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**The Gradual Nature of Priestly Formation:
Missionary Discipleship and Configuration to Christ,
Servant and Shepherd**

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Introduction

*“Each of the dimensions of formation is aimed at ‘transforming’ or ‘assimilating’ the heart in the image of the heart of Christ...” (Ratio 89). In this sentence we have the key that allows us to explore the “heart” of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*: **configuration to Jesus Christ, Servant and Shepherd**. This important document – promulgated by the Congregation for the Clergy on 8 December 2016, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Patronal Feast of the United States of America – has as its foundation that “every priest should always feel that he is a disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation, understood as a continuous configuration to Christ” (*Ratio* Introduction 3). Without this essential understanding that the priest must constantly configure himself to Christ throughout his whole lifetime, no matter how qualified the seminary formation team, and no matter how improved the formation that is offered, we cannot hope to produce abundant fruit for the Kingdom of God. We must enter into a more profound and radical type of priestly formation.*

The whole process of formation is **gradual**. The education of the human person requires a pedagogy that permits assent gradually: transformations that allow a person to face and transform the world – his own reality, personal, familial and social – as the protagonist of his own existence. The same thing happens with priestly formation. This gradual process begins with the Pastoral Care of Vocations, and continues through the final stage of formation, Ongoing Formation. There are two fundamental aspects: **missionary discipleship** and **configuration to Christ, Servant and Shepherd**. Both highlight the consistency of the objectives to be achieved in priestly formation: that each man is called by the Lord to be both an **authentic disciple**, and a **shepherd**, totally **conformed to Jesus Christ**, the Servant and Good Shepherd who gave his life for the sheep.

I. Priestly Formation as a Unique and Gradual Process

“The whole Israelite community journeyed by stages, as the LORD directed.”
– Exodus 17:1 New American Bible

We should note that the objectives mentioned above – being a missionary disciple and configuration to Christ – are **cumulative** and **progressive** – because on the one hand, we never stop going deeper on our journey of missionary discipleship and mystical configuration to Christ, and on the other hand, we only arrive at this configuration if, previously, we have lived seriously and with a certain consistency, this missionary discipleship.

As a consequence, no stage of initial formation is able to be isolated from the others. Neither is **initial formation** able to be detached from **ongoing formation** in the priestly education process: its healthy and fruitful development presupposes having achieved satisfactorily the objectives of the stages before it.

Imagine a seminarian, recently Instituted as a Lector during the Stage of Configuration, having to prepare a Bible Study for young people in the parish where the seminarian is doing his pastoral work, but the seminarian does not know *Lectio Divina* because he was never introduced to it during the Propaedeutic Stage or the Stage of Discipleship. More than likely, the Bible Study organized by this seminarian will be centered on the intellectual points that he learned during his study of Theology, or he will refer to his rather superficial experiences, revealing his ignorance of the Word of God. In this simple example, we see how the weaknesses and deficiencies in an earlier stage of formation are experienced in the stages that follow.

The underlying reason is that priestly formation is unique and gradual, that is, a single continuous process, even though we can clearly distinguish various stages, which are intimately and organically connected with each other:

Since it should be an ongoing experience of discipleship, formation is a single and integrated path, beginning in Seminary and continuing into priestly life, where it

takes the form of ongoing formation. At each stage it requires care and attention. Even if “much of the effectiveness of the training offered depends on the maturity and strength of personality of those entrusted with formation,” one must always keep in mind that the seminarian first - and later the priest – “is a necessary and irreplaceable agent in his own formation.” (Ratio 53).

Let us return briefly to the two objectives of priestly formation:

a) The objectives of priestly formation are **cumulative**. This means that they continue to challenge the priest to greater growth throughout his whole life. For example, the priest, once ordained, continues to be a disciple on his journey to heaven until his death; he must choose to be honest continuously, even in difficult situations; he must continue to configure himself with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, in relation to the different stages of his and life and health.

b) The formation objectives are also **progressive**. This means that there is a sequence between them in the “construction” of a priestly personality. Thus, his life as a missionary disciple precedes and is the foundation of his configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd; just as the decision to take advantage of time precedes the determination to dedicate time to the acts of the ministry; the learning of contemplative prayer precedes spiritual configuration.

From these principles, it follows that Initial Priestly Formation can be described with the following phrase: *“Formation of a Missionary Disciple of Jesus called to be a Shepherd.”* And that long process can be divided into two parts: first, the formation of the Disciple, and second, the specific formation of the Shepherd. Everything is priestly formation, but it is necessary to sufficiently establish the seminarian’s foundation as a Disciple of Christ first, and then specific formation as a priest (progressive sense). Nevertheless, Missionary Discipleship and configuration with Christ the Shepherd implies a continuous and permanent development that lasts throughout the whole of life (cumulative sense). The believer, the candidate for ordained ministry, makes decisions that last forever; these decisions must be renewed, expanded upon, and deepened. Think of a young man who decides to follow the Lord as a priest. He leaves his job that provided him with a lot of money to spend it on having a good time with his friends. He freely renounces his former way of life, like the Apostles abandoning their nets, their boats, and their father on the shores of Galilee. Later on, at a certain point in his life, that man, now a priest, is called to renounce the security afforded him as the pastor of a wealthy, comfortable parish, in order to accept a new, humbler, and humanely less lucrative assignment.

In the same way that Initial Priestly Formation could be described with the phrase: *“Formation of the Missionary Disciple of Jesus called to be a Shepherd,”* Ongoing Priestly Formation can be condensed into the phrase: *“Formation of the Pastor called to be always more authentically a Missionary Disciple of Jesus.”* It is a boundless

dynamism, where the cumulative and the progressive objectives remain open to consummation in an eschatological sense:

For to me, life is Christ, and death is gain. If I go on living in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. And I do not know which I shall choose. I am caught between the two. I long to depart this life and be with Christ, for that is far better. Yet that I remain in the flesh is more necessary for your benefit. (Philippians 1:21-24).

It should also be noted that formation is **integral** in each of its stages, that is, it covers the four dimensions of every authentically Christian educational process: **human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral**. From the beginning of the formation process, the seminarian needs to be helped to grow harmoniously in all four aspects. Obviously it would be easier just to “fulfill the requirements” in one aspect such as studies or discipline, but it is in the interest of the seminarian (and also the priest) to become a “complete person.” A “complete person” means that all the aspects of his existence are ordered in the same direction: the surrender of his life to Christ, Servant and Good Shepherd, by being intimately configured to Him. This process is **gradually** achieved. We will reflect upon the integral nature of priestly formation during my next talk.

II. The Gradual Nature of the Stages of Formation

A fundamental characteristic of all learning is that it is a **gradual process**. You cannot learn anything in life at once; steps are required that **gradually** lead one to achieve the objectives proposed for a particular educational process. Gradualness also characterizes priestly formation. There are several levels of it:

First, there is a **gradualness from one stage to the next**, as I have already explained. Consequently, it is necessary to examine well the formation program and the statutes of each seminary, as well as the program of ongoing formation of the clergy, to guarantee that the definition and the objectives of each stage are the correct ones. It will be helpful to specify the aspects that correspond to each stage in each of the dimensions of formation, so that the gradualness in each dimension is clearly shown. If you have a didactic schema, which highlights the content of each dimension, you can appreciate the gradualness. Here is an example of gradualness in the spiritual dimension in initial formation:

Propaedeutic Stage	Introduction to the spiritual life
Discipleship Stage	Rigorously and systematically putting the spiritual life at the center of ones life
Configuration Stage	Beginning to live priestly spirituality
Pastoral Stage	Meditation on the Rites of Holy Orders and the meaning of their configuration with Christ, Servant (diaconate) and Good Shepherd (presbyterate).

By defining the gradualness of each one of the Dimensions of Formation, the meaning of the formation program is seen more clearly, and the possibility of caring for significant aspects of formation in a progressive way is opened; for example, the learning of prayer, the formation of affectivity, or the experience of living the evangelical counsels.

Secondly, there is a **gradualness within each stage**, tracing a formative path with concrete means and materials (which is the goal of the formation program in each seminary and each presbyterate). A seminarian who begins the Discipleship Stage should not be the same man who concludes it. The situation of a newly ordained priest is not the same as one who has had two decades of priestly ministry. Each formative period has its own objectives and traces a precise path of growth.

Finally, the **gradualness of each person and each group**, who mature according to their own characteristics and possibilities. The formators need to know and value the maturation process that each seminarian and / or priest and the group as a whole have lived in the past, so that they can establish the continuity and novelty that occur in each person and in each group, giving them confidence that they will be able to make progress. Imagine that we are in a seminary in a region recently affected by a natural disaster. In these circumstances, the objectives for the group, in each of the stages, should be adapted to the painful experiences that seminarians have experienced personally, and within their families and communities. Perhaps, for example, the pastoral works that were planned for parishes or other pastoral centers should be changed to community service to the victims.

III. Missionary Discipleship: the Indispensable Foundation for the Transformation of the Heart of Future Pastors into the image of the Heart of Christ

According to what we have said so far, the Discipleship Stage of Initial Formation supposes to continue deepening the objectives of the previous stages, that is, the objectives of the Propaedeutic Stage, although it could also be extended to the objectives of vocation ministry or other forms of prior formation (minor seminary, for example). At the same time, following the Lord is the indispensable foundation on which to build configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, in the next stage, called Configuration precisely because its main objective is conforming the candidate to Christ the Priest. And this configuration “*calls for patient and demanding work on the person, who is open to the action of the Holy Spirit. Its purpose is to form a priestly heart*” (*Ratio* 55).

Consequently, the *Ratio* points out the following characteristics of the Discipleship Stage:

The disciple is the one whom the Lord has called to “stay with Him” (cf. Mk 3:14), to follow Him, and to become a missionary of the Gospel. Each day he learns

how to enter into the secrets of the Kingdom of God, living a deep relationship with Jesus. Staying with Christ becomes a pedagogical-spiritual journey that transforms the life of the seminarian and bears witness to His love in the world (Ratio 61).

The experience and dynamic of discipleship... requires a specific stage in which all possible efforts are expended to root the seminarian in following Christ – sequela Christi – listening to His Word, keeping it in his heart, and putting it into practice (Ratio 62).

The clear reference to the divine initiative of every Christian vocation places us at the very core of the Missionary Discipleship that is common to all the Christian faithful. **Before any specific vocation or service, one is called to be a Missionary Disciple of Jesus Christ.** In other words, we are called to be sons and daughters of the Father by Holy Baptism, and witnesses of His Merciful Love in the world by virtue of that same Sacrament (and also through the Sacrament of Confirmation), whose graces are constantly renewed by frequent participation in the Most Holy Eucharist. Thus, Missionary Disciples bring the presence of their Lord to all realities and all environments. Pope Francis commonly refers to this basic dimension of the Christian life of every believer as the “consciousness of being a people,” which every priest must remember and cultivate in order to prevent the harmful effects of the different forms of clericalism in his life and ministry. Saint Augustine explained it in a beautiful way:

If on the one hand I am terrified of what I am for you, on the other hand, I am consoled by what I am with you. I am a bishop for you; I am a Christian with you. The condition of being a bishop denotes an obligation, that of being a Christian, a gift; the first involves a danger, the second a salvation.

– Saint Augustine, Sermon 340,1

If we contemplate the vocation of the Apostles in the New Testament, whose ministry ordained priests participate and perpetuate, we perceive with clarity, in the first place, that Jesus called them, not because of their extraordinary merits or capabilities, but simply because He wanted them (cf. Mk 3:13; Acts 9). Secondly, we perceive that He called them from among the disciples he had gathered and formed (Lk 6:13). It is also clear that their vocation did not exempt them from going deeper into the mysteries of the Kingdom that Jesus taught and manifested by His life and miracles. On the contrary, they continued to listen to their teacher (obedience), beginning in their “school” in Galilee, continuing throughout the other regions where Our Lord developed His public ministry, and finally accompanying Him on His final ascent up to Jerusalem.

In this way, the Apostles also faced their weaknesses, for example, their search for the “first place” (cf. Mk 10:35-45), and their betrayal and abandonment of Our Lord at the time of his suffering and death (cf. Mk 14:50). “*But it is through their weakness that they are made strong*” (cf. 2 Cor 12:10); their weakness reminds us that the

Apostles will always be strong if they remain Missionary Disciples. They will continue their missionary journey not only under the action of the Holy Spirit that will confirm and strengthen them to give Christian witness (Acts 2:1-11), but also through the support and confrontation between themselves (authentic priestly fraternity) (cf. Ac 15; Ga 1:11-2:14). Moreover, if their mission was to “*make disciples of the all the nations*” and “*to baptize and teach the disciples to obey everything that Jesus commanded them*” (cf. Mt 28: 16-20), the **Apostles had to continue being disciples themselves**. Consequently, it is more than evident that the vocation of the Apostles is the experience of the common Christian vocation: the universal call to holiness by virtue of their Baptism with its dynamic of constant actualization (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, Chapter V: Universal Vocation to Holiness in the Church). Hence, the transformation of the heart of the future priest in the image of the Heart of Christ has as its essential foundation the constant deepening in the *sequela Christi*.

This is what Pope Francis explained at the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy, on October 3, 2017:

*Jesus did not say to those he called: “Come, I will instruct you,” or “Follow me, and I will teach you.” No! The formation that Christ offers His disciples is carried out, on the contrary, through His Words: “Come, follow me.” “Do as I do.” This is the method that the Church wants to adopt for her priests today. **The formation we are talking about is the experience of being a disciple, which brings us closer to Christ and allows us to be more and more configured with Him.** Precisely because of this, it can not be an assignment that ends, because priests never cease to be disciples and followers of Jesus.*

IV. The Discipleship Stage and the Configuration to Christ, Servant and Shepherd

As we have been saying, priestly formation is a path of constant growth in the configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, in a succession of intimately linked stages. We must now ask ourselves, what is the specific place of the Discipleship Stage?

In the *Ratio* there is a description of the Discipleship Stage (*Ratio*, 61-67) – which is always in relation to the other stages – that we could enumerate, without being exhaustive, regarding the main **fruits** or **results** that would be expected to be observed in a seminarian at the time of preparing to enter the next stage:

- The spiritual life occupies the very center of the seminarian’s existence, and its effects are visible in his everyday life.
- The seminarian works systematically on his personality and is aware of having allowed himself to be accompanied deeply.

- The seminarian learns the process of Christian initiation and expresses his faith as a disciple through apostolic works.
- The seminarian acquires a critical perception of reality and particularly of the person and society.

To mature these fruits requires an itinerary that allows each seminarian to reach them, using the means at their disposal. These same means, moreover, although in different degrees, must remain in some way operational and accessible for the continuous deepening and updating of those same fruits in the later stages:

- To remain attentive to the model of Jesus, the perfect man, to reality, and to the seminarian's own conduct in order to walk toward a priestly ideal.

Seminarians should become accustomed to training their character, they should grow in their strength of spirit and, generally speaking, they should learn human virtues.... This will make them a living reflection of the humanity of Jesus, and a bridge that unites people with God (Ratio 63).

- To be freed from everything that prevents a clear following of the Lord and a full personal authenticity, through an assiduous accompaniment process:

In order to attain the solid physical, psycho-affective and social maturity required of the pastor, it is useful to have recourse to physical exercise and sports, along with preparation for a well-balanced lifestyle. As well as the irreplaceable accompaniment of the formators and the Spiritual Director, specific psychological accompaniment could be of help in some cases, to integrate the fundamental elements of the personality (Ratio 63).

- To consolidate the authenticity of life precisely through the formation process:

This process of formation is intended to educate the person in the truth of his being, in freedom and self-control. It is meant to overcome all kinds of individualism, and to foster the sincere gift of self, opening him to a generous dedication to others (Ratio 63).

This consolidation is concretized in the experience of an ever-greater freedom that allows him voluntarily, without coercion – neither internal nor external – to give of his own life in the following of the Lord. It is an itinerary that has a double protagonist – this is crucial, and should not be forgotten – the synergy of divine action and human collaboration.

Growth in human maturity is assisted and brought about by divine grace, which gives direction to the growth of the spiritual life. This in turn helps the seminarian to live in the presence of God in an attitude of prayer, and it is based

on his personal relationship with Christ, that consolidates the identity of discipleship (Ratio 64).

In addition, in this synergy, the entire *ecclesial* community collaborates:

This is a transformative journey that involves the whole community. Through the specific role of the formators and, in a special way, the Spiritual Director, a pedagogical itinerary is proposed, which sustains the candidate in the process of growth, helping him to become aware of his own poverty and, at the same time, of his need for the grace of God and fraternal correction (Ratio 65).

- To make a decision to follow the Lord forever as a priest or in another Christian vocation. With a clear conscience and the experience of Christian discipleship, the seminarian at this stage must reach a determination to follow the path to which the Lord invites him. In other words, a “state of life choice” must be made, using the terminology of the Ignatian exercises.

This specific period is characterized by the formation of the disciple of Jesus who is destined to be a pastor. Special attention is given to the human dimension, in harmony with spiritual growth, so as to help the seminarian to mature in his definitive decision to follow the Lord in ministerial priesthood by embracing the evangelical counsels in a way proper to this stage (Ratio 62).

Consequently, the Discipleship Stage has an important place in the stages of priestly formation with important fruits or results that are expected to be achieved, especially those we have briefly described above.

This stage must be valued properly in its own right and understood with regard to its specific aims, and not simply as an “obligatory step” needed to reach theological studies (Ratio 66). [On the contrary], at the end of the stage of philosophical studies or discipleship, having reached an adequate inner freedom and maturity, the seminarian should be possessed of the means necessary to begin that journey, with serenity and joy. This will lead him towards a greater configuration to Christ in the vocation to ordained ministry (Ratio 67).

V. The Configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, as a Transformation of the Heart of Future Pastors, in the Image of the Heart of Christ

The “Stage of Theological Studies” – or simply “Theology” – is called the “**Configuration Stage**” by the *Ratio* (No. 68-73), precisely because the configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, corresponds to the formative work that is expected to be carried out at this stage, personally and communally. This stage is characterized by the configuration of the priestly virtues and attitudes that shine in the life and

ministry of Jesus, Servant and Shepherd, into the life and apostolate of the seminarian who, at the end of this stage, will humbly petition for Holy Orders. This configuration consists mainly in the transformation of his heart into the image of the heart of Christ (cf. *Ratio*, 89), which is manifested in his attitudes, in his ways of relating, and in his judgments of reality and people.

This stage is, therefore, the phase that is properly called “priestly formation” because the energies and resources used in formation are focused precisely on forming the priest. Of course this formation has, as its foundation, what the seminarian has already achieved as a Baptized Christian and a Missionary Disciple, who is now convinced that he must not only to follow the Lord, but do it as a shepherd of the flock. Therefore, if the necessary conditions are met, the *Ratio* proposes that the passage from the Discipleship Stage to the Configuration Stage is marked by the **Rite of Admission to Candidacy**, whose meaning clearly signifies the free decision of the seminarian to engage in the work of configuration (cf. *Ratio* 67).

If we contemplate the formation of the Apostles in the New Testament, we also distinguish a certain “configuration stage” in their formation process. For example, clearly recognizable in the Gospel of Mark is the section on the three announcements of Our Lord’s Passion (cf. Mk 8:31-10:52). In each of these announcements, Jesus announces His Passion to His disciples. Then the Twelve, or some of them, manifest their profound lack of understanding of His Suffering and Death. *He was teaching His disciples and telling them, “The Son of Man is to be handed over to men, and they will kill Him, and three days after His death, He will rise.” But they did not understand the saying, and they were afraid to question him* (Mk 9:31-32). Finally, the Lord, addressing the Apostles, pronounces a teaching concerning them, and their mission as shepherds. Being an Apostle implies an intimate union with his Lord, to the point of sharing suffering:

“Can you drink the chalice that I will drink, or be baptized with the baptism which I will be baptized? ... The chalice that I will drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized.... Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to be first among you will be the servant of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:38-39; 43-45).

Indeed, “drinking the chalice of the Lord” and being “immersed” in His same “baptism” is about participation in His Paschal Mystery. It is a foreshadowing to the future martyrdom of all the Apostles, except St. John, of course, who alone among the Apostles shared in Our Lord’s suffering on Mt. Calvary. Martyrdom was the crowning of a life and ministry conformed to the essence of Christ, the Good Shepherd, who “lays down His life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). All the Apostles led a pastoral life in union with and in the likeness of Christ, who came “to serve and give His life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10,45). Naturally, these “apostolic attitudes,” crowned in

martyrdom, were born of the deep intimate configuration of each one of them with the heart of the Good Shepherd. That configuration was **gradual** and **continuously developing** until the day of their definitive offering in martyrdom.

In a similar way, the Configuration Stage seeks to form first of all the heart of each seminarian. **The goal of this stage is that in each one of them there beats the heart of a shepherd who joyfully and willingly gives his life for the sheep entrusted to his care.** Configuration is a gradual process: each seminarian is a Missionary Disciple who, having heard the call of the Lord, has decided to follow him in the priesthood and, therefore, allows his heart be shaped by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and the Church. Configuration to Christ is not only an individual, subjective experience, but is a concrete and objective one. It takes place within the context of a community, which includes all the normal and extraordinary events of a seminarian's daily life. This is how his heart is always shaped more and more after Christ, Servant and Good Shepherd.

It is clearly stated by the *Ratio* regarding the entire priestly formation process:

The priest is, therefore, called to form himself so that his heart and his life are conformed to the Lord Jesus, in this way becoming a sign of God's love for each person. By being intimately united to Christ, he will be able to preach the Gospel and become an instrument of the Mercy of God; to guide and give correction; to intercede and take care for the spiritual life of the faithful entrusted to him; to listen and welcome, while responding to the demands and the deep questions of our time (Ratio 40).

VI. The Configuration Stage

The Configuration Stage, as we have just explained, is the specifically priestly stage of formation, because it focuses on the configuration of each candidate with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, although “*without this necessarily exhausting its dynamism or its content*” (Ratio 70). This conformation of the heart of the future priest into the image of the heart of Christ has its beginnings in the previous stages of formation, and continues to be brought to maturity throughout the priestly life.

The fundamental characteristics for this stage are outlined in the *Ratio* 68-73, which carefully explain what the configuration with Christ, Servant and Shepherd, consists of, and, therefore, in what is most proper for priestly formation:

Formation concentrates on the configuration of the seminarian to Christ, Shepherd and Servant, so that, united to Him, he can make of his life a gift of self to others (Ratio 68).

How is the configuration achieved?

This configuration demands that the seminarian enter profoundly into the contemplation of the Person of Jesus Christ, the Beloved Son of the Father, sent as a Shepherd of the People of God. It will make the relationship with Christ more intimate and personal and, at the same time, will lead to an awareness and an assumption of priestly identity (Ratio 68).

It is a process which is **personal** and **gradual**:

This stage allows the gradual grounding of the seminarian in the likeness of the Good Shepherd, who knows His sheep, gives His life for them, and seeks out the ones that have wandered from the fold (cf. Jn 10:17) (Ratio 69).

This “grounding” is concretized in shaping the structures and habits that have been built in the previous stages (which will always be consolidated) with the theological, mystical and ascetical contents concerning the priesthood. Therefore, the point of view that unifies all the dimensions of the seminarian’s life becomes the priestly vocation, whose virtues he must assimilate and synthesize in a proper and genuine way: selfless service; dedication of his life for the salvation of his brothers and sisters; leading his flock to the encounter of the Father. He is able to receive these priestly virtues because he is intimately united to the Lord Jesus, from the depths of his heart.

In relation to the other stages of priestly formation and without being exhaustive, we could outline the Configuration Stage through the main fruits or results that would be expected to be observed in a seminarian before entering the next stage:

- The seminarian assumes the spirituality proper to the diocesan priest, animated by pastoral charity and initiating a process of configuration with Christ, Servant and Good Shepherd. Evidence of this can be demonstrated by the fact that he begins to relate in a particular way in the Christian community, as future member of the family of the presbyterate, whose father is the Bishop. He begins to experience that he will share with the other priests the mission of shepherding the people of God, under the guidance of the Bishop. Therefore, the seminarian’s relationship with the Bishop becomes more marked every month by filial collaboration. In addition, service to the people, their brothers and sisters in the faith, will become the center of their worries and concerns, as they assume an authentic spiritual paternity.

Pope Francis usually points out that the essential feature of the priest’s spirituality is “diocesan,” which implies the close and particular relationship with the Bishop, with the presbyterate, and with the faithful, as we have just described.

- The seminarian shapes his personality – with its virtues and defects – to ministerial service, becoming a bridge for the encounter of men with God. For

this reason, the point of reference of their choices and decisions will always be more than themselves or their own welfare, but the life of the people of God whom they are called to nourish and care for.

- The seminarian extends his vision of the mission of the Church and the exercise of the priestly ministry through apostolic activities. His whole life is about becoming an instrument at the service of others, working to become an agent “of the culture of encounter, of this fruitful encounter, of this encounter that restores to each person his own dignity as a child of God, the dignity of living” (Pope Francis *Domus Santa Marta*, 13 September 2016).
- The seminarian carries out a systematic study of theology aimed at going deeper into the Mystery with an eye toward effective evangelization.

Naturally, to achieve these fruits or results an itinerary is required that allows each seminarian:

- To deepen the theological virtues through the contemplation of Jesus, making a bridge between the Discipleship Stage and the Configuration with Christ Stage:

This configuration demands that the seminarian enter profoundly into the contemplation of the Person of Jesus Christ, the beloved Son of the Father, sent as Shepherd of the People of God. It will make the relationship with Christ more intimate and personal and, at the same time, will lead to an awareness and assumption of priestly identity (Ratio 68).

- To apply the evangelical counsels to priestly ministry: chaste **celibacy**, joyful **obedience**, and the spirit of **poverty**:

The content of this stage is demanding and requires a great deal of commitment. It asks for a constant responsibility in living the cardinal and theological virtues and the evangelical counsels. It demands a docility to the action of God through the promptings of the Holy Spirit, according to an authentically priestly and missionary mindset. It also calls for a gradual re-reading of the one's own personal history in the light of pastoral charity, which animates, forms and motivates the life of the priest (Ratio 69).

- To assume pastoral charity as the soul of the spirituality of the diocesan priest and identifying the priorities of priestly ministry.

With a view to service in a particular Church, seminarians are called to acquire the spirituality of the diocesan priest, which is characterized by selfless dedication to the ecclesiastical circumscription to which they

belong.... This also means conforming one's own way of thinking and working in communion with the Bishop and brother priests, for the good of a portion of the People of God. This indispensable love for the Diocese can be enriched by other charisms, brought about by the action of the Holy Spirit (Ratio 71).

- To shape in one's own person the attitudes and behaviors proper to the priest in the exercise of his ministry.

Gradual configuration with Christ becomes an experience which causes the sentiments and attitudes of the Son of God to arise in the life of the disciple. At the same time, it introduces the seminarian to an appreciation of the life of a priest, inspired by the desire and sustained by the capacity to offer himself for the pastoral care of the People of God (Ratio 69).

A fruitful and harmonious interaction should be achieved between human and spiritual maturity, between the life of prayer and theological understanding (Ratio 70).

VII. Conclusion

Let us return to the phrase of the *Ratio* that illuminates this symposium: “*Each of the dimensions of formation is aimed at ‘transforming’ or ‘assimilating’ the heart in the image of the heart of Christ....*” (Ratio 89). This profound and intimate transformation, as I have tried to show by exploring the *Ratio* in this first reflection, can only take place within a program of priestly formation that is **integrated** and **gradual**, made up of successive stages intimately linked to each other, whose objectives are **cumulative** and **progressive** at the same time. The content of this process is marked by two fundamental pillars: (1) the Missionary Discipleship Stage and (2) Configuration with Christ, Servant and Pastor.

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