

Interview with the Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy
His Eminence, Beniamino Cardinal Stella

“The Gift of Priestly Vocation”

Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis

Osservatore Romano, 7 December, 2016

1. On the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the Congregation for the Clergy promulgated the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, an instrument for the formation of priests. What is the rationale for a new Document for future priests and what were the guiding principles for the preparation of the text?

The last *Ratio Fundamentalis* dates back to 1970, even though it was updated in 1985. In the meantime, as we know, the historical, socio-cultural and ecclesiastical contexts have changed, above all due to the effects of the rapid evolution to which the world is subjected nowadays. Within these new contexts, the Priest is called to incarnate the mission of Christ and of his Church. This rapid evolution has not been done without significant changes relative to other aspects: the image or vision of the priest, the spiritual needs of the People of God, the challenges of the new evangelization, the language of communication, and many more. It seemed that the formation of Priests needed to be revamped, renewed, and restored to the centre. We have been encouraged and illuminated by the Teaching of Pope Francis: by the spirituality and prophecy with which his words are inscribed, the Holy Father has turned often to Priests, reminding them that the priest is not a functionary, but a Pastor anointed for the people of God, who has the compassionate and merciful heart of Christ for the weary and exhausted throng. The words and admonitions of the Holy Father, some of which have regarded temptations tied to money, to the authoritarian exercise of power, to rigid legalism, and to vainglory, show us how the nurturing of Priests and of their formation has been a fundamental aspect of the ecclesial action of this Pontificate, and should also become the focus, more each day, of every Bishop and of every Local Church.

2. What are the innovations of this newly published *Ratio Fundamentalis*?

I would like to start by saying that in the life of the Church innovations are never separate from Tradition, but, on the contrary, integrate it and enhance it. When we listen to the Holy Spirit, therefore, we learn to look ahead, taking into account, of course, the existing patrimony. Thus, the *Ratio Fundamentalis* has taken up the content, methods and orientation produced up to this day in the field of formation, updating it and introducing new elements. In the Document the directions regarding **integral formation**, offered by *Pastores dabo vobis*, from 1992, are recalled, that is to say, the ability to unite, in a balanced way, the human, as well as the spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions, through a **gradual instructional personalised course**. Regarding the first – the human dimension – there is particular stress: one cannot be a priest without balance of mind and heart and without affective maturity, and every unresolved lacuna or problem in this area risks becoming gravely harmful, both for the person as well as for the People of God. Considering the positive outcomes of a **propedeutic period** upon entrance to the Seminary, experienced already in many local situations, the text emphasises the necessity of that period, enabling a careful validation and selection of candidates. Regarding the aspect of **vocational discernment**, furthermore, the text is very insistent: Bishops and formators have a great responsibility and are called to exercise a shrewd vigilance regarding the suitability of each candidate, without haste or superficiality. In this spirit, the *Ratio* seeks to overcome a conveyor belt mentality which developed in the past. The

challenge is to propose **an integral formational course**, which helps the person mature in every aspect, and which favours a final evaluation carried out with a framework encompassing the entirety of the course. In this way, besides the already well known classifications, which have subdivided that course into “phase of Philosophical studies,” “phase of Theological studies,” “pastoral phase,” we have added the “stage of discipleship,” “configuration stage,” and “pastoral stage,” to each of which corresponds an itinerary and a formative content, orientated toward an assimilation with the image of the Good Shepherd. In brief: to be a good priest, in addition to having passed all the exams, **a demonstrated human, spiritual and pastoral maturation** is necessary. I think it is superfluous to add that other minor innovations could be gathered from the text, from the standpoint of approaches to the question, vocabulary used, the formative methodology proposed, and the impulse given by the current Pontifical Magisterium.

3. In addition to these innovations, what would be the most important keywords to achieve an underlying vision of the *Ratio*?

I would choose at least three. The first is “humanity.” I cannot sufficiently insist upon the need that seminarians be accompanied through a growth process which will, in the end, help them become persons who are humanly balanced, serene and stable. Only in this way will it be possible to have Priests with friendly traits, who are authentic, loyal, interiorly free, affectively stable, capable of weaving together peaceful interpersonal relationships and living the evangelical counsels without rigidity, hypocrisy or loopholes. The *Ratio* insists upon the importance of this **human accompaniment**, which helps in the development of maturity in the person, and guarantees within the candidates a good psycho-affective equilibrium. The second word is “**spirituality**,” which should never be taken for granted. The conscience of priestly identity is necessarily founded upon this aspect: the priest is not a man of action, a leader, religious organiser, or a functionary of the sacred. Instead he is a disciple passionately in love with the Lord, whose life and whose ministry are founded on this intimate relationship with God and upon his configuration to Christ the Good Shepherd. Only in this way – cultivating his spiritual life with discipline and expressly dedicated time – can old sacral and bureaucratic views of ministry be surpassed, so that we may have Priests passionately motivated by the Gospel, capable of “feeling with the Church” and being, like Jesus, compassionate and merciful “Samaritans.”

I would say that the third word is “**discernment**.” He who follows the Gospel way and who immerses himself in life in the Spirit, overcomes both an ideological as well as a rigorist approach, discovering that the processes and situations of life cannot be classified through inflexible schemata or abstract norms, but instead need listening, dialogue, and interpretations of the heart’s movements. The privileged place, because it is mature, in the art of discernment is certainly **personal accompaniment, above all through spiritual direction**. This is a fundamental setting, which requires sincere openness on the part of the candidates, and competence and availability on the part of the formators, to offer their time and beneficial tools. Discernment is a gift which Pastors must exercise on themselves, and even more so, within the pastoral setting, in order to accompany and understand deeply the most complicated existential situations, through which often the persons entrusted to us are scarred, burdened, and wounded. While speaking to the most recent Assembly of the Society of Jesus, Pope Francis expressed his worries regarding this subject: “*I am noticing*,” he said “*the lack of discernment in the formation of priests. We are risking, in fact, becoming accustomed to ‘black and white’ and to that which is legal. We are quite closed, by and large, to discernment. One thing is clear, today in a certain quantity of Seminaries, a rigidity has been re-established which is not related to situational discernment.*” The principal challenge upon which the *Ratio* is intended to concentrate was suggested to us, yet again, by Pope Francis: to form priests who are “*visionaries in discernment*” (*Misericordia et Misera*, n.10).

4. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, what would you like to say to Priests today?

I would like to say, as a point of departure, that the great responsibilities entrusted to me in the management of the Dicastery impel me every day to pray for Priests. So many of them, in one way or another, stop by the Dicastery. We try to welcome them, to listen to them, to enter into their situations in life and of ministry which are often delicate, difficult, or ponderous. At the same time, we know that many Priests offer their lives to the announcement of the Gospel with generosity and dedication. To each one of them I would like to say above all: do not become discouraged! The Lord never offers less than his promises, and if you have called upon him, he will make his light shine upon you, whether you live in darkness, aridity, fatigue or a moment of pastoral failure. I would like to recommend to priests that they not let the healthy disquiet, which maintains their progress on the right path, be extinguished! Do not neglect prayer, take great care with your spiritual life, remain disposed daily to form yourselves and let yourselves be sustained and taught by pastoral life and by the People of God. We must remain vigilant, as this time of Advent suggests, not to let habit or mediocrity deaden the gift which the Lord has given to us. We did not by chance choose, for publication, this Feast of the Immaculate Conception, because like Mary, we are called to wait for the Lord, to welcome him, and “give birth to him” for the entire world, in the certainty that “...*they that hope in the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*” (Is 40:31).