

The main features of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*

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✠ Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong
Archbishop Secretary for Seminaries
Congregation for the Clergy

I. Origin of the RFIS

The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* finds its origin in the first article of the conciliar decree *Optatam Totius*, proclaimed by Pope St. Paul VI on 28 October 1965. It established universal laws that were intended to be “*adapted to the particular circumstances of the times and localities so that the priestly training will always be in tune with the pastoral needs of those regions in which the ministry is to be exercised.*” *Optatam Totius* did not intend to standardize priestly formation, but to set forth **fundamental principles**; the implementation of those general norms would be determined by the respective Episcopal Conferences. Each country was to write its own “Program for Priestly Formation,” subject to the approval of the Apostolic See. The goal was priestly formation **with a pastoral focus**.

Five years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, **the first version** of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* was published.¹ In the context of those times, that initial document placed a greater emphasis upon the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of formation rather than on the human and pastoral dimensions.

During a long period of thirty years, many documents were written which tried to **complete** and **establish a balanced approach** to priestly formation. These documents originated at both the universal level, through the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and at the local level, through various Episcopal Conferences. Observing the chronological sequence of these documents, we notice that each of them shed light on important aspects of priestly formation: The Teaching of Philosophy (1972); The Ministries in the Church (1972); Priestly Celibacy (1974); Adult Vocations (1976); Priestly Identity (1979); Liturgical Formation (1979); Spiritual Formation (1980); Human Mobility and Formation (1986); Admission of seminarians expelled from other institutions (1986); Teaching the Fathers of the Church (1989); and the Propaedeutic Stage of Formation (1987).

¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (6 January 1970).

The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, promulgated by Pope St. John Paul II on 25 March 1992, marks a turning point in this history, because the Synod of Bishops considered the theme of priestly formation with **an integral vision and a broad view of priestly ministry**. At that time, for a variety of reasons, a new version of the *Ratio* was not made. During the next 16 years, the Roman Dicasteries and the National Conferences continued to publish documents on particular topics related to priestly formation: Pastoral Care of Vocations (1992); Training of Formators (1993); The Pastoral Care of Marriage and the Family (1995); Admission of seminarians expelled from other institutions (1996); The Scrutinies for Sacred Orders (1997); The Propaedeutic Stage (1998); Indigenous Vocations (1999); The Priestly Mission (1999); Popular Piety (2001); Migration and Vocations (2004); Homosexual Tendencies and Priestly Vocations (2005); Psychology and Formation (2008); Studies of Philosophy (2011); Priestly Vocations (2012); and the Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests (2013).

The beginning of the pontificate of **Pope Francis** marked another important milestone. From the outset, the Holy Father was interested in developing the selection and formation of priestly vocations by instituting a new Secretary for Seminaries within the Congregation for the Clergy. One of my first responsibilities was the revision of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, which was assiduously undertaken by our esteemed Congregation.

This beautiful historical panorama highlights **the necessity for a careful study** of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* in order to synthesize the whole instruction on priestly formation, **combining the canonical requirements with a pastoral focus**.

II. Guiding Principles of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*

There are some key elements in the *Ratio Fundamentalis* that highlight the link between the **theological content** of the priesthood and their **pastoral approach in formation**.

1. The Holistic Approach of a Single Educational Process

The man who has been called to receive the Sacrament of Holy Orders and remain forever faithful to that calling is but one person. This one person goes through three major stages: **vocational discernment, initial formation, and ongoing formation**. We are talking about a single process, the contents of which must be in harmony with each other. The “seeds” which are planted in the beginning of formation will later develop and bear fruit. All the moments of formation culminate in a decision that determine the course of a man’s life.

2. An **Integral** Formation

The development of a person demands, by its very nature, the right balance between its various components. We are not interested in a partial development, because the call of God demands that a man give **everything** – *Totus Tuus* – his whole person. “*You shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart, with **all** your soul, with **all** your mind, and with **all** your strength.*” (Mark 12:30). Because of the weakness of our human nature, we often place too much emphasis on one aspect of our person to the detriment of the others. There are those with a big head but a small body (intellectualism); those with a strong spirit but a fragile mind and body (spiritualism); those who boast of having a great pastoral interest but possess little motivation (pastoralism); and those with a strong body but who have a small mind and spirit (superficiality). The goal of all formation – initial and ongoing – is **integration**. Formation invites everyone, both seminarians and priests, to **leave their comfort zones in order to achieve true growth, harmony, and integration.**

3. A **Gradual** Formation

The *Ratio* proposes several **stages of formation**. The first stage is the prerequisite of a **Propaedeutic phase**, whose objective is to establish a firm foundation to integral formation by means of a thorough vocational discernment process. We are all aware of the necessity to have secure foundations upon which to build. In addition, the document gives new names to the various stages of formation, which serves to place the organization of studies within the context of an integral formation process. We invite the seminarians to follow Jesus as His disciples (**Discipleship Stage**), to configure themselves to Him (**Configuration Stage**), and to make a good synthesis of their formative process (**Vocational Synthesis Stage**) in order to arrive at a more mature and conscientious understanding of the responsibility that comes with ordination to the Sacred Priesthood. Finally, the *Ratio* insists that at the end of each stage of formation, careful discernment is required to determine the suitability of the candidate to advance or not, as the case may be. This discernment is objective and serious; it is not something which should be viewed simply as an automatic transition along the course of studies.

4. The **Communitarian Environment**

One of the main convictions of the *Ratio* is the great importance of a **community**. This idea is in harmony with the understanding of priesthood, which is born of a Christian community; grown by, with, and in a Seminary community; and destined to shepherd a community. Priesthood is not an isolated way of life; on the contrary, “*the priest must always be a man of communion*” (*Ratio* 52), united to the Bishop, to his brother priests, and to the lay faithful (*Ratio* 51). Therefore, the process of formation must always be done in the context of a community with a profound sense of “trust and mutual confidence” between seminarians and formators (*Ratio* 47).

5. A **Missionary** Focus

The entire focus of formation should be **pastoral** and **missionary**. This essential characteristic of priestly formation is part of the definition of the sacred ministry. The call of Jesus consists **in going out** to search for the lost sheep, and in summoning people from the very ends of the earth. The priesthood is not about obtaining certain comforts or privileges; it is about humble missionary service and the surrender of one's life.

6. The Formation of **the Inner Man**

Conforming the interior man to Christ is the heart of formation. Behavior and external actions are always spontaneous manifestations of the heart (cf. Mark 7:15; 20-23). If the "inner man" is not conformed to Christ, external activity becomes mere compliance: "all show, but no substance;" "a veneer of virtuous habits" (*Ratio* 41). The formation of the inner man requires a human process of **openness** and **accompaniment**, where the seminarian walks with a guide, in truth and confidence. Above all, formation requires a **spiritual *docibilitas*** to the action of the Holy Spirit, who forms the candidate into the very image of Christ. A truly formed interior life excludes any actions that are merely legalistic and "performed only for others to see them" (Matthew 6:1).

7. The Way of **Discipleship**

Every seminarian and priest should always remember that first and foremost he is a Missionary Disciple by virtue of his Baptism (*Ratio* 31). "*The disciple is one whom the Lord has called to 'stay with Him,' to follow Him, and to become a missionary of the Gospel*" (*Ratio* 61). The Disciple "lives in a deep, intimate relationship with Jesus" (*Ratio* 42; 61). This baptismal call to be a Missionary Disciple "continues throughout his whole life" (*Ratio* Introduction 3; 62). The priest "*should always feel that he is a disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation*" (*Ratio* Introduction 3). Therefore, following Christ means an "openness to the Will of God" throughout his entire life, with a "continuous conversion of heart" (*Ratio* 54). These foundational principles of discipleship should never be taken for granted since they are essential to initial and ongoing formation.

8. The Path of **Configuration** with Christ

Upon the foundation of discipleship, the Holy Spirit can create a priestly heart through a mystical identification process called "configuration." This understanding of priesthood necessarily involves a **personal and spiritual configuration to Christ** in four principal aspects: as Head, Shepherd, Servant, and Spouse (*Ratio* 35). Configuration demands profound contemplation of the person of Jesus Christ, which requires a serious commitment (*Ratio* 68-69). "*It demands a docility to the action of*

*God through the promptings of the Holy Spirit to an authentically **priestly** and **missionary mindset**.”(Ratio 69).*

9. **Accompaniment and Discernment**

The quality of formation depends on the frequency and depth of the **accompaniment**. Consequently, the *Ratio* requires a personal relationship between each seminarian and his formators, which is not limited to the spiritual director. It is necessary, therefore, for seminarians to be sincere and transparent (*Ratio* 45). The personal conversations with his formators must be “regular and frequent” (*Ratio* 46) so that the seminarian can discern properly his vocation and be formed as a Missionary Disciple (*Ratio* 44).

10. **Organization of Studies**

The proposal of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* places studies in their proper context with regard to an integral formation. To this end, it has balanced the presentation of the dimensions of formation and has reserved a separate chapter for the *ordo studiorum*, requesting that each Episcopal Conference and each Seminary develop a *curriculum*. Moreover, the *Ratio* has expanded the content of the studies adding to the classic curriculum of philosophical and theological studies, both propaedeutic and ministerial programs and courses.

III. The Application of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*

The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* is applicable at two complementary levels: in the **National Seminary** (*Ratio Nationalis*), and in **each Diocesan Seminary** (Program of Formation), including those Diocesan Seminaries which are linked to ecclesial movements.

The *Ratio* also applies in all the **Institutes of Consecrated life** (*Ratio* of each Institute) and in the **houses of formation** of these institutes (Program of Formation).

The *Ratio* applies indirectly in those areas that constitute a single process within initial formation, that is:

- The **pastoral care of priestly vocations**
- The **ongoing formation** of clergy

In addition, the formative perspective of the *Ratio* should inspire other universal pastoral tasks.

•First, **the pastoral care of all vocations**, which should include diocesan offices for vocations.

•All the Institutes of **consecrated life** (*Ratio* of each Institute), their houses of formation (Program of Formation), their pastoral work on vocations and their ongoing formation.

I wanted to specify these areas of direct or indirect application of the *Ratio*, because in particular Churches, doubts will probably arise in this regard, addressed to you, brother Bishops and Rectors of Seminaries. If the Conference of Bishops, the Dioceses, and the Seminaries are moving effectively toward a renewal of priestly formation, your involvement is indispensable. As a wave gradually gathers momentum in the water, similarly good formation reverberates throughout the whole Church.

IV. Why is the *Ratio Nationalis* Necessary?

The publication of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* should be considered as **more of a starting point than a conclusion**. After two years since its publication on 8 December 2016, during which time it has had an unprecedented distribution, it is now time to start the drafting the *Ratio Nationalis*.

This **integrated, systematic, and improved formation proposal**, which, as we have seen, emphasizes the holistic, integral, missionary, and gradual nature of formation – along with the importance of the interior life – now needs to find expression in each individual country or Episcopal Conference through the composing of the *Ratio Nationalis*.

This system began with the Second Vatican Council. The first article of the decree *Opatam Totius*, established this fundamental principle:

“Since only general laws can be made where there exists a wide variety of nations and regions, a special “program of priestly training” is to be undertaken by each country or rite. It must be set up by the episcopal conferences, revised from time to time, and approved by the Apostolic See. In this way will the universal laws be adapted to the particular circumstances of the times and localities so that the priestly training will always be in tune with the pastoral needs of those regions in which the ministry is to be exercised.”

The conciliar text expresses the **need for different norms**, adapted to the situation of each country or rite. It establishes the channels for the revision and approval of these particular norms, and makes clear the goal, which is always the **pastoral nature of all priestly formation**. This pastoral focus, characteristic of the teaching of Vatican II, is echoed by the Code of Canon Law, in c. 242, §1. For this reason, each Episcopal Conference makes their own *Ratio Nationalis*, which must be approved by the

Congregation for the Clergy, establishing **a dialogue of collaboration and communion between the Holy See and the Church of each nation.**

The **periodic revisions** of the *Ratio Nationalis*, with the introduction of amendments, must receive approval from the Congregation for the Clergy. Such revisions are to be carried out periodically when the Episcopal Conference or the Congregation for the Clergy deems it necessary or opportune. In this way, the *Ratio Nationalis* is promoted **as a living document**, which enters into continuous dialogue, both with the diverse pastoral realities of the nation and with the universal Church.

The *Ratio Nationalis* **must be applied in all the Seminaries of a given country**, whether they belong to a diocese, a religious community, or to ecclesial movements. In this way, **the authority of the Episcopal Conference is respected**, and collegiality is enhanced. The existence of the *Ratio Nationalis* and its effective application is **a sign of the communion among the Bishops** in any single Episcopal Conference on the important and essential subject of priestly formation, and for this reason, it must be composed with care in respectful dialogue.

V. Dialogue and Agreements within the Episcopal Conference

We have said that the *Ratio Nationalis* is a sign of communion among the Bishops of a nation. Therefore, it is important that the drafting of such a text is not a hurried endeavor. It is not a matter of “fulfilling a requirement” or of “looking good” before the Holy See, but of effectively moving toward a unified vision of priestly formation in a given country. This higher purpose demands **a rhythm of work, patience, and Christian hope.**

1. The first point of discussion is to consider the general **social, cultural, and ecclesial context** of each nation. The Church at the national level might require various modifications to priestly formation that are specific to that region. The fundamental question is: How do we form priests to evangelize in this country at this particular place and time? It might be helpful to give a general description of a priestly profile.

2. A second point of discussion consists in taking into account **all the pastoral realities of the nation.** This point will consider, on the one hand, all the Dioceses that are able to sustain or establish a seminary, and on the other hand, the superior quality of priestly formation necessary for the Church today. The *Ratio Fundamentalis* insists that **large and small Seminaries** be taken into account so that when drafting the *Ratio Nationalis*, the standards are nuanced so as to be applicable to all seminaries (8). The **Dioceses that do not have a Seminary** deserve special attention, so that the best way to guarantee quality formation for their candidates is also taken into consideration.

3. The third point of discussion is the attention to **positive formation experiences** that have been tried, tested, and found worthy, especially in several seminaries, so that some of these experiences are then adopted and proposed as valid for the whole country.

4. A fourth point of discussion is to evaluate the way in which **ecclesiastical studies** are carried out. Are the studies undertaken within the Seminaries themselves, or is the Seminary dependent on another ecclesiastical university? In the first case where the ecclesiastical studies are taking place within the Seminary itself, it will be necessary to allow for the **adequate integration** of the intellectual dimension of formation with the other three dimensions – human, spiritual and pastoral – guaranteeing a certain uniformity at the national level. In the second case, when a part of the intellectual formation is entrusted to another university, the appropriate duration of the Initial Stages of Formation must be guaranteed.

5. Another point of discussion should be the **distribution of Seminaries** in the country and the establishment of inter-diocesan seminaries (cf. CIC, c. 237 § 2), so that the formation needs of all the dioceses can be met in the most objective way, surpassing other reasons of a personal or ideological nature.

In order to ensure a contact between the Bishops and the life of the Seminaries, it is useful that the Episcopal Conference **listen directly to the formators**, particularly where there are various Seminary Organizations (*Ratio* 9).

Paragraph 7 of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* establishes some basic points that should always be reflected in the *Ratio Nationalis*:

- The **Pastoral Care of Vocations** and the **criteria for the selection** of priestly vocations.
- Definition, objectives, and duration of the **Stages of Formation**.
- General means to achieve **integral formation**, detailing each one of the **Dimensions of Formation**
- The **Curriculum of the Studies** valid for all Seminaries in the country.

In addition to these points, there are many issues related to the ongoing formation of priests; therefore, it is important that the Episcopal Conference include ongoing priestly formation as part of the *Ratio Nationalis*.

VI. *Iter for the Elaboration of the Ratio Nationalis*

The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* establishes a general procedure that each Conference of Bishops must implement in accordance with the specific characteristics of its own social, cultural, and educational environment. Using paragraph n. 8 of the *Ratio* as the basis for my reflections, I would like to explain a little further the steps to be taken:

1. First, a **broad consultation** is required, which does not exclude any reality of priestly formation in the country. It is recommended that the formation team of each Seminary meet together. This consultation and the mere existence of such a gathering establishes a climate of communion and participation that is necessary.

2. The second step is **the writing of a basic text**. It is only a first draft, which is the responsibility of the Commission of the Episcopal Conference for Seminaries. Usually this first text is prepared by a group of Rectors. In some countries, before presenting the text to the Bishops, a revision is carried out by all the country's formators. Using this method, one can envision a process of one or two years, so as to arrive at producing an enhanced text wherein the different realities of the nation are reflected.

3. The third step is the **presentation of the text to the Episcopal Conference**, where the Bishops discuss and enrich the contents, so that consensus and approval of the Conference can be reached. This step can have several twists and turns: from the Conference to the Seminary Commission, and from the Commission to the Seminaries Committee. The important thing is to get a well-refined text, which is accepted by everyone.

4. Finally, the text is **presented to the Congregation for the Clergy**. It should be noted that the Episcopal Conferences are being asked to enter into the same dynamic of closeness, accompaniment, and collegiality with the Congregation for the Clergy that they presumably had with each other and with their Commission for Seminaries.

At this point it seems opportune to make a **brief digression to comment on canon 237 § 1**. It reminds us that, in each diocese, "whenever possible and convenient," there must be a major Seminary. If it is not possible for a diocese to have their own seminary, there are two options: send the seminarians to another Seminary, or establish an inter-diocesan Seminary. The Bishop's judgment on the "possibility and advisability" of erecting or maintaining a major Seminary is of singular gravity, both in dioceses which, having a long tradition of formation, have few seminarians, and in those which, having a sufficient number of vocations, lack the material and human resources necessary for formation. The erection of an inter-diocesan Seminary

requires the agreement between the Bishops concerned and the approval of the Holy See (cf. c. 237 § 2).

According to this spirit of communion and collaboration, in the discernment of the diocesan Bishop of erecting a Seminary, it would always be advisable to **consult the Bishops of the ecclesiastical province** and even, as the case may be, the Episcopal Conference. The conciliar decree *Christus Dominus* affirms that, *in these days especially bishops frequently are unable to fulfill their office effectively and fruitfully unless they develop a common effort involving constant growth in harmony and closeness of ties with other bishops* (37). Therefore, the decision to erect or maintain a Seminary does not depend on the ideological position of the Bishop or other subjective factors, but **always proceeds from the pastoral good** that in almost all cases exceeds the interests of the local Church. Pope Francis, speaking to newly ordained Bishops, said: *In serene dialogue, [a bishop] is not afraid to share, and even sometimes to change, his discernment with others: with confreres in the episcopate, to whom he is sacramentally united, and then discernment becomes collegial*” (Pope Francis, Address to the New Bishops, 14 September 2017).

VII. The Expected Fruit

I have insisted on the **atmosphere of closeness and communion** that must exist among the Bishops when making decisions on the formation of priests.

This same climate is also necessary among the Rectors and, in general, among the formators of a given country. The drafting of the *Ratio Nationalis* represents a great opportunity to develop these positive relationships of collaboration.

Seminary Organizations are very useful because they are an expression of the desire of formators to meet and help each other. The more experienced formators can share the wisdom of their experience with the new formators as they both discuss their ideas about seminary formation from different perspectives.

Naturally, there should be a **strong connection** between the Episcopal Commission for Seminaries and the various Seminary Organizations. Both structures must collaborate willingly and effortlessly in the drafting of the *Ratio Nationalis* and in many other matters that concern seminaries.

I would like to point out some of the fruits of this positive climate of collaboration, along with a few practical action items.

• **Among the Rectors.** First, it is essential to promote **knowledge of each other**. Attending meetings is important, not only because of the content discussed, but also because they establish personal encounters whereby relationships are created between various Rectors. The preparation of an **updated directory** is useful so that Rectors

have each other's correct contact information. **The atmosphere of closeness and communion** is manifested in the spontaneity with which we can write an email or make a phone call. Good communication can solve many problems; for example, the particularly delicate case of the admission of seminarians who have gone through other Seminaries. Second, collaboration among Rectors also supports their **ongoing formation**. It would be helpful to define, in an objective and clear way, a profile of the Rector and the style of his performance. This profile is not intended to create a "standardized" type of Rector, but to offer adequate training so that Rectors can fully assume their pastoral responsibility, learn to accompany the priests on their formation teams, and achieve the appropriate level of dialogue with the Bishop, diocesan organizations, and the entire presbyterate. These relationships open up new horizons and foster a climate of collaboration whereby we humbly acknowledge that we are always learning in our service to the Church.

- **Among the Formators.** There are many possibilities for productive relationships and ongoing formation for formators. **Preparation of new formators** who are assigned for the first time to the Seminary need their own formation to learn basic principles of formation, accompaniment and discernment of vocations, and the organization and functioning of a Seminary. We also think of **the most experienced formators**, who usually assume the role of Vice Rectors and represent an important personal reference for the entire Seminary. Another group are **those formators who have completed their service** in the Seminary. It is desirable that they have the opportunity to share their invaluable experience with the presbyterate through their service to the permanent formation of the clergy.

- **Among the Formators of the Propaedeutic Stage.** This is a very special stage that is normally one-year long. It is important that this stage **be established uniformly** in each country. The collaboration and communion among the formators of the Propaedeutic Stage with the Seminary Formation Team has great merit. The formators of the Propaedeutic Stage have an important contribution to make in the development of the *Ratio Nationalis*, especially now that the Propaedeutic Stage has become mandatory.

- **Among the Spiritual Directors.** The formation of Spiritual Directors includes many elements of spiritual direction itself. This group of priests has very special characteristics; they are accustomed to performing hidden and yet fundamental work. Some aspects of the spiritual life proposed by the *Ratio* can be studied: the initiation into silence and prayer; the direction of retreats and spiritual exercises; the organization of the liturgical times in the Seminary; spiritual direction; the teaching of personal and vocational discernment. The *Ratio* calls for a close attention to the seminarians' spiritual life, and requires that spiritual directors be attentive to their different stages of formation.

•**Among the Financial Administrators.** The link established among the Financial Administrators of the Seminaries is also important because it represents an aid for economic management that has both common and diverse characteristics. Of particular interest is the modeling of proper economic administration of the Seminary, which undoubtedly prepares seminarians for the parish administration that they will someday have to assume. If the administrator is a priest, it is important that he present himself as such, without blurring his identity.

•**Among Psychologists and other specialists.** Training for psychologists and other specialists who help in the Seminaries is indispensable. Objective criteria should be offered for their training and collaboration in the Seminary, which sometimes is not easy to promote.

I have enjoyed opening up for you the panorama of these different groups of formators and the range of activities that a Seminary Organization could develop, which show that the drafting of the *Ratio Nationalis* is an occasion and the fruit of a shared journey among the Seminaries of the country. It is desirable that each word that is written in the document will be the result of a profound dialogue that open possibilities for the future, always in the spirit of collaboration and communion.

✠ Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong
Archbishop Secretary for Seminaries
Congregation for the Clergy

Facebook.com/obispojorgecarlos
Instagram:arzobispojorgecarlos
Twitter@arzobispojorge
Snaptchat:arzobispo.jorge