40 years. The traditionally effective monastic formation has left the priest miserably ill equipped to meet the new challenges. I look at the reality of prevailing formation practices in the following approaches of which one or two or more may be found in each formation centres.

2.1. Traditional Approach

They faithfully follow the signs of the time, tradition, rules and regulations with the sincere effort to form the young seminarians towards becoming better priests. Everything is well defined, structured and stamped with the seal of higher approval.

2.2. Disciplinary Approach

It is a kind of prevent and promote way of forming. When taken in a committed spirit we get a good number of integral priests. This approach follows a well regimented model to make the subjects to observe the discipline with meticulous fidelity.

2.3. Freedom Approach

Give freedom, the candidates will be responsible. This may be one of the best approaches provided the scales and parameters for freedom and responsibility are drawn and understood clearly. Given the normal circumstances, there is lot of joy and happiness on the one side and at the same time there is lot of suspicion and doubts on the other side.

2.4. Liberal Approach

Taking clues from the above three approaches and leaving the candidates to form themselves is called liberal approach. It has got its own strength and weakness in the formation offered. This could have been an experimentation type or really meant to protest the so called traditional mode of priestly formation.

2.5. Charismatic or Religious Approach

It is a formation, which is inspired by the founder or saint of a congregation or charisma, that are found in the Bible. It is easy for the formation house to implement the vision, mission and expectation from the point of view of the founder.

2.6. Contextual Approach

It could be the combination of the above five approaches or totally a new approach according to the context, culture and concerns of the local church and pastoral priorities. Day to day life and processes in formation are made meaningful and relevant.

3. Significance of this Paper

To speak about Seminary Formation or Priestly Formation, for some of us has become a fashion, for some others it is the need of the hour. Why is this topic more relevant today and always? Because, no other organisation in the world invests so much in terms of number of years, human and financial resources in the formation of its personnel as the Catholic Church does. In this context, one can raise an honest question. Does our present seminary formation introduce our candidates to the spirituality of the diocesan priest, missionary thrust, and spiritual leadership?

This is an experiential and reflective paper based on personal experience, observation, analysis, and interaction with various Rectors of major seminaries and minor seminaries. There is no clear cut evidence that our formation is absolutely effective or a total failure. At the moment, the effectiveness of our formation is something like 50% effective, 50% needs lot of attention and improvement. Surveys most of the time reveal to us the indicators of the crisis or problems in formation. Indicators of crisis can be the following:

- escape: alcohol, excessive diversion, 'entertainment'
- unlimited talking, power conscious, authoritarian
- lack of ability for silence
- unlimited activism, unwillingness to serve people
- exaggerated need for affirmation
- ongoing criticism, negative perspective
- difficulties in sleeping, do not look as men of God
- sexual 'abnormalities', childish behaviour, exploitation of women religious, luxurious living and worldly lives
- difficulties to reach out, isolation, fear...
- paralyzed ability to act, lack of spirit of collaboration
- being fixed on certain relationships.⁴

4. Four Types of Students Enter the Seminary

Paul Parathazham who has made an empirical study on "Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India"⁵, observes

that selection of the right candidates contributes towards ninety percent of formation.

In my personal opinion there are four kinds or types of students who enter the seminary.

1) Good in all aspects.

2) Poor in all the aspects especially economic and spiritual, but genuinely inspired by the Spirit, called by God, open and sincere to learn from the existing system of formation.

3) Critical and wrongly engaged or motivated type: He joins the seminary for his personal / family interests or on account of some group pressure. None of these is shown or manifested in the screening and scrutiny.

4) Unfit or just liberal type: He is not fit to enter but he enters to give it a trial or test or just for a change. This type, if not unfit they also exhibit liberal attitudes in everything. He will not be serious. He will not take a serious commitment. It is very difficult to identify them in the formative years.

5. Four Types of Seminarians Found in the Seminary

The 1990 Synod of Bishops treated the topic "The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day". The Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is a remarkable document in many respects that it presents the priest as a mature and integrated human being who should be able to present the gospel vision to the world through his words and deeds.⁶

We find the following type of seminarians in the seminaries:

1) Committed and well motivated: Always brings excellent results and is involved in fruitful ministries even while in formation.

2) Convinced of his vocation but needs direction and guidance: He needs constant care and discernment. He engages in constructive formative activity or constantly tries for a better formation. At times he may face failures, but ready for correction and change.

3) Critical: He may listen but he has his own way of learning and doing things so as to achieve his own interests. He turns out to be excellent in ministry or problematic to the core.

4) Liberal: With ulterior motives, he is not serious about formation but serious about his own goal. He ends up in problems or creates problems for himself and others.

6. Four Types of Priests Found in the Field

John Ponnore in his article on "Spiritual Formation of the Diocesan Priest"⁷ lists the number of casualties thus: those who leave priesthood and get married, all those who are not spiritually maturing, those who are pastorally non-effective, those who go to any extent to achieve their ambition, those who seriously misappropriate funds, and those who seriously fail in celibacy while continuing to be in the active ministry.

Yet, we can find the following type of clergy in the field.

i) Holy and Integral

They are indeed a gift from God. They bring lot of joy, hope and faith to people whom they serve.

ii) Good and Happy

Sometimes they make mistakes but always open for reconciliation and conversion. They engage in active ministry which brings lot of celebration and joy.

iii) Ambitious and Authoritarian

With this attitude if their energy and force is directed towards service and charity, they are a gift of God otherwise they create hell on earth.

iv) Mediocre and Liberal

This is a problematic type. They want only to live in weakness, promiscuity, licentious behaviour, compulsive fighters and leading a scandalous life. Only God can save them. Very few are open for

change, conversion and transformation. Therefore, we need a formation of spiritual leadership.

7. Four Approaches of Priestly Formation Needed for Today

Studies show that the culture of the seminary leaves an imprint on the candidate that he carries with him, as part of himself, all through his life, even if he leaves the seminary. Hence, seminary formation must be constantly and consistently studied and evaluated, so that the seminary may produce the kind of priests that are needed today. The following approaches imply that the seminarians be helped to discover, discern and accept his own self-esteem and remain faithful to it. Among the many attitudes needed, the seminarian must have a positive attitude toward the formation processes. The search for the essence of the priestly formation demands a return to the roots or sources of the Abba experience of Jesus and this Abba experience must be lived out in the following of Jesus and establishing God's kingdom. Briefly I am going to propose four approaches, just to have the glimpse of the total and global understanding of priestly formation. Personally I have gone through various interesting and enlightening articles and thoughts on formation. This is also one of the topics widely discussed and deliberated. That being the case, I decided to furnish only the practical and pastoral aspects in these approaches.

7.1. Incarnational Approach for a Human or Personal Formation

“The Word became flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14). This particular approach envisages a person-centred goal. The Church insists that human formation is the necessary foundation of priestly formation. In order to achieve this goal the training must be tuned to formation of human value. Human values such as honesty, integrity, justice and fairness must be inculcated through the following practices:

a) Physical fitness through games, sports, walk and manual work.

b) Characters of self-reliance, emotional maturity, initiative and hard work.

c) Freedom and responsibility in the area of relationship with the complementary sex and same sex.

d) Listening skill: to listen to oneself, companions, superiors, and the poor.

7.2. Mystical Experience Approach for the Spiritual Formation:

“It was Karl Rahner who said that if there was to be a Christianity, a Christian would be a mystic or nothing at all. The primary meaning of mysticism is the contemplation of the mysteries, the mysteries of God – and that is the heart of the liturgy”.⁸ Our formation must become a spiritual path, a way to the eternal Truth, the prayerful expression of one’s faith and devotion. Our spirituality is manifested in our attitudes and actions. Therefore, the spiritual formation must include certain degree of:

a) A taste for silence and contemplation or meditation.

b) A way of life of personal prayer, adoration and eco-consciousness.

c) A deep involvement in community prayer and active participation of liturgical celebration.

d) Regular spiritual direction marked with confession and matured orientation towards celibacy, poverty and obedience.

From the history of spirituality it is clear that without silence there can be no prayer, no self-control, no asceticism, no concentration.

7.3. Prophetic Approach for the Intellectual Formation:

Priestly training and theological preparation would do well to inculcate in the students a profound thirst for knowledge and understanding. Our need is not to have simply degrees and diplomas for the name sake. On the contrary, intellectual formation must enable one to have spiritual knowledge so that he can guide persons to God.

Intellectual formation must include:

- a) Regular reading habits, reading relevant books for updating.
- b) A research oriented mind and alertness for preaching.
- c) Faith-inspiring curriculum for theological investigation.
- d) Training for social awareness, analysis, reflection and action.

Seminarians should be helped in decision making so that they can reach out freely in the service of humanity.

7.4. Kenotic Approach for the Pastoral Formation:

The Second Vatican Council's decree on the Training of Priests, *Optatam Totius*, begins with the words: "The Council is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends in great part upon the priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ...." Therefore the pastoral formation is to provide the necessary uniform training for the pastoral work of the priest. This particular aspect is a field-oriented training where the students are exposed to the socio-economic, political and cultural realities of life. Greater involvement in the lives of the people and active engagement in the socio-political processes are felt to be necessary for making the formation meaningful and relevant. Today's ministry requires a professional touch from the priest in the following areas of life: teaching, preaching, counselling conflict resolution skills, and interpersonal communication skills. Thus we need to include and integrate:

- a) Mission exposure programs, camps, social work and pastoral ministry.
- b) Models of pastoral values and sharing of experiences.
- c) Measuring the fruits of the Spirit in formation (Gal 5:22-23, 2 Cor 3:17).
- d) Inter-religious and inter-faith dialogue. Through exposure programmes the seminarian enters into life's basic realities as

lived by the toiling masses and participates in the experiences of their struggles.

His Eminence William Cardinal Baum, former Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education said: "The danger of every Seminary is to know about Jesus without knowing him, to talk about Jesus but not to talk to Him, to listen to experts speak of Him without letting Him speak about Himself. A deep, personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ is the foundation of Holiness"⁹.

Conclusion:

George Aschenbrenner affirms in his book, *Quickening the Fire in our Midst*, that the diocesan priesthood is "a distinctive life of active-apostolic spirituality in which the *mission of an official position and authority must be integrated with a holiness of personal life*".¹⁰ The two basic sources of the priest's holiness are his involvement with 'Word and Worship'. Further he holds that diocesan seminary formation must involve a profoundly personal experience of God's love.¹¹ There must be a radical reorientation of the seminarian and his faith, a purification of postmodern fragmentation, relativism, and alienation; an experience of extensive solitude and aloneness with God; and solid preparation in understanding God's reconciling forgiveness and communicating it to a broken people.

As a conclusion, a seminarian or a priest must be a lover of Mother Mary or Marian in his life, only then he can be a true disciple of Jesus. A true disciple of Jesus is a role model for any one be it a formee for a formator or a formator for a formee. Formators must be those who are life-giving and growth-promoting. Seminary is a school of prayer, faith, wisdom and charity.

¹ Conference of the Catholic Bishops of India, Charter of Priestly Formation for India, Revised on the basis of the Apostolic Visitation (New Delhi: CCBI, 2004) 1.

² John Paul II, Post Synodal Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis*" No. 3.

³ John Paul II, Post Synodal Exhortation "*Pastores Dabo Vobis*" No. 43.

⁴ Franz-Josef Eilers, svd, ed., "*Priestly Spirituality: Treasures and Experiences*" (Manila: Logos [Divine Word] Publications, Inc., 1999), 132.

⁵ Paul Parathazham, "Vocation and Formation of Priests and Religious in India", *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, 3/2(2000), 5-41.

⁶ John Ponnore, "Spiritual Formation of the Diocesan Priest", *Vidyajyoti*, 68/8(2004), 595-605. Also cf. A. Alangaram S. J., "Towards a Relevant Spiritual Formation for Integral Ministry", in *Indian Theological Studies*, vol. 43 / 2(2006), 115-139.

⁷ *Ibid.*,

⁸ Mary Grey, "From Shaken foundations to a different integrity: Spirituality as Response to Fragmentation", in *Concilium*, 2(2006), 84.

⁹ Michael F. Burbridge, "Spiritual Formation of Future Priests", in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*, Vol. CII / 10 (July 2002), 19. Cf. J. Mattam, (1998): "Formation to be geared to the people of the place": Interview in *Souvenir 1987-1997*, Sambalpur: Khristo Jyoti Mohavidyaloyo, 63-64. Also. J. Mattam, (1999): "Vocations: Sociological Underpinnings", *VJTR*, 63, 47-56.

¹⁰ G. Aschenbrenner, *Quickening the Fire in Our Midst*, Book Reviewed by Walter Burghardt in *Human Development*, vol. 23/3 (2002), 45-46.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 45-46.