

DIALOGUE AND COMMUNION WITHIN THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE REGARDING THE FORMATION OF PRIESTS: *RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS INSTITUTIONIS SACERDOTALIS*

Convegno Internazionale, Castel Gondolfo

5 October 2017

Introduction

The People of God and all of humanity are the beneficiaries of the mission of priests, and all the work of formation is geared toward this mission.¹ Bishops recognize the significance that the Church must afford to priestly formation through their careful implementation of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (given on 8 December 2016). The proper implementation of this document requires a thoughtful and collegial cooperation of bishops in the formation of men for the priesthood.

While the Council of Trent encouraged the establishment of seminaries, a preference that is still recognized by the proper law of the Church today.² In the five decades following the Second Vatican Council, there has appeared a significant impulse to engage the bishops of an Episcopal Conference to cooperate in the exercise of their apostolic ministry. The formation of seminarians is no exception. This is also an arena in which dialogue and communion among the episcopate should be promoted.

Ratio Nationalis

Where this collaboration is most evident is in the requirement that the *Ratio Fundamentalis* be enacted as a *Ratio Nationalis*, not simply implemented by each Bishop in the diocese entrusted to his care. The Episcopal Conference is meant to be the guarantor and promoter of seminary formation for its territory. This method offers

¹ Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the sponsored by the Congregation for Clergy on the 50th Anniversary of the Conciliar Decrees *Optatam Totius* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Roma: 20 November 2017)

² CJC, c. 237 §1.

significant advantages over an autonomous application by individual Ordinaries. First, a corresponsable effort to achieve consensus at a national or regional level will necessarily engage the expertise and experience of many bishops, seminaries and directors of formation. This broad engagement will lead the Episcopal Conference to recognize and accept its collective role for the formation of priests in its territory and provide a greater number of resources that will enhance the formative process.

A second advantage is that the development of a national *Ratio* provides the conference of bishops with an opportunity to reflect on the particular context of seminary formation in its region and provide elements that will address the unique challenges faced by the local Churches. The pastoral situation of each country will inform how seminarians are formed, since they will minister in a uniquely concrete situation. Reflection and consensus at a national or regional level will, on the one hand, avoid giving too much weight to the peculiar idiosyncrasies that might characterize a single diocese and, on the other hand, provide a context in which the true diversity of a given region are recognized and utilized for the service of the Church in that area. Otherwise, it could happen that a local seminary, or even a formation house under the authority of a community of consecrated life, may become closed in an exaggerated and self-referential autonomy.

A third advantage of the dialogue among the members of the Episcopal Conference in developing and implementing a *Ratio Nationalis* is that the bishops together will pursue a level of excellence which may not be envisioned or even possible for a single diocese. The *Ratio Nationalis* serves as a goad to constant improvement in the formation of seminarians. While it is possible that a national *Ratio* might be reduced to the lowest common denominator among all the seminaries in a region, it is more likely that the dialogue will establish standards that are rooted in the *Ratio Fundamentalis* and

challenge all the seminaries, both diocesan and religious, to an excellence that reflects the aspirations of the entire conference.

Methods of dialogue and communion in producing the national plan

The usual method for producing a national *Ratio* is that the episcopal conference entrusts its drafting to the committee of the Conference that treats issues concerning the formation of seminarians.³ The work of the committee will extend in two directions: toward the members of the entire Conference and toward those specialists already engaged in the ministry of formation within the territory of the Conference.

The bishops' committee treating seminary formation must also engage the entire body of bishops, not only those Ordinaries who sponsor their own seminaries, since the goal of this higher-level dialogue is to harmonize priestly formation across the country. While it is impractical that the entire Conference attempt to write the document, it is crucial that the successive drafts of a *Ratio Nationalis* be vetted by other committees of the Conference. The process in the United States invites the committees on canonical affairs, cultural diversity, doctrine and others to contribute their unique viewpoints to the production of a final national *Ratio*. Each Conference of Bishops will undoubtedly have particular areas where it feels the need for particular attention. Finally, the entire Conference will approve the national text and submit it to the Holy See for the necessary *recognitio*.

This engagement by many bishops is vital, since many, if not most bishops in the United States send their candidates to seminaries that are not located in their respective dioceses. The bishops want some assurance of coherence of criteria across their country,

³ In the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, it is the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations that is presently revising the *Ratio Nationalis*.

which provides the confidence that their seminarians are being formed for the actual context of their own dioceses.

It is essential that the committee also gather the views of those already engaged in seminary formation, i.e. rectors, deans, spiritual directors, formators, and even bishops who oversee seminaries. These experts should examine the requirements of the new *Ratio Fundamental* against the pastoral context in which seminarians are being formed, while trying to glimpse the circumstances of priestly ministry in the future. The suggestions of this consultation will play a crucial role in the design of the new *Ratio Nationalis*. The engagement of their expertise and experience will enrich the national document and will favor a greater acceptance by seminary personnel in the actual implementation of the national Ratio.

In the United States, the committee charged with updating the national *Ratio* consults the *National Association of College Seminaries* and the *National Association of Catholic Theological Schools*, peer organizations of our seminaries and their leadership. These two organizations were not created by the bishops nor are they governed by the Episcopal Conference. A bishop does attend their meetings and serves as a liaison with the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations. The autonomy afforded the two organizations has provided a noteworthy impetus for the engagement of seminaries in their continuing development as well as a forum for consultation and cooperation of directors of formation in the various institutions across the country. The Episcopal Conference recognizes and respects the two organizations as partners in the dialogue aimed at establishing a *Ratio Nationalis*.

Cooperation in Seminary Formation

It is helpful to reflect a bit upon the cooperation among the bishops that should accompany the erection and continuing support of seminaries. The dialogue among the

Bishops should offer an opportunity for a responsible exercise of the right given to the diocesan bishop by the Code of Canon Law (cf. c. 237, §1). This has been and will remain a difficult issue for the bishops of the United States. Most of our seminaries have long histories and are located in the Eastern and Midwestern regions of our country. There has been much discussion over the years about the consolidation or reorganization of seminaries. These discussions have led to few substantive changes, mostly due to the desire of the diocesan bishop to retain his institution. This has contributed to an attrition of a number of seminaries in the country.

One alternative to individual diocesan seminaries would be interdiocesan centers, organized on the level of the Ecclesiastical Province, or seminaries sponsored by a larger region.⁴ The dioceses of the United States cannot provide many examples of formal cooperation in the operation of a seminary. In recent years, two such seminaries existed, one in Detroit for the Ecclesiastical Province of Detroit, and the other in Miami for the Ecclesiastical Province of Miami. The provincial seminary in Detroit ceased to exist in 1988, due to disagreement among the bishops regarding the direction of the seminary. Perhaps in countries which are, for the first time, organizing seminaries, these experiences will prove more successful. The clear advantage of such formal cooperation is that there is a guarantee of criteria, an adequate number of seminarians, faculty, and finances – elements that individual diocesan seminaries always find difficult to provide.

Even when a number of dioceses attend a seminary that is effectively governed by the host diocese, cooperation among bishops in the actual support of the seminary is often ephemeral in the United States. After a change of bishop in a participating diocese, the new Ordinary may decide to move his seminarians to another institution, perhaps one with which he has some personal connection. On the other hand, a personality clash

⁴ The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops is organized geographically in fourteen regions.

among Ordinaries may lead to such a change. Alternatively, the seminary itself may choose to ignore the genuine concerns of a sponsoring bishop and thus alienate his support.

Yet, even when the bishops relate amicably, there is never a real guarantee of financial resources and personnel on the part of the bishop who simply sends his seminarians to a seminary. In addition, in many dioceses the bishop sends his seminarians to a number of seminaries, thus obviating any kind of real commitment to a given institution.

These challenges present a concern which the Episcopal Conference should address, particularly in the formulation of the *Ratio Nationalis*. The document should urge each Bishop to give serious consideration to supporting, not only with seminarians, but also with faculty and finances, a seminary or seminaries for the good of the Church of the country. Of course, no *Ratio Nationalis* will have the force to effect this; it will always be a matter of persuasion. At least this level of conversation must be held in the formulation of the *Ratio Nationalis*, even if no effective solutions can be found immediately.

Bishops who send their candidates to a seminary outside of the diocese must find an effective way of ensuring that these young men remain connected in some way to their home diocese during the years of formation. The seminary cannot be a “babysitter” for an absentee father! The connection can be strengthened by pastoral experiences in the home diocese during the time of formation as well as frequent, reciprocal communication between the Bishop and directors of formation. A Bishop must be careful to give serious weight to the recommendations of those in charge of formation. Of course, regular visits of his seminarians as well as conversations with other Bishops

making use of the same seminary are practical means towards a more effective dialogue and deepened communion.

Apostolic visitation of the seminaries as a possible instrument of dialogue and communion

On two occasions over the last forty years, the competent dicastery of the Roman Curia has conducted an Apostolic Visitation of seminaries and houses of priestly formation in the United States. The stated aim of these Visitation was that of “providing assistance to you, the U.S. Church leaders, in your mission of ensuring a correct priestly formation for your candidates to Holy Orders.”⁵ While there was some polemic regarding the factors that motivated each of the Visitations, for the most part, the seminaries expressed a degree of satisfaction afterwards. The Visitation called for the personal engagement and cooperation of the Bishops of the country under the leadership of the Apostolic Visitor.

A Visitation could be an instrument by which the Holy See encourages a greater degree of dialogue and communion among the Bishops, if the process has a convincing dialogical character and uses as its principal reference the *Ratio Nationalis*.

Conclusion

The entire process of the *Ratio Nationalis* and then its implementation at the local level calls for and, indeed, requires the cooperation of the Bishops. The deepened value attributed to episcopal collegiality by the Second Vatican Council is crucial to producing an excellent document and, eventually, to promoting an ongoing pastoral conversion of the structures of seminary formation in the country or region. While safeguarding the authority and appropriate autonomy of each Ordinary, this process of dialogue and

⁵ Congregatio de Institutione Catholica (de seminariis atque studiorum institutis), *Letter to the Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops and Major Superiors of the united States of America, with responsibility for diocesan seminaries and religious houses of priestly formation*, prot. N. 1009/2002 (15 December 29008).

communion will bring the richness and diversity of many institutions to the formulation of a harmonious formation program, which will serve the entire Conference of Bishops.

Joseph Cardinal Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark (USA)
Chairman
Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.