

PRIESTLY FORMATION IN ASIA TODAY

by M. Amaladoss, S.J.

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It is rather difficult to comment on the working document for the Eighth Ordinary Synod (October 1990), "The Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day". The document is inclusive in that it integrates the observations that came in from different parts of the world; it says a little of everything. So it is not an easy text with which to dialogue. In any case by the time these reflections are printed the Synod will have concluded its deliberations. I have chosen, therefore, to reflect rather on the images and perspectives that seem to be taken for granted in the document. Such a reflection may give us a point of view from which to discern and evaluate proposals for priestly formation that may arise from any source. I am taking the working document as the starting point for my reflection. While appreciating the many beautiful things it is saying, I am trying to broaden the reflection. Hopefully, the Synod itself, in the meantime, will have addressed some of these concerns.



The Reality Of Asia

The Asian Bishops gathering in Taiwan in 1974 saw poverty, and great religions and cultures as characterizing the situation in Asia. I do not think that the situation has radically changed. The majority of the people remain poor. The great religions seem to be growing strong and renewing themselves. The cultures have withstood the impact of centuries of colonialism. They are, however, facing the challenges of modernity: the impact of science and technology, of industrialization and urbanization, of consumerism and the mass media. However, Asia has not been secularized in the same way that Europe has been.

The Church, facing this situation, is a small minority in Asia, except in the Philippines. In many senses it is still a largely "foreign" Church. Feeling self-defensive, it does not seem ready to face the challenges of Asia. It has always made serious efforts to promote development. But involvement in inculturation and inter-religious dialogue

is still in its early stages and the concern of small elite groups. It seems hardly in a position to face prophetically the challenges of modernity. In many places the Church may even be seen as the representative, thanks to its schools and other institutions, not only of modernity, but also of western culture. In such a situation the Church is facing the tremendous challenge, both of becoming an authentic local Church and of engaging in its mission of evangelization in all its breadth and depth. In the absence of groups of well prepared lay people, the leadership falls largely on the priests and places on them responsibilities much heavier than elsewhere.

This raises the first question: can we think of a priest apart from his community? Can we make plans for the formation of a priest that do not involve in some way the training of the whole community that is supposed to work with him?

The Images Of The Priest

One can form an image of a priest in two ways: from above or from below. One can think of Christ the High Priest and of all other priests as his representatives, acting in his name and with his power - in persona Christi. Like Christ, all of them have sacerdotal, prophetic and pastoral functions. This is the traditional way. One can look at the priest from another point of view. Christ indeed is the High Priest. However, the whole community of the disciples of Christ, baptized in his name, share his priesthood - they are a priestly people with a mission to the world. To serve this community in mission there are various ministries with various special charisms. They are special gifts of the Spirit for the service of, and on behalf of, the community, which are more than sharing in the common priesthood. Some of these may be officially recognized by the Church. Among these many charisms there is one of unifying leadership. This involves a special gift of the Spirit and a special recognition by the community in the person of the Bishop through ordination. He is the symbol of the headship of Christ. This view sees the priest, his identity and mission, in the context of the community.

The unifying leadership of the priest may be exercised in varying circumstances and forms. The Working Document seems to have a uniform role-model of a pastor in a parish. The religious priests are recognized, of course, but they have to work in collaboration with the parish pastors and the Bishop. But as a matter of fact, in the Church we have a great variety of priestly roles. Besides parish pastors, we have contemplative religious devoted to prayer and spiritual guidance. There are apostolic religious engaged in a wide variety of works: teachers, scientists, communicators, writers, theologians, even workers. Even if some diocesan priests may be doing some of these tasks, there are some religious congregations that undertake one or other of these services as their special charism/vocation. Pastoral service, then, need not be seen as a minimum common denominator, followed by various special ministries. Even among the diocesan priests one occasionally finds team ministries where one deals with

the youth, another with the workers, a third with the professionals, etc. This diversity may be necessary and inevitable in large urban centres. If this pluralism of roles is accepted, then one could think of a variety of formation programmes. By accumulating all roles in one composite image, we may be condemned to making unsuccessful efforts towards forming a super-person/priest.

If such a variety were accepted, one could think of setting apart persons to preside over the Sunday Eucharist. These persons would not necessarily have to undergo the elaborate training normally expected of a priest. In some ritual traditions these are married, as the Working Document (No. 35) points out.

Active and Contemplative

Asia is rich in spiritual traditions. All of these hold up the ideal of an integrated, self-realized, person as the guru or spiritual guide. Looking for Asian models for priestly spirituality one may be tempted to look for them in monks and sannyasis. We have the counterparts of the sannyasis in the contemplative religious of the Christian tradition. These have a necessary role in the life of the Christian community. But not all priests are called to a contemplative life. Most of them have to be involved in the world, with the Christian community, to witness and to transform the world from within. So one of the challenges to the Asian Churches would be to develop an image of a priest who is an integrated person, but who is not a monk. The Working Document does not offer much help in this area. As a matter of fact, while with regard to work all priests are assimilated to parish pastors, with regard to spirituality all priests seem to be assimilated to monks - not merely in the matter of following the evangelical counsels, but also in the matter of forms of prayer and style of life. One can wonder whether such a spirituality is suited to every type of priest that we have envisaged above. I think that there is a real need to develop various forms of apostolic spirituality, and in particular for parish pastors. The Working Document does refer to this need (No. 24).

Methods of Formation

Formation is a process of experience, reflection, and change of attitudes and perspectives leading to new forms of behaviour. The Working Document focuses on various practices, without outlining a method. Here again the Asian Churches will have to reflect further. Asia has age old methods of prayer and sadhana directed to interiorization and concentration, to the integration of the body, spirit and the world, using music and the arts and the beauties of nature. We will have to devise appropriate experiences that both facilitate habit formation, and change attitudes so that people can be trusted to choose methods and practices they find helpful to a deeper experience of God.

Intellectual Formation

With regard to intellectual formation one could raise a number of questions. Once again the tendency in Asia would be - and should be, I think - depth rather than extension, method rather than merely content, integrated and personal rather than academic training. In the West, over the past four centuries, philosophy and theology have become academic and abstract pursuits that have a certain currency among the intellectual elite, without much impact on the people. Without sacrificing intellectual excellence, we have to promote experience-based and problem-centred research and reflection that will make theology relevant to life. This would not be possible without a thorough-going inculturation so that students could simply understand these concepts rather than the present practice of committing everything to memory. Emphasis on memory is of little value in grasping these new concepts.

One would think, therefore, that initiation to a method would be more important than memorization of content so that students learn to theologize rather than repeat formulae. This would make on-going formation both essential and interesting. What would be needed once students have acquired a method of study are materials to work on, opportunities to meet in groups and reflect together and competent guides to facilitate discussion. Similarly, with reference both to inculturation and to evangelization it is necessary to train people to a hermeneutical approach enabling them to "read" tradition and interpret it to the rapidly changing and pluralistic world of today. This is better than supplying ready-made answers to questions that some may have asked sometime in the past but no longer exist today. Inculturation in a pluralistic and changing world is an on-going process. It is not a question of applying or adapting a ready-made body of knowledge to particular cultural and problematic situations.

Places of Training

One wonders whether such a training in method starting from experience and leading to an integral formation of the person can happen in seminary or university settings as we know them. In Asia training is from a master to a disciple in the context of a personal relationship and of guidance. In such a setting learning and life, spirituality and apostolate are integrated into one organic process of growth. Such a formation can happen effectively only in smaller groups. We may have to experiment with pilot projects along these lines in Asia. After an initial period of such personal formation, we could always think of advanced training in appropriate higher academic institutions.

It is from this point of view of experience-based formation that we have to explore possibilities of the community being involved in some real and meaningful way in the formation of their priests. Pastoral involvement will not then be an occasion to practice what one has learnt, but will provide the experiential context from which arises a cycle of action-reflection-action.

Diversity

I think that it is time that we diversify our pastoral approaches to the different groups in the Church. Besides the groups like children, workers, youth, married people, etc. with which we are familiar, I refer to groups like the elite, the fervent and the popular. I think that today the priest is not meeting the needs of the elite, because he is talking a language that is not contemporary. Popular piety survives and flourishes, but it does so on the margins of the official pastoral efforts which seem to cater rather to the middle class - culturally speaking. The fervent go rather to the special movements for their nourishment. I think that this is happening in Europe. I think that we should be careful not to import such pastoral methods into Asia, but we should think of our own situation and needs, and devise appropriate methods.

Dialogue

My final comment has to do with the fact that Asian Christian communities are on mission living among people of other Faiths and ideologies. It would not be enough to learn about other religions and ideologies in the abstract. The experience that forms the basis of formation should include an on-going dialogue of life, clarified and strengthened by reading, reflection and discussion, preferably in a dialogical setting.

Formation is a process of experience, reflection, change of perspectives leading to new forms of behavior.

