

CONFERENCE OF BISHOPS OF THE PHILIPPINES

The key aspects of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* and their application

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(January 27, 2018)

Origin of the RFIS

The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* finds its origin in the first article of the conciliar decree *Optatam Totius*. It establishes **general norms** that will subsequently be applied to different cultural contexts, according to the reality of each country. The focus is on the dialogue between the universal view of the Holy See and the specific perspective of the Conference of Bishops. The *raison d'être* for this dialogue lies in the conciliar determination that envisages priestly formation **with a pastoral objective**.

It is not intended to standardize training, but to set forth those fundamental principles, the implementation of which would be determined by respective Episcopal Conferences.

Five years after the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, **the first version** of the *RFIS* was published¹. In the context of those times, that initial document laid greater emphasis upon the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of formation, to the detriment of the human and pastoral perspective.

During a long period of thirty years, many documents tried to **complete and balance** the doctrine about priestly formation, taking various specific arguments. I must add that this movement occurred at the general level, through the Dicasteries of the Roman Curia² and at the local level of the Episcopal Conferences. Observing the chronological sequence of these documents, we observe 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* (January 6th, 1970).

² Sagrada

The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1990) marks a turning point in this history, because the Synod of Bishops vivaciously considered the theme of priestly formation, now 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 another 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 Vocation (2005); Psychology and Formation (2008); Studies of Philosophy (2011); Priestly Vocations (2012); and the Directory for Priesthood (2013).

The beginning of the pontificate of **Pope Francis** marked another important milestone, since the Holy Father, from the outset, was interested in developing the selection and formation of priestly vocations, by instituting a Secretary for Seminaries with the view to undertaking the revision of the RFIS, which was assiduously undertaken by the Congregation for the Clergy.

This beautiful historical panorama highlights **the necessity for a carefully review** of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*, in order to synthesize the whole reflection on priestly formation, **combining the canonical exigencies with a pedagogic proposal**.

Guiding Principles of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*

We can find some key elements in the *Ratio Fundamentalis* that underlines the link between the **theological contents** of priesthood and their **pedagogical praxis in formation**.

The holistic approach of **a single educational process**. At any given time there is but one person who has been called to receive Sacred Ordination and to remain forever faithful to that calling. This very person goes through three major stages: a **vocational process, initial formation and ongoing formation**. We are talking about a single process, the contents of which must be in harmony together. What is planted from the beginning later develops and bears fruits. All moments of formation culminate in a decision that will determine life's course.

An **integral** formation. The development of a person demands by itself the right balance between its various components. We are not interested in a partial development, because **the call of God implies everything** that the person is and promotes always the good and happiness of this person. Admission to seminary however, must be denied to certain anomalous kinds, such as 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 great pastoral interest but possess little motivation (pastoralism); and those with a strong body but who have a small mind and

spirit (superficiality). The integral formation invites everybody, seminarians and formators, to **leave their comfort zones in order to achieve true growth**.

A **gradual** formation. The *Ratio*'s proposal of the **stages of formation** is very interesting. The first stage is the pre-requisite of a **propaedeutic phase**, whose objective is to achieve a secure start to integral formation by means of an adequate vocational discernment process. We are all too aware of the imperative to have secure foundations upon which to build. In addition, the document gives a new name to the various stages of formation, which serves to place the contents of study within the context of the formation process. Indeed, we invite the seminarians to **follow Jesus as his disciples**, to **configure themselves to him** and to **make a good synthesis** of their formative process 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, something which should not be viewed simply as an automatic transition along the course of studies.

The **communitarian environment**. One of the main convictions of the *Ratio* is the great importance of an educative community. This main idea obeys the very **theology of priesthood**, a vocation born of a Christian community, grown into the community of the Seminary and destined to guide a community. Priesthood is not an isolated way of life, or a choice for an individual ascetic, but a ministry made by men who enjoyed the privilege of being part of the holy people of God. Therefore, the process of formation must be done in a deep sense of dialogue and confidence between seminarians and formators.

A **missionary** target. The whole formation's focus is **pastoral and missionary**. This essential characteristic of priestly formation is part of the definition of the sacred ministry. The charge of Jesus consists **in leaving** in search of the lost sheep, in summoning a people from the very ends of the earth. It is not a place for certain comforts or for the search of privileges, but for a humble missionary service and the surrender of life.

The formation of **the inner man**. The formation has its nucleus in the interior. Behavior and external forms are always a spontaneous manifestation of the heart. If this does not happen, exteriority becomes mere compliance, a set of hollow shapes. The formation of the inner man requires **a human process of opening and accompaniment**, when the seminarian walks with a guide, in truth and confidence. However, this formation requires also **a spiritual process of *docibilitas*** to the action of the Holy Spirit, who forms the candidate into the very image of Christ. The pedagogic option of interiority excludes a form of exteriority that is merely legalistic and a formal compliance of the rules.

The way of **discipleship**. Every seminarian, as any other Christian, walks continuously in the footsteps of the Lord. The essence of discipleship is a personal relationship with Jesus, a friendship in the imitation of his examples. Without this

necessary and intimate reference, priestly vocation may lose its meaning. The following of Christ must be **verified, revised and deepened**, to the extent of constituting a path that can be walked throughout the course of life. The disciple acquires a consistent sense of communion and of mission, which are intrinsic to Christian life. These founding principles should never be taken for granted since they are essential to initial and ongoing formation.

The paths of **configuration** with Christ. Upon the foundation of discipleship, the Holy Spirit can create a priestly heart through a mystical identification process called “configuration”. The interpretation of priesthood as such necessarily involves a **personal and spiritual imitation of the Lord** in four principal aspects: the servant, the pastor, the head and the husband. Configuration represents a very deep spirituality that demands a serious commitment. In this way we may notice how important is that each seminarian have a sincere desire for priestly sanctification.

Accompaniment and discernment. The quality of formation depends on the frequency and depth of the accompaniment. Consequently, the *Ratio* **requires a personal rapport** between each seminarian and his formators, which is not limited to the spiritual director. It is necessary therefore, for the seminarian to be transparent. The personal encounters with the formators must be **systematic, deep and well programmed**, consequently aiding the discernment process of priestly vocations.

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

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 or itinerary of formation), including the Diocesan Seminaries linked to ecclesial movements.

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

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

- The **pastoral care of priestly vocations**
- And the **ongoing formation** of clergy.

In addition, the formative prospective of the *Ratio Fundamentalis* should inspire other global 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 or itinerary of formation), their pastoral work on vocations and their ongoing formation.

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

Why is the *Ratio Nationalis* necessary?

The publication of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* has to be considered **more a starting point than a point of arrival**. After one year of its publication, during which it has had an unprecedented diffusion, it is time to start the elaboration of the national *Ratio*'.

This **integrated, systematic and improved training proposal**, which, as we have seen, emphasizes the uniqueness, integrality, graduality and missionary sense of formation along with the importance of the inner man, **needs to find expression now in the various national realities**.

This way of working began with the Second Vatican Council. The first article of the decree *Optatum Totius*, establishes the 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 place, establishes the channels for the revision and approval of these particular norms and makes clear the target, which is always the **pastoral orientation of all priestly formation**. This pastoral orientation, characteristic of the doctrine of Vatican II, is applied by the Code of Canon Law, in c. 242. For this reason, each Episcopal Conference makes their own *Ratio Nationalis*, that 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 or 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 being respected** and collegiality enhanced. The existence of the *Ratio Nationalis* and its effective application is **an important sign of the communion among the Bishops** in any single Episcopal Conference on a subject as delicate as priestly formation and for this reason, it must be elaborated with care in respectful dialogue.

Dialogue and agreements in the Episcopal Conference

We have said that the *Ratio Nationalis* is a sign of communion among the Bishops of a Nation. It is important that the elaboration of such a text is not a hurried endeavour. It is not a matter of "fulfilling" a requirement or of "looking good" before the Holy See, but of effectively moving toward the unity of priestly formation in a given country. This higher purpose demands **a rhythm of work of its own and a good dose of historical patience and Christian hope**.

The first point of dialogue is in the consideration of the general circumstances of the nation, of the culture and the Christian communities there. The Church at the national level is going through moments that demand **a specific qualification of priestly formation**. The fundamental question is: What priests do we need to evangelize in this historical moment? It is helpful to describe a general priestly profile.

A second point of dialogue consists in taking into account **all the pastoral realities of the nation**, that is, all the dioceses, which, on the one hand, condition to a large extent the possibility of establishing or sustaining a Seminary and, on the other hand, demand a specific preparation of their priests. The *Ratio Fundamentalis* insists that the **large and small Seminaries** be taken into account (n.8), so that in the elaboration of the document, the standards are nuanced so as to be applicable to all. The **dioceses that do not have a Seminary** deserve special consideration, so that the best way to guarantee quality training for their candidates is also foreseen.

The third point is the **attention to positive formative experiences**, which have been tried, tested and found worthy, especially those that are repeated in several dioceses, so that some of these experiences are then assumed and proposed as valid for the whole country.

The way in which ecclesiastical studies are carried out must be taken into account. If they are made in the Seminaries themselves or if the seminarians go to ecclesiastical faculties. It is necessary to foresee the **adequate integration of the study plans with the training objectives** and the duration of the stages, guaranteeing a

certain uniformity at the national level. In the second case, when a part of the intellectual formation is entrusted to a faculty, the appropriate duration of the formative stages must be guaranteed.

Another point of dialogue in the Conference of Bishops is the **distribution of Seminaries** in the country and the establishment of inter-diocesan seminaries (Cf. CIC, c. 237 § 2), so that the training 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 reality of the Seminaries, it is useful that the Episcopal Conference **listen directly to the formators**, particularly where there is a Seminary Organisation.

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* establishes some points of agreement among the Bishops that are always reflected in the *Ratio Nationalis* (n.7):

- The **style** of the Vocation Ministry and the **criteria for the selection** of priestly vocations.
- Definition, objectives and duration of the **training stages**.
- General means to attend the **integral formation**, detailing each one of the formative dimensions.
- The **curriculum of the studies** valid for all Seminars in the country.

In addition to these points, there are many issues related to the formation of priests, therefor it is important that the Episcopal Conference include priestly formation as an **ordinary chapter of its agenda**.

Iter for the elaboration of the Ratio Nationalis

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* establishes a general procedure that each Conference of Bishops must implement in accordance with the characteristics and specific demands of its own socio-educational environment. Taking the Ratio (n.8) for support, I would like to explain a little further the steps to be taken:

- 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.
- The second step is **the writing of a basic text**. It is only a first draft, which corresponds to 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. In this way, you can envisage a process of one or two years, so as to arrive at producing an enriched text wherein the different realities of the nation are reflected.

- 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 Commission, and from the Commission to the Seminaries Commission. The important thing is to get a well-purified text, which presumably is accepted by all.
- Finally the text is **presented to the Congregation for the Clergy**, as already indicated.

It should be noted that the Episcopal Conferences are being asked to enter into the same dynamic of closeness, accompaniment and collegiality that the Congregation for the Clergy wishes to put into practice.

At this point it seems opportune to make **a brief digression commenting on canon 237 § 1**. It reminds us that, in each diocese, "whenever possible and convenient", there must be a major Seminary. Otherwise, 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* (CD, 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 particular Church. Pope Francis, speaking to new ordained Bishops, said: *In peaceful dialogue, he is not afraid to share, and even sometimes modify, his discernment with others: with confreres in the episcopate, to whom he is sacramentally joined, and then discernment becomes collegial* (Pope Francis, Address to the new Bishops, September 14, 2017).

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 convenient among the Rectors and in general among the formators of a given country. The elaboration of the *Ratio Nationalis* represents a great opportunity to develop these positive relations of prompt collaboration.

Seminary Organisations are very useful because they are an expression of the desire of the formators to meet and help each other. On these organisations, the older formators give some preparation to the new ones as they continually elaborate and share criteria of discernment at various levels as well as from different perspectives.

Evidently, there is a **solid link** between the Episcopal Commission for Seminaries and the Seminaries commissions themselves, within that country. Both structures must collaborate fluidly in the elaboration of the *Ratio Nationalis* and in many other matters that concern the Seminary.

I would like to point out some possibilities of this positive and proactive climate, considering different areas of action.

Among the Rectors. It is convenient to promote, first, **mutual knowledge**. Beyond the contents, attending meetings is important, because they establish personal encounters whereby bonds are created between various institutions. For this, the preparation of an **updated directory** of the Seminaries is useful, so that the Rector may know who he may have to contact at any given time. **The climate of closeness and communion** is manifested in the spontaneity with which everyone can write an email or make a phone call. In this way many problems can be solved, particularly the delicate case of the admission of seminarians who have gone through other Seminaries. It also supports **the ongoing formation of the Rectors**. It is a great good to define in an objective and clear way the profile of the Rector and the style of his performance. It is not intended to standardize, but to offer adequate training so that the Rectors fully assume their pastoral responsibility, learn to accompany the priests of their formative teams and achieve the appropriate level of dialogue with the Bishop, the diocesan bodies and the entire presbytery. This relationship may open a new horizon and foster a climate, wherein it is humbly recognised, that we are always learning in this difficult ecclesial service.

Among the formators. There are many possibilities for productive relationships and ongoing formation for formators. A first need that arises is the **preparation of new formators**, who are assigned for the first time to the Seminary and need to fully assume the task already received, to learn basic principles of formation, accompaniment and discernment of vocations and to know exactly the organisation and functioning of a Seminary. We can 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 interesting group are **those formators who have completed their service** in the Seminary. It is desirable that they have every opportunity to share their invaluable experience with the presbyteral fraternity through their service to the permanent formation of the clergy.

The formators of the propaedeutic stage. It is a very special stage, only one year long. It is important that this stage **be established uniformly** in the country. The collaboration and communion between the formators of the propaedeutic stage **with the Seminary formation team has great merit.** This group has an important contribution to make in the development of the *Ratio Nationalis*, especially now that the propaedeutic stage has become mandatory.

Spiritual directors. The formation of spiritual directors includes as many elements as the spiritual direction itself. It is a group of priests with very special characteristics, used to perform a hidden and fundamental work. Some means of spiritual life proposed by the norms of formation can be studied: the initiation into silence and prayer, the direction of retreats and spiritual exercises, the organisation of the liturgical times in the Seminary, spiritual direction, the teaching of personal and vocational discernment, etc. The *Ratio* calls for close spiritual attention to the seminarians and requires that spiritual directors be attentive to the different formative stages.

The administrators. The link established between the administrators of the Seminaries is also interesting because it represents an aid for economic management that has both common and diverse characteristics. Of particular interest is formation on the pastoral and formative sense of the economic administration in the Seminary, which undoubtedly prepares seminarians for the parochial administration that they will then have to assume. If the administrator is a priest, it is important that he present himself as such, without blurring his identity.

Psychologists and other auxiliaries. 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 groups of formators and the range of services that a Seminary Organisation could develop that show that the elaboration 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 be loaded with the density of a deep dialogue and open possibilities for the future, always in the line of closeness and communion.

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