

# **FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE NEW RFIS**

*Singular Journey of Discipleship, Integral, Communitarian, Missionary*

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## **1. Sustainability of the diocesan Seminary and the formative community**

The Seminary, as an institution, exists in the form of a **Christian formative community**. This means that the community is not only the place where formation is received, but rather that it possesses a formative capacity in itself. This is according to the fundamental value of communion in the Church and with the radical way of community life that is proper to priestly ministry.

*A healthy pedagogy of formation will not neglect to pay attention to the experience and dynamic of the group of which the seminarian forms a part. Community life during the years of initial formation must make an impact on each individual, purifying his intentions and transforming the conduct of his life as he gradually conforms himself to Christ. Formation comes about every day through interpersonal relationships, moments of exchange and discussion which result in the development of that 'fertile soil', in which a vocation matures concretely (RIFS, 50).*

Effectively, human relationships that are nurtured and interpreted by the grace of God and, in concrete, by the gift of the priestly vocation, are the **ordinary vehicle for the transmission of values** that will be fundamental for the future exercise of ministry. The educational community comes to be, therefore, a field of maturation and of discernment of the vocation.

We are speaking of a **necessary element** during the formative process. *The experience of community life is a valuable element that cannot be neglected in the formation of those who will be called, in the future, to exercise a true spiritual fatherhood in the communities entrusted to them.* (RFIS, 51) Therefore, the possibility of offering an adequate educational community is a **criterion to evaluate the sustainability** of a Seminary. An educational community must have a sufficient number of seminarians, a consistent team of formators, a qualified body of professors and, above all, it must guarantee a human climate that facilitates the development of every person, as a man, and as a disciple of the Lord called to be a shepherd.

It is about **establishing relationships that correspond** to intimate sacramental fraternity (P.O. 8), which will characterize, in the future, the priestly life of the seminarians. *The bonds that are created in the seminary between formators and seminarians, and between the seminarians themselves, must be marked by a sense of fatherhood and fraternity. In fact, fraternity is fostered through spiritual growth, which requires a constant effort to overcome various forms of individualism. A fraternal relationship “cannot just be left to chance, to fortuitous circumstances”, but is rather a conscious choice and an ongoing challenge* (RFIS, 52).

Fraternal life is, therefore, a **continuous field of learning** and of intensification, so as to prepare the seminarians to make a positive and professional contribution to the presbyterate, and in leading a Christian community. *The seminary community is indeed a family, marked by an atmosphere that favours friendship and fraternity. Such an experience will help the seminarian in the future to understand better the demands, the dynamics and also the problems of the families entrusted to his pastoral care* (RFIS, 52).

## **2. Gradualness of formation**

Gradualness is one of the wisest features of the formative pedagogy of the Church. The values of faith and of the vocation are not learned once and for all, on the contrary, they imply a **learning that constitutes the basis for learning anew**. In this way the person is placed **on a journey**, towards an “*evermore*,” where every piece of knowledge and every experience is progressive and accumulative: **Progressive** because there is always another step to be taken; **accumulative** because the end already achieved continues to be an object for growth.

From this perspective, formation, in the seminary, can be described through the following phrase: «formation of the **disciple of Jesus, called to be a shepherd**». That long process can be divided into two parts: first, the formation of

the disciple and, then, the specific formation of the shepherd. Everything IS priestly formation, but it is necessary to apply a sufficient foundation of discipleship in order to apply, afterwards, priestly content (progressive sense). Nevertheless, missionary discipleship and configuration to Christ the Shepherd imply a continuous and permanent development of the person (accumulative sense). The believer, a candidate for ordained ministry, starts making decisions that are permanent; decisions that he will then have to take up again and again, to deepen and expand them.

Developing the pedagogical process of the disciple who is called to be a shepherd with greater detail, paints a clearer picture of the gradualness of the formation programme through four stages:

a) The **propaedeutic stage**, of at least one year of duration, offers an introduction to priestly life and to the formative process itself. **It initiates the seminarian into spiritual life**, concretely, by meditation on Sacred Scripture and by methods of prayer, through sacramental life and through liturgical participation. It provides the seminarian with **knowledge of himself for the first time** so that he may become aware of his principal virtues and defects, thus obtaining a “map” of his own personality. It makes him aware, also of those points of difficulty that he must face and those strong points that he must expand and deepen. It offers the seminarian the **necessary knowledge** to understand his own faith and his vocational choice and to fill eventual lacunae from his prior formation. It helps the seminarian to obtain a **more objective and universal understanding of the apostolate of the Church**. Summarizing all these contents, we find that the key word is «**introduction**». It is about an introduction that is valid and necessary for all candidates, regardless of their precedence, because it proposes a first positive step in the formation programme.

b) The **stage of discipleship** or philosophical stage, of two to three years of duration, accompanies the seminarian in the conscious and free affirmation of his choice to follow Jesus in a life of discipleship, an absolutely necessary element in order to be able to speak, specifically, about priestly formation. It is about educating the man and the disciple in a rigorous and systematic way. Working on the foundations laid during the propaedeutic stage, helps the seminarian in his **practical-systematic experience of the spiritual life** which includes personal and communal prayer, liturgical and sacramental life, a believer’s interpretation of life, history, and life events, the development of the cardinal and theological virtues, all of which are features of a true Christian. During these years **systematic work on his own personality** is propitious, thus facing, in-depth, through dialogue with the formators, his principal defects and developing his principal strengths. The seminarian must be conscious of not having hidden anything about himself and of

having placed sufficient effort, particularly in his affective and sexual life. It is the moment to **share his faith** through pastoral activity, concretely, by catechesis for Christian initiation and to acquire a **critical and a believer's vision of reality**, all of which come about through the study of philosophy and the human sciences. The key word for this stage is «**systematic formation**» and the result that is expected to be achieved is that of a freer man and a more authentic Christian, capable of dedicating himself, intensely and generously, to his own priestly formation.

c) The **stage of configuration** or theological stage, of four years of duration, is more specific because it helps the seminarian understand the mystical and ascetical journey of a spiritual configuration to Christ the Servant, Shepherd, Priest and Head, thus assuming an ecclesial and public commitment through the rite of admission into the candidates for Holy Orders. We go from an educational phase to a formative phase, in the proper sense. The seminarian, without putting aside what he has learned in the previous two stages, starts to live out **priestly spirituality** that is comprised of praying for the people of God, a more active and conscious participation in the mysteries of Christ through the liturgy and the sacraments, which is framed by the reception of the ministries of lector and acolyte, and a profound sense of belonging to the Church, at a particular and universal level. The work accomplished to form his personality now acquires a pastoral sense, ensuring that the seminarian, conscious of his virtues and defects, comes to **be a bridge and not an obstacle** between Jesus Christ and the people whom he is destined to evangelize. At this point of the formation program, the seminarian puts forth everything he is and everything he has at the service of the Gospel, deepening his spirit of poverty, celibacy and obedience, which are proper to the diocesan priest. The **study of theology** is so profoundly linked to the formation program that the seminarian translates its contents into his spiritual, priestly and pastoral life. Apostolic activity will serve to expand his vision of priestly ministry, specifically in the field of the particular Church, learning to value and actuate all charisms and vocations that are present therein and which constitute it. Therefore, the key word in this formative moment is «**specificity**».

d) The **pastoral stage** or vocational synthesis, of varying duration and modality, according to the practice and the tradition of the Diocese. It takes place between the end of residence at the seminary and priestly ordination. It is marked by two fundamental elements: the **insertion into a Christian community**, be it parochial or of another type, and the reception of the **Holy Orders** of Diaconate and Priesthood. The candidate for the priesthood must employ everything he has learned during his time in the seminary and **give it continuity**, in the pastoral context of the community where he is placed, thus immediately preparing himself to begin his ongoing formation. An important part of this pastoral insertion is the

**participation in the presbyterate** and in diverse priestly groups, be it at a parish level or at the level of diocesan commissions; the seminarian must realize, in practice, that it is about a common vocation and a common mission, which he shares with his brothers in the presbyterate. A special place in his formation is occupied by **meditation on the rite of ordination**, which has very rich elements for the sacramental configuration to Christ the Shepherd. On the other hand and, as part of his specific formation, he is tested in his availability for **humble service** and in his attitude for **collaboration** in pastoral mission with lay and religious faithful. The **modalities** of the pastoral stage are mainly three. The pastoral mission while living together with a group of priests, for example, in a parish; the pastoral mission while living in a house of formation that is proper to this stage, under the direction of an experienced priest; residence in seminary until priestly ordination. The seminarians that have done their formation in an inter-diocesan or diocesan seminary find, in this stage, an opportunity for a more direct and lively knowledge of the particular Church. The key word for this stage is «**definitive self-giving**».

Gradualness is a fundamental part of formative pedagogy. One can speak of the gradualness of the stages, as we have done. One can also specify the gradualness within each stage, thus tracing a formative itinerary, with concrete means and materials (the object of the formative itinerary of every seminary). But we can also talk about the gradualness of every person and every group, who mature according to their own characteristics and possibilities.

### **3. Integrated Formation**

Integrality is a basic formative principle which proposes that the seminarian grows in an integral way, that is, simultaneously cultivating the four dimensions of formation, as has been specified when explaining the formative stages. The seminarian gradually grows in integrality in the following ways:

a) During the first stages of the formation program, the seminarian must be presented with challenges for growth in every one of the dimensions, helping him to avoid finding refuge in his own strengths and, instead, opening himself up, authentically, to balanced growth. The seminarian will feel that he is making an effort in what used to be unknown fields and this can create some discomfort: for some it will be sports, for others it will be studies, still for others it will be fraternal life. The central point is that they understand and assume the sense of integrality. In the introductory period, the novelty of this integrality is emphasized, while in the philosophical or discipleship stage it is the systematic growth in each dimension that is highlighted.

b) During the last stages, an integrated formation must be assumed by the seminarian in a more natural and profound way. He no longer puts one of the dimensions aside to focus on another, since, by now, he has understood, accepted and practiced an integrated formation. The seminarian will become aware that he is more mature and complete as a person due to the harmonious cultivation of all four dimensions.

c) During ongoing formation, the priest assumes, out of his own responsibility and initiative, the four dimensions of his formation, thus transforming himself, effectively, into the agent of his own process of discipleship, and continuing his configuration to Christ the Servant, Shepherd, Priest and Head.

#### **4. Importance of an integrated itinerary of formation.**

*The diocesan Bishop (or, in the case of an inter-diocesan Seminary, the Bishops concerned), assisted by the community of formators of the Seminary, has the task of developing a **programme of 'integrated formation'**, also called the formation itinerary, and of promoting its practical application, in a way that respects the different stages and the pedagogical journey set out therein. Taking the Ratio Fundamentalis as its point of reference, this programme of formation aims to apply the norms of the Ratio Nationalis and the pedagogical vision that inspires it, according to the circumstances and needs of the particular Church, taking into account the cultural background of the seminarians, the pastoral reality of the Diocese and its 'tradition of formation' (RFIS, 10).*

An integrated program of formation **proposes a pedagogical itinerary** to achieve the objectives of every formative stage and the diverse dimensions of formation, foreseeing the most convenient means, the times of their application and the educational gradualness that is most pertinent, according to local circumstances. The formation program does not refer to the group as a whole, since this should already be considered in the national *Ratio* and in the Statutes, but rather includes **various programs that are more specific, one for every stage**. This is elaborated by the formators and constitutes the **formative itinerary** of the Seminary, which the seminarians must accept.

#### **5. Vocational accompaniment and discernment.**

A privileged means of priestly formation, from the years of Seminary and throughout priestly ministry, is **personal accompaniment**. We need each other. This requires self-awareness of our own need to be helped. To ask for help is a sign of maturity. No one is saved alone, we are saved in community. We are subjects and objects of priestly formation.

*Each formator should be possessed of human, spiritual, pastoral and professional abilities and resources, so as to provide the right kind of accompaniment that is balanced and respectful of the freedom and the conscience of the other person, and that will help him in his human and spiritual growth (RFIS, 49).*

An important element in accompaniment is *trust* (Cfr. RFIS, 47), with which the candidate is able to entrust his life to another person, handing over his own intimacy. *Respect, empathy, listening*, are, among others, the keys to help the seminarian grow in trust within an interpersonal relationship. When one feels heard one learns to entrust one's life to another. One is only willing to embrace a piece of advice or a proposal when one feels listened to, before that it is difficult to do so. We need, as companions, to learn how to listen, and to listen not only to what is communicated verbally but, especially, to what is expressed in non-verbal ways, which constitute the greater part of the communication. Gestures, looks, postures, tone of voice, etc., are expressions of a message that, willingly and often not willingly, is communicated. It is also convenient that during the conversation the companion listens to himself. When we interact with another person something happens within the listener, and that which the person experiences within himself can be a manifestation of what the other person is experiencing. Afterwards, that helps to better know and understand the other person.

The goal of the accompaniment is not only a knowledge of self, it must go beyond that, as Pope Francis reminds us in EG, 170, exhorting the fact that personal and spiritual accompaniment, despite sounding obvious, must lead to God, and must not remain at a self contemplation, or at an immanence, without the possibility of arriving at the transcendence.

When the seminarian is presented with the ideal to be achieved within this personal accompaniment, that is to say, the Person of Jesus, the one who is being accompanied must be able to identify with Christ the Shepherd and must be able to, step-by-step, grow in likeness to Him, up to the point of being able to think more like He thinks, to feel like He feels, and to live like He lived, to take His form, His appearance, until he repeats, with St. Paul, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gl 2,20); thus, accompaniment comes to be a pedagogical and formative experience.

When the formator presents this Model he must do so *progressively*, according to the stage in which the seminarian finds himself and according to the level of maturity achieved up to that point. This gradualness and pedagogy can be concretized in a *personal program of life*; in this way the formator, like the seminarian, know in what direction they are aimed, and what are the steps that

must be taken in order to achieve the goal. If we allow accompaniment to take just any direction without a clear program, most probably there will be no growth and the person will not be truly formed. An accompaniment where *growth* is not seen is a waste of time and efforts.

*Accompaniment must be present from the beginning of the journey of formation and throughout life, even if it requires different approaches after ordination. A series discernment of the vocational situation of the candidate at the outset will avoid needless procrastination when it comes to making a judgment about suitability for priestly ministry. This will avoid leading the candidate to the threshold of ordination, without having ascertained whether the indispensable conditions have been met (RFIS, 48).*