

PROFOUNDLY HUMAN PRIESTS¹

Human formation and the spiritual life

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I would like to begin with the concluding words of the homily that Pope Francis delivered on the 29th of March 2018, at the Mass of the Chrism: “*A priest who is close to his people walks among them with the closeness and tenderness of a good shepherd; in shepherding them, he goes at times before them, at times remains in their midst and at other times walks behind them. Not only do people greatly appreciate such a priest; even more, they feel that there is something special about him: something they only feel in the presence of Jesus. That is why discerning our closeness to them is not simply one more thing to do. In it, we either make Jesus present in the life of humanity or let him remain on the level of ideas, letters on a page, incarnate at most in some good habit gradually becoming routine.*”

The Holy Father illuminated several passages of the Liturgy of the Word during that Eucharistic Celebration, which suggest the topic of “closeness”: that of God to his people, that of Jesus who is anointed to preach a message of hope and therefore of closeness, and finally, that of the priest. What seems to fall under this vision of closeness, although the expression does not recur in the homily, is really human formation.

In fact, please note that this concerns not only kind behaviour or a means of communicating, but of “*an attitude that involves the whole person, his way of building relationships, of being himself and attentive to the other contemporaneously.*” This attitude—without a doubt—belongs only to one who is humanly mature, to the person who has grown within himself those human virtues that make him capable of authentic and peaceful relationships, of emotional and affective stability.

As you know, this topic is not new. In the journey of these last decades, especially beginning with *Pastores dabo vobis*, human formation has become a crucial question. The centrality of Jesus the Good Shepherd as the fundamental image by which priestly configuration is inspired, the rediscovery of closeness as a “key to

¹ Meeting of the Congregation for the Clergy with Rectors and Spiritual Directors of the Regional Pontifical Seminaries of Italy, 13 April 2018.

evangelization” is, unfortunately, also one of the unpleasant events that, in this context, regarding seminarians and priests, has put a spotlight on this important dimension of life and spirituality in a totally new way.

While having at heart the gradualness of personal journeys toward the priesthood, and also the paths and instruments of accompaniment, today more than ever we must be courageous and determined in affirming that the Church needs Priests who are fully men and profoundly human. Only a mature and peaceful man is able to exercise the gift of the priesthood in a fruitful way.

The task of accompanying and discerning a priestly vocation, with a special view toward human formation, is that which concerns your service as Rectors and Spiritual Directors. It deals with helping candidates to develop the right maturity in themselves and, in view of future ministry, the capacity to cultivate the human qualities necessary for the construction of a balanced personality, strong, free, and capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibility.

I would like us first to reflect on the content of spiritual direction. Notwithstanding the many reflections on this topic, one can still perceive today the tendency to view this service as something “separate,” with respect to questions related to the innermost privacy of the person and his concrete daily life that unfolds. In the Plenary Assembly of this Congregation of 1 June 2017, Pope Francis spoke in this way of a “spirituality without flesh”; in addition, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, taking up the ordinary Magisterium of the Holy Father, published the document *Placuit Deo*, which warns against the tendency to view Christian salvation as a merely interior journey, detached from the body, from relationships and from material reality.

Also in the Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* on holiness, Pope Francis has stigmatized the Gnosticism of one who has “a mind without God and without flesh,” i.e., of one who measures the spiritual life starting with the accumulation of knowledge and encompasses the mystery of God in formulas, without bothering with the flesh, that is, with real life.

That places a priority on the need to view spiritual accompaniment not as an area that regards exclusively the life of prayer in a strict sense or as some advice on meditation and on spiritual reading; on the contrary, in virtue of the Incarnation of Christ, we know that the spiritual life is neither abstract nor separate from the concreteness of daily life: it is the center of a fully human existence, and nothing that is human is outside of it.

The *Ratio* clearly stresses the fact that the holiness of a priest and the effective exercise of his ministry depend in large part on the maturity of his personality, on his psycho-affective balance and his human virtues, which necessarily belong to the Priest. It is as if to say—paraphrasing Saint Thomas—an efficacious grace does not exist without human nature.

Thus, in the Seminary, spiritual formation must not be negligent in involving itself in many aspects and levels of the person: the biological, that sign of the evolutionary growth with its various phases; the emotional, which includes also the psychological sensations and perceptions of the candidate; the intellectual that regards thoughts, ideas and decisional capacity. But above all, an attentive and scrupulous discernment is required in the area of relational affectivity, the principal aspects of which range from the balanced care of his own body to the capacity to dialogue peacefully with another, from sincerity to kindness toward others, from the capacity to withstand difficulties and obligations to a peaceful interiorizing of chastity and celibacy. This is the reason the Spiritual Director is required to live in the Seminary, participating in the daily life of the formative community.

It is necessary to work with generosity to help candidates for the priesthood to develop a strong, peaceful and free identity, that you might help them not to repress affective and sexual development, and at the same time, to make them interiorly solid, tranquil and balanced in interpersonal relationships and in the interior acquiring of the value of chastity.

In short, on human formation, one cannot be superficial: one cannot be a priest if one is not first of all a mature man, structurally balanced and affectively stable.

For this reason, priestly formation must also help candidates to develop the capacity to read their own history in depth, to interpret it in light of God's plan and to accept their own frailty with humility, then to seek, with spiritual means, and, if necessary, with the help of the human sciences, to remove obstacles of a psychological nature, affective or emotional, that might impede a peaceful actualization of the ministry.

Speaking to the participants at the Convention on the 50th anniversary of the conciliar decrees *Presbyterorum ordinis* and *Optatam totius*, sponsored by this Congregation in November 2015, Pope Francis affirmed that:

“A good priest is first of all a man with his own humanity, who knows his own history, with its riches and its wounds, and who has learned to make peace with it,

reaching a fundamental serenity, proper to a disciple of the Lord. Human formation is therefore a necessity for priests, so that they may learn not to be overcome by their limits, but rather, to make their talents bear fruit. A priest should be a tranquil man who knows how to protect his serenity within himself, even in difficult moments, conveying the beauty of a relationship with the Lord. Conversely, it is not normal for a priest to be often sad, nervous or of a hard character; it doesn't bode well and it won't do well, neither for the priest, nor for the people."

After this delicate service, which the Spiritual Director fulfills, the synthesis of discernment belongs to the Rector, in communion with the other formators; the history and life of some Priests, the difficulties that Bishops often have to confront and unfortunately the facts of recent history demonstrate how indispensable maximum prudence and even more firm rigor are to this discernment.

Some shadows, together with some frailties, at times latent but rooted in the personality, can be covered up and hidden behind a perfect façade; or, contrariwise, they can be underestimated in the formative process by the one who must accompany and discern.

To formators, Pope Francis recommended: *"When it concerns the priestly vocation and entrance into the Seminary, I beg you: do a real discernment, take a shrewd and cautious view, without lightheartedness or superficiality"* (POPE FRANCIS, Address to the participants at the International Convention on the Pastoral Care of Vocations, 21 October 2016).

The *Ratio* as you know, recalls many times this indispensable necessity of discernment both in the selection of candidates for entrance into the Seminary and at the conclusion of each stage of formation. This has to be the case, in a particular way, for all questions inherent to the areas of affectivity and sexuality.

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