

Accompaniment and Discernment of Priestly Vocations

Lithuania, June 10-14, 2019

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

INTRODUCTION

The **high quality of formation which formators themselves must engage by means of** ongoing formation makes possible the integral initial formation of seminarians who are in the initial stages of their journey, giving it a solid footing.

I wanted to start by highlighting this important formative dimension, because priestly formation involves the creation of a **community united in fraternal charity**. In the human environment called “Seminary”, we are all brothers and disciples of the Lord Jesus while at the same time we are called to continual growth to be configured to Christ for others (kenosis).

This is a basic rule of priestly formation: **The degree of growth achieved by the formator is what allows him to help the young seminarians in their own growth process.**

On the other hand, **accompaniment and discernment** are two sides of the one coin. One cannot exist without the other. The intensity and depth of the accompaniment enables an acute sense of discernment.

Discernment has two essential references: Firstly, **a true bond with God** through His Holy Spirit by listening to and living out his Word. Secondly, a **systematic bond with the one**, the formator who accompanies us in God’s name.

I. A SOLID FORMATION

Formation is structured in four dimensions, an approach that can facilitate a better theoretical understanding. Therefore, the aspects considered here below should be read with respect to the integrality of the human person.

It is clear that each dimension has its own specific characteristics: «*the **human** dimension, which represents the ‘necessary and dynamic base’ of all priestly life; the **spiritual** dimension, which helps to develop the quality of the priestly minister; the **intellectual** dimension, which provides the necessary instruments of reason to understand the values that belong to being a pastor, to make them incarnate in daily life, and to transmit the content of the faith adequately; the **pastoral** dimension, which enables a responsible and fruitful ecclesial service*» (RFIS, 89).

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* states: “*Human formation, being the foundation of all priestly formation, promotes the integral growth of the person and allows the integration of all its dimensions. Physically, this means an interest in health, nutrition, physical activity, and rest; psychologically it focuses on the constitution of a stable personality, characterised by emotional balance, self-control and a well integrated sexuality. In the moral sphere, it is connected to the requirement that the individual arrive gradually at a well formed conscience. This means that he will become a responsible person able to make the right decisions, gifted with right judgement and able to have an objective perception of persons and events. Such a perspective should bring the seminarian to a balanced sense of self respect, leading him to be aware of his own talents and learning how to place them at the service of the People of God. The aesthetic sense should also be cultivated in human formation, by offering opportunities for an appreciation of various modes of artistic expression, cultivating in him the ‘sense of beauty’. He ought to be aware of the social environment, and be helped to improve his capacity for social interaction, so that he can contribute to building up the community in which he lives*” (RFIS, 94). In regard to this paragraph, I would like to present five points that are useful for growth in the human dimension and for acquiring a sufficiently mature personality: self-knowledge, self-esteem, freedom, affectivity and self-giving.

1. A profound self- knowledge. The human person is a mystery, but he is not unknown or unknowable; he is someone who is revealed gradually, requiring, over time, an ever deeper and more objective knowledge of himself.

It is necessary for the seminarian or priest, according to their age and the moment of life or formation that they are living, to be able to open themselves to experience, to learn from this self-knowledge and grow as a person, coming to deeper self-knowledge gradually. What characteristics about themselves have they come to know (what emotions, feelings, desires, hopes, motivations, needs, ideals, strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, how they react to situations, etc)?

This is not about a merely superficial knowledge. Rather, it means engaging all of their potential, and experiencing growth in ongoing transformation, namely **conversion of the heart**. For this reason, self-knowledge must not remain at the level of appearances but arrive at the deepest core of the human person: *“The pastoral care of the faithful demands that the priest have a solid formation and interior maturity. He cannot limit himself simply to demonstrating a ‘vener of virtuous habits’, a merely external and formalistic obedience to abstract principles, but is called to act with great interior freedom. Indeed, it is expected of him that, day after day, he will internalise the spirit of the Gospel, thanks to a constant and personal friendship with Christ, leading him to share His sentiments and His attitudes”* (RFIS, 41).

At times, our ‘ego’ can deceive us, holding out as good something that is good only in appearance, but that at a deeper level represents only the selfish pursuit of something that can even be contrary to what is expected of a Christian, a seminarian, or a priest. Here we see the importance of a continuous review of life, of the examination of conscience, of introspection, of being challenged, of openness to others, of listening – especially when we receive correction from others –, of accompaniment, of silence, of reflection, and so on. It is important before making any decision, from small and daily decisions to those that are great and transcendent, that a person asks himself: what am I seeking? Even if the step one is intending to take appears good, it is desirable not to neglect asking oneself whether the choice being made is for one’s own satisfaction or, instead, whether the principal motivation is the building up of the Kingdom of God, from which follows all the rest (cf. Mt. 6:33).

Knowledge of self in the Holy Spirit is the rock upon which human maturity can be firmly established. The Gospel parable that invites us to dig deeply to establish the foundations of our house (cf. Mt. 7:21-27) tells us a lot in this regard since it implies the dynamic between the person (human dimension) and listening to the Word (spiritual dimension): whoever builds upon the sand of superficiality and convenience runs the risk of ruining his own life.

There are many pedagogical, spiritual and formative means by which to build this self-knowledge. These help the person to discover, recognise and embrace aspects of himself that, even if hidden from him, are very evident to others. These place in perspective the great value of fraternal life and of the challenges that a formator can place before us lovingly at the opportune moment in formation.

A renewed experience of self-knowledge helps the one being formed to acquire a fundamental attitude that will accompany his steps throughout life: the capacity to be welcoming, to value, to be grateful, and indeed the willingness to ask others to provide correction when necessary. Jesus prayed: *“Father your will be done”*. This leads the person to experience challenges as a sign of the Lord’s affection and of his Providence, helping him to reach his deepest being.

2. Self-esteem. Why speak of self-esteem when Jesus asks his disciples in the Gospels to deny themselves, when he tells them to concern themselves with the Kingdom of God and that the rest will follow? Obviously, self-esteem cannot be the purpose of the disciple's life and mission, or even more of the pastor's. Rather, it is used as a means to build up the Kingdom of God in his own life and in that of others. This can be seen in two aspects that are at once distinct and complementary.

From a certain point of view, when the Christian or the priest lacks sufficient self-esteem, instead of seeking the glory of God and the salvation of souls in his apostolate, there is the danger that, while he is doing many good things, he might seek principally the approval and acceptance of others through this activity, doing things so as to be noticed, to receive a reward, to get recognition or respect. Instead, when he is clear about his own worth, affirmation of who he is becomes secondary, and indeed becomes peripheral to his concerns.

From another point of view, self-esteem does not mean valuing merely those positive aspects, such as one's qualities and strengths, but also loving oneself with all one's limits, frailties, weaknesses and sufferings. This is fulfilled by not regarding oneself with one's own eyes but with the eyes of Jesus, who never ceases to love us when he meets our human frailty, sin and weakness; instead, being merciful, his love for us grows. It is, above all, about letting ourselves be looked upon by Jesus so that, learning from him, we can look at ourselves with his deep and merciful eyes. This is why formators must accompany those in formation in the same way as Jesus, so that, before feeling themselves judged, candidates can feel the urge to change and allow themselves to be transformed. Generally, we treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. A seminarian or religious will learn to treat himself and others in accordance with the manner in which he is treated by his formators.

To have self-esteem does not mean the denial of one's frailties, insecurities or failures. Frailty does not exclude self-respect, insofar as it is part of human life and cannot be avoided. Respect for oneself is born from a realisation that one is a creature, a human being, created by God.

If we reflect for a moment on the parable of the prodigal son (cf. Lk 15:11-32), we can see very important elements that shed light on the work of formation. The son, who bears the signs of sin, feels gazed upon, sought out and reached by infinite love. This experience allows him to recognise that he is a son when he considers the signs of the cloak, the sandals and the ring, together with the inescapable memory of his own weakness and failure. The speech he had prepared: "I am not worthy to be called your son...", does not even get a hearing from the father, who has eyes and ears only for what is deepest and most enduring: the beloved son. A similar experience should come about in the relationship between the one in formation and the formator, in whom the loving and unconditioned gaze of the father can heal any wounded self-esteem of the disciple and guide him to a more realistic and complete acceptance of himself.

Even if it seems paradoxical, one gains respect when it is least sought out. In the siege of Jericho, God did not ask for the walls to be assailed but for the trumpet to be sounded (Joshua 6:1-22). When we take things so much to heart that they become a question of life and death, we can achieve the contrary effect. “Do not make your own importance the object of your life. It is better to give oneself, in dedication and self-giving, to bringing the tasks of each day to a good end and to cultivating deep and meaningful personal relations...” (Cucci, 2013, p.151).

3. Freedom. When a person grows in self-esteem, his freedom too begins to grow and expand: his openness to himself and others grows, and certainly his openness to God grows, that is to say that God can bring his work to fulfilment in the human heart. The seminarian or priest becomes ever more open to living what is being proposed by the Gospel, namely the values of the Kingdom. Concretely, he is open to living in a relationship of intimacy with the Lord, to following Jesus in poverty, chastity and obedience.

It is not enough to know the ideals of the Christian and priestly life and to desire to live them. It is also necessary that the person be capable of living them, because at times one is unable to live as one desires, as a result of a lack of freedom. It is because of this lack of freedom, that at times, the vocational journey is abandoned, or one continues along the road, living with mediocrity, showing no fruits of an authentic Christian and no fruits of a priestly life (Galatians 5:22).

The first obstacle to freedom is one’s ‘ego’, when it resists what Jesus invites us to do, especially when it seeks satisfaction, rewards and unhealthy compensations. Unable to deny itself, it seeks comfort and solace in the satisfaction of its own needs or desires, more or less in contradiction with one’s vocation. Experience in the field of formation has shown that seminarians entering the Seminary have a more or less clear idea of what they want to achieve in their priestly or religious lives. However, a significant percentage do not have the capacity or sufficient willingness to live that ideal. That is to say, they do not enjoy the freedom needed to do the good that they actually desire. Thus, a challenge in the field of formation is to amplify freedom, making the person more aware of their own contradictions and more open to living the good that is offered.

The lack of interior freedom can easily bring the seminarian or priest to live what Pope Francis has called «**spiritual worldliness**»: *“It takes on many forms, depending on the kinds of persons and groups into which it seeps. Since it is based on carefully cultivated appearances, it is not always linked to outward sin; from without, everything appears as it should be. But if it were to seep into the Church, it would be infinitely more disastrous than any other worldliness which is simply moral”* (EG, 93). In his address to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2014, the Pontiff set out a number of illnesses that afflict it, which can easily be applied to any Christian, seminarian or priest. They are the forms in which spiritual worldliness appears: considering oneself indispensable, activism, functionalism, lack of communion, rivalry, vainglory, double life, self-promotion, gossiping, indifference

towards others, hoarding and exhibitionism. When freedom is lacking, it is easy to become prone to these illnesses without even being aware of it, and in their turn they further limit the little freedom already possessed. In this way the words of the Gospel are fulfilled: *“To anyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; from anyone who has not, even what he has will be taken away (Matt. 12:13).*

The Gospel recalls for us the truth that Christ will set us free (cf. John 8:32). By entering into contact with Jesus, the incarnate Word, the mystery of man is brought fully into light (cf. *GS*, 22). The truth about oneself, that which is known gradually, the acceptance and the change that the candidate in formation discovers in himself will permit him to widen the horizons of his freedom. It is worthwhile for each person, in the course of his own formation, both initial and ongoing, to look out for those areas in which he is less free and is unable to be master of himself. By allowing himself to do this he will be able to draw treasures from that very place for his own good and the good of the brothers and sisters.

During the period of initial formation, a process of growth in personal freedom must be undertaken. If we want to set a course, we must begin by recognising points of strength and weakness within ourselves, thus leading the young person to overcome a perception of himself as being completely good or completely bad. It’s about tracing the map of one’s own being and being thankful for how one is, safeguarding one’s self-esteem. This can also be done with regard to our family of origin, our socio-economic situation, or any other element of one’s personal history. In this way, the person, by understanding himself better, can make progress in his journey of conversion and integration.

This pedagogical work must bring the person to speak the truth about himself, even from the beginning, it can cost him dearly. When we learn to overcome the fear of facing personal contradictions, we grow in basic faith and trust, and are able to be more authentic and more humble in our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters.

It is important to read one’s personal reality from the point of view of faith and of the experience of mercy. In this way, the areas of strength and weakness will not be an obstacle but a journey, and useful for evangelising. This results in a disciple and a missionary who is aware of his own imperfections, knows how to make the best of his own contradictions in order to provide humble service and to be a herald of the Gospel. As Saint Paul says: *“Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2Cor 12:10).*

4. Affectivity. Man is created to be in relationship with others. We cannot survive without human relations. One who is free, is able to establish interpersonal relationships that are healthy and meaningful. Lack of freedom could lead someone to turn in on himself: *“To go out of ourselves and to join others is healthy for us. To be self-enclosed is*

to taste the bitter poison of immanence, and humanity will be worse for every selfish choice we make” (EG, 87).

One element of vital importance in the area relationships that a seminarian or a priest establishes, is affectivity. Emotional maturity presupposes that one is aware of the central place of love in human existence. *“Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (JOHN PAUL II, Redemptor Hominis, 10).*

The heart of one’s formation in emotional maturity lies in developing this capacity to love. The more human a man or a woman is, the greater will their capacity to love; and, vice versa, the greater the capacity to love maturely, the greater is one’s humanity. As Thomas Merton put it: *“Our first task is to become fully human” (MERTON, T., Contemplation in a World of Action, III).*

This is a love that engages the whole person, physical, psychological and spiritual, and that finds expression in the ‘spousal’ meaning of the human body, by which one gives oneself to another and welcomes them (cf. *PDV*, 44). The seminarian and the priest, who live spousal love in celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven, are called to give themselves to the Church and humanity, by living sexuality chastely, that is living their relationships with others with gratitude, placing the other and not one’s own needs at the centre.

Emotional maturity arises from the confidence that one knows oneself to be loved always and forever, and it manifests itself in the certainty of being able to love always. We must keep in mind that *“in natural human love there is a potential for self-giving that will never be fully satisfied. Its limits, as a consequence, opens the creature to a new horizon, theocentric transcendence” (BISSI, A., Maturità umana, cammino di trascendenza, 165).* The only one who can love always and forever and whose love will not disappoint is God. For this reason, not only spouses, but also the celibate and those consecrated to the Lord, are called to welcome those human mediations through which we receive divine love, to allow themselves the experience of this affection and to share it with their brothers and sisters, especially those most marginalised by society, in this way becoming a mediation of divine love for others in their turn.

The sacrifice that a priest makes of biological fatherhood, so as to live an exclusive love in the way he experiences his own sexuality and ‘genitality’, can cause him, within the logic of human nature, to feel incomplete, inadequate and alone. If a seminarian thinks that to live celibacy is not a problem for him, then we must conclude that the problem is the seminarian himself. For this reason, human formation in Seminaries and presbyteries must help the priest to face loneliness, emptiness, frustration and abandonment when these are experienced as a result of this sacrifice. The capacity to live all this with sufficient peace and harmony, is a good indicator for measuring the level of emotional maturity the person has reached.

In this regard, it is important to cultivate close and deep friendships, with clear and flexible limits. *“Priestly friendship: this is a treasure, a treasure that we must cultivate among ourselves — friendship among you, priestly friendship. Not everyone can be close friends. But how beautiful a priestly friendship is! When priests, like two brothers, three brothers, four brothers, know one another, talk about their problems, their joys, their expectations, many things... priestly friendship. Seek this, it is important. Be friends. I think this helps a great deal in living the priestly life, the spiritual life, the apostolic life, community life and also the intellectual life: priestly friendship. If I were to meet a priest who said to me: “I have never had a friend”, I would think that this priest has not had one of the most beautiful joys of the priestly life: priestly friendship. This is my hope for you. I hope that you be friends with those whom the Lord places along your path as friends. I wish you this in life. Priestly friendship is a force for perseverance, apostolic joy, courage, and even for humour”* (Francis, *Address to Rectors and Students of the Pontifical Colleges and Residencies of Rome*, 12 May 2014).

A seminarian or a priest, who is mature in the way he relates with others has **empathy** and **concern** for them. Whoever is able to go out of himself is also able to see what the other needs, that is, he is able to put himself in someone else’s position. He is not indifferent to the needs of his neighbour, but is able to stop and do something to help him. Today, more than ever, in a context of globalisation and indifference, the Church needs good Samaritans, seminarians and priests who, by following the example of Jesus, feel compassion for the sufferings of others, approach them without being afraid of getting their hands dirty, sharing and relieving the sufferings of humanity.

Initial formation must help the seminarian to establish closeness in their relationships, since the choice of celibacy does not mean giving up intimacy, understood as the bond that allows a person to be himself, in his relationship with others, expressing himself with sincerity and transparency, just as he is. The celibate must, in fact, become an expert in intimacy, in which a relationship of one who loves and allows himself to be loved, is brought about.

There are different levels of intimacy that complement one another and are of great benefit to the celibate life and the apostolic mission. Intimacy is needed in the relationship with God. His Word must resound in the heart of the celibate and renew the loving bond with the Lord. Intimacy is a fraternal relationship, an *“intimate sacramental brotherhood”* (PO, n.8). It includes different aspects of life, particularly the human and the spiritual, lived with our brothers at different levels. Intimacy is also required in relationships with the laity and with the community, for by it, that wonderful exchange of good is brought about that is summed up in the word, love. Intimacy is also called for in our relationship with the poor and excluded, manifested in the loving and merciful bond with those who are neither loved nor respected, with those who are marginalised and in need of the tender and transparent gaze that belongs to the celibate. Thus, Seminaries must prepare seminarians for intimacy as an essential element in affective relationships.

In the relational world of the seminarian and priest today, the space occupied by the digital world is rapidly expanding. “*Social networks should be integrated into the daily life of the Seminary community in a particular way (by a use that is both vigilant, but also serene and positive). They should be experienced as places that offer new possibilities from the point of view of interpersonal relationships, of encounter with others, of engagement with one’s neighbour, of the witness of faith. These may all be viewed from the perspective of formative growth, which cannot fail to take into consideration every place in which relationships are formed and in which we experience life (RFIS, 100).*”

The human formation offered in Seminaries cannot neglect this important sphere. It is necessary to have a formative itinerary regarding internet use, taking into account the context of the new generations. Its purpose, then, is not to prohibit or control, but: a) to learn the art of connection and disconnection; b) to make progress in being honest with oneself on the moral, intellectual and emotional level; c) to know how to communicate with clarity and transparency.

5. Self-giving. This point encompasses the above-mentioned. A seminarian or priest who has sufficient self-knowledge and knows how to respect himself will be free to give himself to others in love. Man, the only earthy creature God wanted for himself, cannot find himself completely without a sincere **gift** of self (GS, 24). No one becomes a priest just for himself, but to give himself and spend himself for others. The priest who closes himself off in himself becomes sour and embittered. The priest who gives himself is a happy priest. “*Priestly joy is deeply bound up with God’s holy and faithful people, for it is an eminently missionary joy. Our anointing is meant for anointing God’s holy and faithful people: for baptizing and confirming them, healing and sanctifying them, blessing, comforting and evangelizing them*” (Francis, *Homily for the Mass of Chrism*, 17 April 2014).

II. ACCOMPANIMENT

A privileged means for priestly and religious formation, from the first years of formation right through ongoing formation, is **personal accompaniment**. We need one another. One needs to be aware of one’s need to be helped. To ask for help is a sign of maturity. No one can save himself on his own; we are saved together by Christ. We are always and at the same time subject and object of priestly formation.

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

An important element of accompaniment is **trust** (cf. RFIS, 47), whereby one puts oneself in the hands of another, entrusting to them one’s intimate reality. *Respect, empathy* and *listening* are key elements, along with many others, that help trust to grow in a

relationship. When we feel that we have been listened to, we learn to give our life to another. Usually, one is only open to accepting counsel or a suggestion when one feels that one has first been listened to. The one who accompanies must learn how to listen, and not only to what is communicated in words, but above all to what is expressed non-verbally and that constitutes a great part of communication. Gestures, looks, body language, tone of voice, etc., convey a message that makes itself felt, whether we intend to or not. It is important, moreover, that, during a meeting, the one who is accompanying a candidate must first listen to him. What happens in listening can tell us something about the one who is being accompanied and those signs could allow us to better understand and help them. People do not care what you know until they know that you care.

The scope of accompaniment is not just self-knowledge. It may be obvious, but, as Pope Francis reminds us in *EG 170*, it is necessary to go beyond this, so that personal and spiritual accompaniment, can lead us to God and doesn't end up becoming mere self-contemplation, something confined to the immanent, without the possibility of **reaching the transcendent**.

When, in accompaniment, an ideal is set out for the seminarian to reach, and this ideal is **the Person of Jesus Christ**, the purpose of this accompaniment, is self-identification with him. It is to help us to grow gradually in likeness to him, so as to think more and more in the way he thinks, feel as he feels, live as he has lived, conforming ourselves ever more to him, so as to say with Saint Paul: "*I live not now I but Christ lives in me*" (Gal 2: 20). It is only in this way that accompaniment becomes a pedagogical and formative experience.

In proposing this Model, a formator must do so **gradually**, taking into consideration the stage of the journey and the maturity reached by the one being formed in that moment. This 'graduality' of pedagogy can be made concrete in a **project of life**, so that the formator and the seminarian can know the goal they are striving for and the steps that must be undertaken to reach it. If we allow accompaniment to go in whatever direction it will, without any clear guidance, it is very likely that there will be no growth, and the entire undertaking would be a waste of time and energy.

A general outline of accompaniment in Seminary can be useful to identify with more precision the content and the dynamics of the different stages. It is easy to observe that each stage has its own characteristics that places different demands on formators. Consequently, it is not enough to have a generic approach to accompaniment, but one that is clearly defined and specific to each individual.

The process of priestly formation has **many aspects to it** and involves the formation team, at times certain external professionals and the seminarians themselves. There is always a goal to achieve that directs the energies and resources available to the seminarian in such a way that he may grow to be a missionary disciple and a future shepherd of a flock.

Stage of formation	Target	General Dynamic of the Stage
<i>Propaedeutic stage</i>	Learn to be accompanied in all aspects of the person.	The seminarian welcomes Christ in his life aided by the formative means at his disposal, thus availing of initial formation.
<i>Stage of discipleship</i>	Work systematically on one's personality to achieve greater authenticity as a man and as a disciple of the Lord.	The seminarian allows himself to be accompanied, marinating a docility of spirit, openness and transparency , freely accepting God's will in his life.
<i>Stage of configuration</i>	Elaboration of the priestly project to respond to the will of God and the needs of his people.	The first intuitions about the priestly ministry are enriched with the study of theology, pastoral activity and accompaniment . All this results in a better vocational discernment.
<i>Stage of vocational synthesis</i>	Insertion into a Christian community as one prepares for Holy Orders and priestly ministry.	The candidate for Holy Orders establishes a bridge between initial formation and ongoing formation, making a synthesis of all his formative years, offering himself for the accompaniment of the people of God .

III. DISCERNMENT

The principal goal of accompaniment is **discernment**, which must be present from the outset of the journey of priestly formation. Already, in the context of the pastoral care of vocations, when the young person presents his own vocational questions and uncertainties, he needs to be accompanied, so as to discover the source of the voice calling him to follow this path, distinguishing an authentic divine call from what is simply a self-inspired calling where the terms priesthood or celibacy are used, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid facing personal or social issues. If this were the case, it could be a matter simply of flight, from poverty for instance, from difficult family situations and tensions, from confusion about one's own sexual identity, or from delayed adolescence, from a conflicted past, or an incapacity to establish relationships that might lead to marriage, etc. The pastoral care of vocations must identify situations of this kind as early as possible so as to help the aspirant to confront them and **to make a free choice for the Lord**.

“The Bishop shall take care to choose competent and experienced priests for the work of spiritual direction, which is one of the privileged ways of accompanying each seminarian in discerning his vocation. The Spiritual Director, or Spiritual Father, must be a true master of the interior life and of prayer, one who helps the seminarian to welcome the divine calling and to develop a free and generous response” (RFIS, 136).

Formation must help candidates to **experience this vocational discernment with openness, transparency and responsibility**, so that in each step of formation they can make a mature decision to continue with the journey or to interrupt it. Whoever perseveres should do so maturely, as should the one who decides to leave. Unfortunately instances

are not lacking where the journey has been continued in the absence of the requisite maturity to make the decision to leave the Seminary, just as there is no want of those who, by contrast, lack enough maturity to persevere along the path, despite having received a divine calling.

On 20 November 2015, Pope Francis, on the occasion of the Conference to mark 50th anniversary of the Conciliar Decrees *Optatam Totius* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, stated in reference to discernment and admissions to Seminary: “*One thing that I would like to add to the text — sorry! — is vocational discernment, the admission to seminary. Seek the health of that young man, the spiritual, physical, material, physical and mental health [...] It’s curious. When I realize that a young man is too rigid, too fundamentalist, I do not have confidence; in the background there is something that he himself does not know. [...] Eyes open to the admission in seminaries. Eyes open*”.

In this regard, the new *Ratio* states: “*A serious discernment of the vocational situation of the candidate from the beginning will avoid needless procrastination when it comes to making a judgement about suitability for priestly ministry. This will avoid leading the candidate to the threshold of ordination, without having ascertained whether the indispensable conditions have been met*” (RFIS, 48).

On another occasion, Pope Francis, in addressing the Congregation for the Clergy, spoke of discernment as follows: “*We need priests, there is a lack of vocations. The Lord calls, but it is not enough. And we bishops are tempted to take the young men who present themselves without discernment. This is bad for the Church! Please, one must carefully study the evolution of a vocation! See whether it comes from the Lord, whether the man is healthy, whether the man is well-balanced, whether the man is capable of giving life, of evangelizing, whether the man is capable of forming a family and renouncing this in order to follow Jesus. Today we have so many problems, and in many dioceses, because some bishops made the mistake of taking those who at times have been expelled from other seminaries or religious houses because they need priests. Please! **We must consider the good of the People of God***” (Francis, *Address to the Plenary of the Congregation for the Clergy*, 3 October 2014).

A seminarian or a priest who receives close and proper accompaniment will be **able to discern** the will of God in his life and in the life of the Church. In this way, the Seminary becomes a school of discernment that prepares the future priest to become an expert in the art of seeking discerning the will of God. We read in the *Ratio* that, “*The call to be pastors of the People of God requires a formation that makes future priests experts in the art of pastoral discernment, that is to say, able to listen deeply to real situations and capable of good judgement in making choices and decisions. To make pastoral discernment effective, the evangelical style of listening must take central place. This frees the pastor from the temptation to abstraction, to self-promotion, to excessive self-assurance, and to that aloofness, that would make him a ‘spiritual accountant’ instead of a ‘good Samaritan’*” (RFIS, 120).

IV. PREPARED TO ACCOMPANY OTHERS

The priest who has gone through a process of human and spiritual maturation has the **ability to accompany others** in similar processes. Accompaniment is a **core part of the presbyteral ministry**, whether that be in the classical form of spiritual direction or otherwise. Caring for the spiritual growth of the community necessarily implies caring for the growth of each of its members. An obvious sign of the depth of evangelization is the frequency and dedication of priests to the confessional and accompaniment of his flock.

This is **an important area of ongoing formation**, because staying close to those who grow up in the Church helps the presbyter's own development, as countless holy priests have testified. How does such process occur?

- The patient listening to people's situations in life opens a precious space of priestly fatherhood. Here the priest **grows in** sensitivity and respect to the presence of the Lord in the lives of people.

- In patient listening, the priest **become a witness** to the joys and sufferings of the faithful. He is touching the flesh of Christ as a true pastor of the flock. There is a strong link between accompaniment and **presbyteral identity**.

- In listening, the priest is **immersed in reality**, thus avoiding idealism so as to be of fruitful service to his people with an evangelical spirit, acquiring overtime experience and wisdom. This is the face of **true pastoral training**.

Spiritual direction and other forms of accompaniment bring **depth and personalisation** to the task of evangelisation, especially through concern for the poor and most vulnerable in society. How is this deepening achieved?

- Through care for the poor and **selfless dedication** to them. The priest will come to the realization that the poor are the wealth of the Church. Remember St. Laurent. Putting the vulnerable at the heart of his pastoral care gives depth and identity to the ecclesial community by teaching them of the centrality of the preferential option for the poor.

- A priest's pastoral care for the poor and the vulnerable will have a positive effect on **those who collaborate with him in pastoral ministry**. In this way, the ecclesial community will come to realise that they are all God's children and are all part of his family.

- A Cristian community wherein accompaniment abounds promotes **personal processes of integral maturation**, indispensable to evangelisation. "*I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly*" (Jn. 10:10).

CONCLUSION

The terms *accompaniment* and *discernment* may appear at first glance to be new expressions in the Church, but in reality, these belong to the ancient Christian tradition and are at the heart of the Gospel. As we journey on the path of accompaniment and discernment, let us make the words of Pope Francis our own, words like *walking together, going out to the peripheries, a merciful Church, a field hospital, pastoral closeness, patient listening, shepherds smelling like the sheep, ministers of mercy and joy*, and so on.

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

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