

The Stages of Priestly Formation

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The stages of priestly formation have been outlined in the *Ratio Fundamentalis* in such a way as to guarantee **an integral formative process**. Formation involves an educational process that is both **gradual** and **progressive**, one that is not carried out “in fragments” or in isolated segments.

In a **gradual process**, the fulfillment of the objectives pose an **ongoing challenge** that place the seminarian on a path of continuous growth, preparing him for ongoing formation. This happens with the **fundamental experiences** of discipleship and configuration: we are always disciples on a journey with configuration to Christ lasting a lifetime. We see this with respect to **small decisions** and various **aspects of formation**, as occurs with the method of prayer, for example, or the experience of celibacy; these realities are continually being renewed, for at no time can we say that we have mastered them.

This gradual understanding of formation requires a **humble attitude** on the part of those chosen to "savour" its value. This attitude is typical of religion and we can find a precious example in the poor of Yahweh, whose wealth is to depend totally on the Lord.

On the other hand, the gradual characteristic of formation requires that **much attention be paid to training in its early stages**, where the seeds are planted, that will grow during successive stages. A good introduction to silence, for example, and to the method of prayer, will be invaluable to his prayer life during his lifetime; if, on the contrary however, the seminarian lacks an adequate introduction to prayer, his perseverance on this point will be greatly hindered.

In a **progressive process**, the foundation of learning is based upon achieving various objectives. The seminarian must realize that he is being gradually introduced to Christian and priestly values, and that he must **remain open** to learning.

The progressive sense of formation helps us to distinguish **the proper character of each formative stage**. We begin with an introductory phase that is developed over time, and understood according to certain values that find application later in priestly life and ministry.

Between these two **fundamental processes**, that of discipleship and that of configuration, there is a progression. Indeed, the human and Christian identity of the seminarian constitutes the basis upon which it is possible to build a well-defined priestly identity. *Without an adequate human formation, all priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation* (PDV 43).

We see this progression unfold throughout the formation process. The seminarian, for example, is first introduced to silence and then to the method of prayer; from there he moves on to an assiduous practice of Gospel meditation, the key to discipleship; thereafter, he is introduced to the art of contemplation, requisite for configuration to Christ the Shepherd. These steps are interrelated and dependent on each other.

Consequently, both the formator and the seminarian need to continually evaluate, retain and reaffirm what has been **previously acquired**, so that they can build upon a secure and pre-existing foundation. It is important to identify and comprehend the values that the seminarian has learned in his family, as these constitute the foundation upon which the Seminary formative process will build. Equally important to determine is how the candidate relates to lay people, particularly women, in order to prepare him well for future collaboration in his priestly ministry. This means that formation **never starts from scratch**, but has a deep and positive root in the personal history of the seminarian. In addition, we realize that it is necessary to **strengthen the existing base**, so that it can be progressively strengthened.

Formators will be better equipped to help seminarians to grow and mature when they realize that formation is essentially progressive. Prayer in the propaedeutic stage for example, is not the same as that in the theological stage; or pastoral work for example, is not the same for a seminarian in the discipleship stage as it is for him during the stage of vocational synthesis.

Let us take a closer look at each of the formative stages, in order to appreciate what is specific to each one.

I. The pastoral care of vocations

The pastoral care of vocations is defined as a **preliminary process** that has a certain flexibility to it. This means that it can be done in different ways and at varying times.

It is desirable that vocational care be first carried out **in various ecclesial realities**, such as in parishes, schools, universities, ecclesial movements, voluntary activities, among immigrants and so forth. It is evident that it **must be done in different ways**, in varying contexts, all of which valid. The pastoral care of vocations in a given diocese is effective when it approaches vocations from a variety of different perspectives. The main objective in caring for vocations is to accompany and encourage the young in living their faith and to assist them in discerning their vocation in life, which is why it is indispensable to foster a vocations culture.

Pursuant to this initial care for vocations is the pastoral promotion of vocations to the priesthood. It is of the utmost importance here to carefully discern and **select suitable candidates for admission to Seminary**. The discernment process will determine who is to be chosen among those who feel called.

The following are some of the basic elements to be taken into consideration during the discernment process of a prospective candidate: does he have any experience of Church life; does he belong to a parish community and is he active within it; does he pray and what has been his experience of prayer; does he speak the native and local language; has he good physical and mental health; what is his family background; what is his academic history and so forth.

II. The propaedeutic stage.

One of the main objectives of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* is *the need to dedicate a period of time to preparation of an introductory nature, in view of the priestly formation to follow or, alternatively, of the decision to follow a different path in life. Ordinarily this period is not to be less than one year or more than two [...] Its principal objective is to provide a solid basis for the spiritual life and to nurture a greater self-awareness for personal growth [...] Moreover, this time is an ideal opportunity to acquire an initial and overall familiarity with Christian doctrine [...] Finally, if necessary, the propaedeutic stage can help to make up for anything that is missing in their general education* (RF, 59).

The contents of this stage of formation are outlined as follows:

Establish solid foundations in the spiritual life. It is intended only to lay the foundations of the Christian life according to the guidelines of the Universal Church and the Second Vatican Council. That is why in some Seminaries this takes the form

of a catechumenate. A spiritual itinerary is created to cater for the candidates that would include, among other aspects, Sacred Scripture, the Creed, an introduction to the Sacred Liturgy, Marian devotion, the lives of the Saints, methods of prayer and an introduction to the Virtues.

Foster a greater self-awareness. It is important that these spiritual elements be accompanied by an initial analysis of one's own personality, that is, by taking into consideration human factors, so that the seminarian concludes this stage by having elaborated a "map" of his virtues and defects. He would come to realise that his vocational choice requires a path of personal maturation.

Receive an initial and concise introduction to Christian doctrine. Christian doctrine will be the object of study during this first year, which will inform the seminarian's faith and indeed all the dimensions of formation.

Gain a deeper understanding of the priesthood. Although the seminarian has opted for the priesthood, his understanding of it is still in its infancy. In response to this lacuna, it is important to have a course on what the priesthood means. The itinerary at this stage must not only foster an intellectual understanding of the priesthood but also an existential one.

Make an initial vocational discernment. At the conclusion of the propaedeutic stage, the seminarian must make an initial decision about the priesthood. It is necessary that he has achieved sufficient freedom to commit himself to Seminary formation.

All the elements of this stage intend to **introduce the seminarian to the formative process.** The propaedeutic stage represents the entrance door to a lifelong journey. It is important that in this introductory stage the various dimensions of formation be implemented in a balanced way, thereby aiding the seminarian to realise the integral harmony of the entire process.

In the great majority of Seminaries, the propaedeutic stage **lasts one year.** When this year of formation is established, it is then easy to outline the process with the corresponding materials. The programme can be renewed annually, since it is free from the weight of tradition. This flexibility of the propaedeutic stage permits one to adapt the contents of the programme to suit the needs of a given group of candidates at any given time.

The programme can be prepared in different ways: by semesters, by trimesters, by training modules, etc. What matters most however, is that the objectives of this stage are achieved. The propaedeutic year is a privileged time, free from the demands and the constraints of an academic calendar, to foster meaningful experiences for the candidates. This flexibility allows for a more careful and serene initiation.

Elements in this formative stage. The following elements form part of this stage in the formation process.

Sacred Scripture. The catechesis devoted to the Word of God presides over the entire formative process. It is important to present the Sacred Texts to the seminarians in a clear and comprehensible manner. Care must be taken to ensure that Sacred Scripture is understood in terms of prayer and not viewed as an object of study. In presenting the Biblical texts, one can naturally introduce the use of good Biblical commentaries.

Personal prayer. Catechesis is incarnated by the practice of personal prayer. The time devoted to prayer can be gradually increased to around an hour. At the same time, seminarians are introduced to the various methods of prayer. It is important to introduce them to the practice of meditation, reminding them that this form of prayer is central and essential to their spiritual life. It would be good to give guidance here to certain devotional practices, most especially the recitation of the Holy Rosary. It will be important to observe how personal prayer informs their discernment.

Sacramental life. The process of formation introduces the seminarians to the sacramental life through a series of catechesis and celebrations. It is important to foster habitual sacramental practise as this will encourage seminarians to seek the sacraments for themselves. It is also useful to designate a day of the week for confessions. Special care and attention must be given to ensuring a dignified celebration of the Mass. A Holy Hour on a given day of the week provides an occasion for the community to experience Eucharistic worship outside of Mass.

Catechumenal context. This would take the form of catechesis during community gatherings and monthly retreats. Seminarians would undertake to study the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the layout of which would be introductory in nature. Some celebrations are significant: The enrolment, the enthronement of the Bible, the solemn presentation of the Sacred Scriptures, the presentation of the Creed, together with penitential, baptismal and Eucharistic liturgies. It is vital that these celebrations be carried out in a dignified and meaningful way.

Spiritual reading. It is advisable to teach seminarians at this early stage, the distinction between praying with the Word of God and spiritual reading. The practise of both of these is indispensable and are not to be confused with each other. There are four fundamental types of books: Biblical introductions and commentaries; those that provide a Christological catechesis; introductory texts on Our Lady and lives of the Saints; and those that give instruction on prayer and its methods. One of the responsibilities here for the spiritual director is to introduce the seminarians to such texts.

Spiritual exercises. These are particularly important at this stage and for most seminarians this will be their first such experience. Seminarians would be introduced to the practice of prolonged periods of silence. These exercises would also be an occasion for the seminarian to bring to the Lord his personal and familial circumstances, and to find healing in Lord if required. Spiritual exercises are an ideal opportunity to enjoy more time for prayer where one can rekindle the familial bonds of paternity-filiation (relationship with God as Father), fraternity (relationship with Jesus, the brother) and motherhood (relationship with Mary as mother).

Self-knowledge. It is important that each seminarian develop an awareness of his virtues and defects. At the philosophical or discipleship stage, any area of his life that needs particular attention can be catered for, and where necessary, the support of a psychologist can be obtained. Such an analysis could be left to the latter part of the propaedeutic stage, when the catechetical formation is almost complete, with the priority given throughout however, to spiritual formation, so as to pave the way for the next stage in the formation process.

The intellectual life. Seminarians are introduced to the intellectual life by means of the schedule of classes and a disciplined approach to study. This is achieved by teaching them the proper study methods like reading comprehension, how to do research and analysis, how to be concise and how to organise study time. It is important here to ensure that the seminarian is learning these methods and applying them. The development of cognitive skills can be fostered during the propaedeutic stage. These will be strengthened in the subsequent stages. At this early stage, one could already observe the quality of a seminarian's literacy skills, with assistance provided to him if necessary.

Pastoral life. It is fitting that seminarians come to understand pastoral experience as a field of practical formation, ecclesial participation and communication of their own faith. Therefore, it is better to be placed with experts to learn, or in a youth setting to participate. In some Seminaries, to guarantee this formative sense of the apostolate, the seminarians alternate their apostolic activity every trimester. These experiences can be of a social nature (in order to face reality), community based (in order to affirm the ecclesial membership), or catechetical in nature (in order to open a space for them to share their faith). Close accompaniment during pastoral placements is paramount and should involve the lay faithful.

Exercise and work. These are delicate areas because they touch on the personal autonomy of seminarians. It is important here to find a healthy balance between both aspects of formation, where seminarians are encouraged to partake in regular exercise and work, without this being imposed upon them. At this early stage of formation, seminarians should be taught that they are called to serve and not to be served (Mt. 20:28).

The communitarian meetings. This is a central moment because it gives seminarians a certain pattern to their formation. It is important to give sufficient time to such gatherings, like an entire afternoon for example, so that community activities are not rushed. In the propaedeutic stage, an intense training process is carried out. For this reason, it is useful that community meetings take place twice a month. Both the formator and the spiritual director should prepare these encounters, since it is always better that they act as a team. Others may be invited to participate in community gatherings if deemed opportune.

Formation meetings: These are conducted by both the formator and by the spiritual director respectively. It is convenient that at the first community gathering, these meetings be presented as part of the formation process. It is envisaged that, from the beginning, seminarians would be openly disposed to being accompanied during the course of their formation. Regular scheduled formation meetings are a requisite for a seminarian's personal formation. It is a privileged space wherein the formator can listen to, confront and exhort him. The duration of these meetings should last about an hour. During the propaedeutic stage, these one to one meetings should be rigorous when necessary.

The community evaluation. This is done with the whole group in a formal and programmed way. It should follow a similar pattern to formation meetings; these should take place every three or four weeks. Community gatherings should be viewed as routine in the formation programme. It is important that the formator listen to the different opinions in the community and that he confront the group clearly when necessary. The objective of such gatherings is to foster a wholesome community environment.

The propaedeutic outlook. It is proposed that this be evaluated every three months. Openness to formation at this stage is indispensable. In his outlook, the seminarian will ask questions like: How am I applying myself to the formation? Am I really taking advantage of the means offered to me in each formative dimension? The formators should provide seminarians with clear and practical models in preparation for this exercise.

III. The philosophic stage or discipleship.

According to the *Ratio Fundamentalis*, the concept of missionary discipleship requires that *all possible efforts are expended to root the seminarian in the sequela Christi, listening to His Word, keeping it in his heart and putting it into practice [...] Special attention is given to the human dimension, in harmony with spiritual growth (RF, 62). It is important to carry out a systematic work on the personality of the seminarian [...] This process of formation is intended to educate the person in the truth of his being, in freedom and in self-control. It is meant to overcome all kinds of*

individualism, and to foster the sincere gift of self, opening him to generous dedication to others (RF, 63).

The contents of this Stage of formation are as follows:

Rooted in missionary discipleship. The goal of this stage of formation consists in a having decided to follow Christ, even if the seminarian does not continue with his formation in the configuration stage. Deciding for Christ is the foundation of the whole process. Assiduous meditation on the Gospels is invaluable to discernment here.

Emphasis on the human dimension. We are interested here in integral human formation. It is desirable that the seminarian be aware of the fact that he has committed himself freely and trustingly to accompaniment from his formators, particularly with regard to areas where he may have wounds stemming from his experiences in family life. If psychological help is required, then this stage is opportune for that to take place.

Formation in love of truth. Philosophical studies within the process of human, spiritual and pastoral formation is aimed at authentic living, which is a necessary feature of the disciples' identity. This truth is not always positive in nature, as it involves having to confront the truth about weakness and sin in a person's life. The seminarian must learn to embrace his own weakness and to trust more fully and radically in the grace of God.

Formation in the use of freedom. It is the early stages of Seminary life that one must learn the correct use of freedom. For this reason, it is wise not to burden seminarians with too many prohibitions or regulations, but to help them to exercise the proper use of time, to develop healthy human relationships and to use correctly modern day means of communication for the purpose of evangelization.

All the elements of this stage intend to **arrange the formation process** in a rigorous, methodological and demanding way. The stage of discipleship establishes a solid foundation for initial and ongoing formation. If in the previous stage, an introduction to formation was all that was intended, now the acquisition of the means and methods used in the various dimensions of formation are sought. Whilst two years at least are required for this stage, many Seminaries have a three-year structure, in order to guarantee this integral growth. **The programme can be structured in different ways:** when it lasts three years, it usually comprises three phases, coinciding with the academic year; when it lasts two years, it usually consists of four semesters.

Elements in this formative stage. The following elements form part of this stage in the formation process.

Sacred Scripture. It is necessary to prioritise meditation on the Word of God, especially the Gospels, as this is an essential part of the disciples' journey. Seminarians

should experience the benefits of this continuous spiritual exercise and be prepared to maintain it throughout their lives.

Personal prayer. The seminarian is refining his own method of prayer, in such a way as to strengthen his relationship with the Lord. He must remain vigilant and disciplined in his prayer life and not to abandon it despite having a heavy schedule or being on vacation. His prayer life deepens and strengthens through liturgical prayer, the source and summit of which is the Holy Mass, while also being introduced to the Liturgy of the Hours.

Sacramental life. Confession and active participation in the Eucharist become something habitual and profoundly lived. As the seminarian matures, he will realise the indispensable value of sacramental grace in his friendship with the Lord.

The context of discipleship. The four dimensions of formation are integrated here, each in its own way. Thus, we can speak of the spirituality of following Christ, of questioning one's motivations on this journey, of acquiring a Christian vision of reality and of pastoral action as an expression of faith.

Spiritual reading. It is useful to make available to seminarians books that may help them to deepen their appreciation of discipleship. Examples of such texts would be: more in-depth theological works on life of Christ; Biblical commentaries to facilitate a more profound meditation on the Gospels; methods of personal and communitarian prayer; reflections on Christian initiation; texts on the Blessed Mother; more complete and critical biographies of Saints; and works that consider the human demands of the Christian and priestly vocation.

Spiritual exercises. These can focus more on the meaning of discipleship, thereby inviting the seminarian to deepen his commitment to following the Lord of the Gospels through authentic Christian living.

Self-knowledge. Having determined during the previous stage their main strengths and weaknesses, this stage favours a deeper understanding of one's personality and their life's trajectory, aided by the close accompaniment of formators and, if necessary, also by health professionals. The process of interior freedom and human growth must become gradually clearer.

The intellectual life. The study of philosophy is central to this stage of the formation journey, and must not be rushed or undermined. It helps seminarians to acquire a critical vision of reality, to answer some of life's most fundamental questions and to embark on the path of knowledge itself.

Pastoral life. This has two fundamental objectives: firstly, to deepen the sense of belonging to the Church, which is achieved through insertion in the processes of

evangelisation; secondly, to help seminarians to communicate their faith to others, especially through catechetical instruction.

Community meetings. The contents of these meetings should help seminarians to assimilate concepts and experiences of discipleship, especially those of a spiritual and anthropological nature.

Formation meetings. These meetings with their formators become more intense, systematic and profound, in line with the contents of formation. If psychological or medical help is required for a seminarian, this should be provided. Close accompaniment on the part of the formator is a must here. A regular **community review** will also help seminarians to establish a true and wholesome climate of discipleship, where Christian values are authentically lived.

The outlook on discipleship. This can be carried out annually or every semester, depending on how the programme of formation has been structured. It is important that it be the product of profound spiritual discernment and not a mere projection of one's desires. Discernment is a natural part of their formation as disciples of the Lord.

IV. Periods of interruption of studies.

In some dioceses, a period of interruption of studies is proposed to seminarians for their formation. If this practice is carried out, it is absolutely necessary that the seminarian understands why this is happening to him and what is intended for him during this period. A constructive programme must be put in place to help him grow. To fail in this regard would be to run the risk of impacting negatively upon him.

Two reasons why a period of interruption of studies could be recommended:

▪ When the seminarian **lacks sufficient maturity** to continue his formation. An opportune moment for this would be the transition from the philosophical stage to the configuration or theological stage. A particular experience would then be proposed to aid his maturation and thus allow for better discernment. A lack in maturity could be apparent in any of the formative dimensions.

▪ To ensure **a greater understanding of the pastoral reality**. This would serve to benefit the seminarian in his studies, by rooting him in pastoral experience, in line with the desire of the Council Fathers. Oftentimes, a seminarian who has experienced pastoral life over a determined period of time has a clearer understanding of what it means to be a priest. Upon his return to Seminary, his experiences are of benefit not only to his own formation but also to the Seminary community. Moreover, it is for such reasons that a newly ordained priest should gain sufficient pastoral experience before he is sent for further studies.

It is necessary that **the formators discern** what is appropriate for each seminarian on a case by case basis. It is important to take into account the seminarian's age, his development in formation to date and his current stage in formation.

When the pastoral stage, or the stage of vocational synthesis, is well defined, these interruptions become more of an exception. Careful discernment is required before formation is interrupted.

V. The configuration stage or the stage of theological studies.

With regard to the configuration stage, we read in the *Ratio Fundamentalis*, that *formation then concentrates on the configuration of the seminarian to Christ, Shepherd and Servant, so that, united to Him, he can make his life a gift of self to others* (RF, 68). This process *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. This stage allows the gradual grounding of the seminarian in the likeness of the Good Shepherd* (RF, 69). *Concretely, a fruitful and harmonious interaction should be achieved between human and spiritual maturity, between the life of prayer and theological understanding* (RF, 70). *Seminarians are called to acquire the spirituality of a diocesan priest* (RF, 71).

The contents of this stage are outlined as follows:

Configuration to Christ, Servant and Shepherd. The spiritual process of configuration begins here and continues throughout life. There are two requisite characteristics in the maturation process of each seminarian: firstly, he must have a strong identification with Christ the Servant, in order to radically and humbly place himself at the service of others – fruit of the preceding stage of discipleship; secondly, he must have a strong identification with Christ the Shepherd, giving his life for the people of God, with particular care for the poor and the vulnerable.

Contemplative prayer. Introduced in the propaedeutic stage and becoming a regular practise in the discipleship stage, this form of prayer now focuses on Christ the Priest and his public ministry. The study of theology can nourish contemplative prayer, especially the study of Sacred Scripture, Christology and Mariology. Through contemplative prayer, the seminarian learns to imitate Christ through configuration to him.

In this way, the spirituality of the diocesan priest is formed, to be animated later by pastoral charity in collaboration with the diocesan bishop, the presbyterate and the entire Christian community.

Integral formation. All educative means employed in formation have as their objective the spiritual configuration to Christ. The study of theology is key to understanding the nature and mission of the Church and priestly ministry. Particular emphasis is placed here upon human virtues in priestly service. The seminarian gradually becomes more familiar also with the spirituality of diocesan priesthood. Pastoral activity helps him to experience and appreciate the many forms of vocations and ministries within the ecclesial body. The seminarian interprets his virtues and abilities as a means for evangelization, learning to manage his weaknesses and defects in such a way that they do not become an impede his formation.

The formative requirement. During the configuration stage, this acquires the form of pastoral responsibility. Admission of candidates to Holy Orders helps them to assume a public commitment in their formation. Seminarians would adopt here a more seriously approach to their formation with the understanding that their future service to the People of God requires of them complete dedication to their Seminary formation. This stage of formation usually last for **four years**. Configuration with Christ, Servant and Pastor, demands assiduous accompaniment on the part of both the spiritual directors and the formators.

Elements in this formative stage. The following elements form part of this stage in the formation process.

Sacred Scripture. The scientific and systematic study of Sacred Scripture builds on what has been taught in the preceding stages, within the pastoral context of the entire formative process. The Word of God should be at the heart of a seminarian's study, life and activity.

Theological contents. These are indispensable in the process of configuration, because they help to construct the priestly identity (Christology) and define ministerial service (moral theology).

Sacramental life. This now acquires the double meaning of feeding the shepherd who in turn will feed the people of God. The seminarian will grow in his awareness and appreciation of sacramental grace here through the exercise of the ministries of reader and acolyte.

Spiritual reading. In the configuration stage, numerous are the possibilities for spiritual reading: a more profound study of the lives of the saints, especially with regard to contemplative prayer; Works relating to pastoral ministry; more in-depth study of the Church Fathers and so forth.

Spiritual exercises. These are of immense benefit in the process of configuration to Christ and will serve to strengthen the desire for priestly sanctity. It is recommended

that during the theological stage, the spiritual exercises should be composed around diocesan priesthood and pastoral realities.

Self-knowledge. A humble acceptance of his strengths and limitations will permit the seminarian, on the one hand, to direct his qualities and virtues to the future service of the people of God, while on the other hand, require of him to be vigilant in the mastery of his weaknesses, so that they do not inhibit his priestly ministry.

The intellectual life. The study of the various areas of theology should be especially fruitful here. In applying himself diligently to his study, the seminarian will be better equipped to have an answer ready for people who ask him the reason for the hope that he has (cf. 1 P. 3:15).

Pastoral life. This will help the seminarians to broaden their understanding of the mission of the Church and priestly ministry. Through contact with various Catholic groups, and especially with the laity and consecrated persons, the seminarian learn the art of collaboration in the work of evangelisation.

Community and Formation meetings: coming together as a community and meeting one to one with his formator, will foster in the seminarian at this stage, a desire to serve the Lord and his Church in communion with his brothers.

The outlook on priesthood: This is particularly important because it implies an awareness of the generosity and selflessness required for an effective priestly ministry. The seminarian might consider such questions as: what kind of priest do I hope to be? Have I abandoned myself completely to God's will and providence? The answer to these questions will not only be shaped by his own personal desires but also by the pastoral needs before him. Careful discernment is called for at this stage, especially in anticipation of being admitted as a candidate for Holy Orders.

VI. The pastoral stage or the stage of vocational synthesis.

In describing the duration of this stage, the *Ratio Fundamentalis* describes two distinct phases: *the time from leaving the Seminary until the subsequent priestly ordination* (RF, 74). There is a certain flexibility here that can be adapted to suit each candidate and that takes into consideration the customs and practices of a given diocese. It has a dual purpose: *on the one hand, it is about being inducted into the pastoral life, with a gradual assumption of responsibilities in a spirit of service; on the other hand, it is about making a suitable preparation, with the help of a specific accompaniment, in view of priesthood* (RF, 74). Insertion into a pastoral reality and into a presbytery in particular, requires careful and prudent accompaniment of the candidate, from both the host community and the experienced priest to whom he is sent (cf. RF, 75). For the reception of the Holy Orders, the candidates *need a suitable time*

of preparation, especially of a spiritual nature (RF, 77). Finally, this stage helps to lead priests into the dynamic of ongoing formation (RF, 79).

The contents of this stage are outlined as follows:

Personalisation of the process. Whilst group activities may take place, the pastoral stage by its nature is characterised by a more personal process, the duration of which can vary from diocese to diocese, depending on the suitability of each candidate and the circumstances in which he finds himself. The personal accompaniment here is to be provided at a local level, through a parish priest for example, who has a clear understanding of his formative responsibilities. This will serve to complement the accompaniment provided by the Bishop and the Seminary Rector.

Community insertion. This can often pose a certain challenge to the candidate that requires close attention. On the one hand, it involves the ability to discover and accept the local ecclesial reality in which one is placed. Difficulties with integrating into this new reality can also arise with living in a presbytery and having to collaborate with others. The candidate for Holy Orders must adapt to his new circumstances and apply what he has received during his Seminary formation, to his new pastoral life. The challenges that come with the transition from Seminary to pastoral ministry highlight the importance of close accompaniment during this stage of formation.

Preparation for Holy Orders. Ordination to the diaconate and the priesthood are special moments of grace that require due care and preparedness for the candidate: the support here from the Christian community and his own family are particularly significant.

Elements in this formative stage. The following elements form part of this stage in the formation process.

Fraternity. The candidate for Holy Orders experiences fraternity in the presbyterate in the following three ways: a) Living under the same roof with his brother priests, for service in a common jurisdiction; b) Daily coexistence in a priestly team or with a sole parish priest; c) Frequent meetings with the diocesan presbyterate. It is essential that the newly ordained receive the requisite support and friendship during his priestly life, but most especially during his early years in ministry.

Dedication to the mission. The candidate receives his first ministerial appointment to which he will dedicate himself. His ministry will largely determine how he lives his daily life. As he strives to live a balanced and holy life, he will have to remain vigilant in doing so.

Spiritual exercises: Prior to the reception of Holy Orders, he will have his canonical retreat during which time it will be important for him to evaluate the priestly identity as he envisaged it during the configuration stage.

Self-knowledge. He grows in self -knowledge at this stage of his formation with the help of the Christian community and his fellow priests. The candidate learns to confront various challenges and contradictions that he experiences in pastoral practice. During this period of his life, he will need to be open and welcoming of fraternal correction.

The intellectual life. His priestly ministry will largely stimulate his intellectual dimension. Intellectual interests, heretofore for personal benefit, will now be for the good of the people of God. Considerations for possible further study should be informed by pastoral realities.

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