

Priestly Formation in the Asian Context

(The following is the final statement of the Second Seminar for Rectors and Spiritual Directors sponsored by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences, in Tayabas, Quezon Province, Philippines. The seminar took place from October 11-25, 1992. The report was published in early 1993.)

The startling event of the 1990's has been the collapse of the USSR. China is gradually yielding to a guarded form of free economy. The nations of Asia and the Asian Church are making a careful, prayerful study of these enigmatic signs of the times.

Asia has been the cradle of the world's major religions. Except in the case of Christianity, Asia also continues to embody a major section of believers of all these religions. For example Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Judaism witness the deep religious sensitivity of our people. Of these, Islam and Hinduism are going through a period of resurgence. What is further true of Islam are the inroads it continues to make beyond Asia in Africa and some European countries. On the other hand, the impact of Christianity in Asia, besides being still considered a "potted plant" of the West, also lacks missionary vibrancy. In fact, in some countries, some of its sheep are being lost to New Age religions that confront them. South Korea, however, is an outstanding example of a vibrant Church which is growing rapidly.

Pastores Dabo Vobis has aptly pointed out: "Despite many contradictions, society is increasingly witnessing a powerful thirst for justice and peace, a more lively sense that humanity must care for creation and respect nature, a more open search for truth, a greater effort to safeguard human dignity..." (no.6). This is surely true of Asia. We see, however, that Asia is experiencing the havoc brought about by ethnically, politically, economically or religiously based turmoil, genocide, and even war that has rendered millions shelterless and refugees. Besides, several Asian countries have fallen victim to the dictates of international loan-giving agencies and transnational corporations. Many a country is being turned into a paradise for tourists, with the accompany-

ing degradation by mass media, the installing of cable T.V. and lewd entertainment. All these have spawned a culture of opportunism, materialism, consumerism, and hedonism, factors detrimental to the nurturing of priestly vocations because they have an adverse effect on family life.

The Asian conscience has been roused by rampant poverty and polarization between rich and poor to respond through the network of its non-government organizations including human rights organizations. The stage is set for the Church to take a more active role in sensitizing people to violations of social justice and opportunities to promote human dignity.

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The majority of people in the Asian Church are marginalized. These poor masses who live outside the bustling metropolises are gradually maturing and discovering, through inter-faith dialogue of life, what it means to be the light of the world, yeast in the dough, and salt of the earth. No wonder, therefore, that increasing numbers of priestly and religious vocations are from this group. Almost all the Asian countries are experiencing an increase in vocations. In several countries they have more than doubled. Asian seminaries are, on the other hand, insufficiently equipped to cope with the quantity and changing quality of candidates.

All Asian formators accept the need for improved methods, contents and personnel in the area of priestly formation. The Bishops Synod on the *Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day*, the ensuing document *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, other ecclesiastical documents and the series of seminars held by the FABC-OESC, are undoubtedly a positive contribution and an impetus for a review of priestly formation. Hopefully, they will give the much-needed thrust for a more contextualized formation for priests and an ongoing formation for carrying out the Church's pastoral, prophetic, and missionary tasks in the evangelization of the peoples of Asia (*P.D.V.*, no. 2).

Convictions and Recommendations

Selection of New Candidates

Convictions

1. Candidates who apply to enter the seminary come from an increasingly poorer background:

--a society which fosters the anti-evangelical values of individualism, materialism and permissiveness and in which there are increasingly attractive professions available for brighter students;

--an educational system which in many places has disintegrated;

--an economically poor background;

--an inadequate religious background found among many new converts.

Recommendations

1. That there be a careful selection of applicants, including psychological evaluation, before they enter the major seminary.

2. That formators be prepared effectively to address the needs of the candidates who are accepted.

Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest

Conviction

1. The spirituality of the diocesan priest is biblical and ministerial. It centers on his belonging to a particular local church or diocese on behalf of which and within which he exercises his ministry of the Word, of the sacraments and of leadership in communion with and under the direction of the bishop and in collaboration with his fellow priests in the presbyterium, with the religious and the laity. Hence, he is called to be a man of intimate union with God and with Christ, and a man of communion, respectful of and close to his people, his fellow priests and his bishop.

Recommendations

1. That the seminarians be helped to become well acquainted with their diocese and to develop a clear sense of belonging to it and of having responsibility for it; hence, they should gradually be more and more involved in its life and especially in its concern for the poor.

2. That the bishops and the priests of the diocese, by the frequency and quality of their contacts with the seminarians, foster in them this sense of belonging. It is in this context that the seminarian should be helped to develop into a man of prayer and be trained in the ministry of the Word, of the sacraments and of leadership - ministries which are the shape that his love for God and neighbor must take.

3. That the seminarians have contact with role models whose lives are characterized by this type of priestly spirituality.

4. That the seminarians be formed to a prayer life nourished by a contemplative reading of the Word of God, and events in the life of the local and the universal Church, the life of the people (Christian and those of other religions) of their diocese. This should be done in the liturgy as well as in personal prayer and reflection.

Formation in Positive Human Values

Convictions

1. Human formation, or formation in positive human values, is a prerequisite, as well as a continuing and essential dimension of priestly vocation.

2. Human formation requires that formators and seminarians promote a relationship marked by trust, compassion and sensitivity based on openness and truth.

3. Seminary formators, in order to be effective, are called to be examples of maturity.

4. The selection of seminary formators must be based on their human maturity, virtues and competence.

5. The formation of the value system of seminarians is greatly influenced before formal seminary training, primarily in the family.

Recommendations

1. That the admission and formation of candidates adequately take into account the first agents of their formation (the family, school, community, etc.) and that formation not isolate them from these (although seminarians are indeed called out of their families and they are not intended to serve the interests of their families as ordained ministers);

2. That the selection, preparation and ongoing formation of seminary formators be given careful study and attention in the diocesan pastoral program of the diocese concerned;

3. That the community of seminarians be structured in small groups along the lines of Basic Ecclesial Communities;

4. That hypocrisy and distrust be effectively reduced and an atmosphere of openness, sincerity and transparency be promoted by person-oriented formation as opposed to institution-oriented formation;

5. That seminary formators and seminarians promote and maintain a wholesome (open, sincere and transparent) relationship;

6. That Sisters and lay people be invited to participate more actively and creatively in seminary formation.

Personal Spiritual Direction

Convictions

1. Personal spiritual direction should be a top priority in seminary formation.

2. The Holy Spirit is the principal director of a seminarian's life, and a personal spiritual director is only his instrument. The director must, therefore, be a man of faith sensitive to the action of the Spirit.

3. Spiritual direction is a personal relationship between a seminarian and the priest to whom he goes for direction in which the task of the director is to discern and to help the seminarian discern and respond to the presence and activity of God in his life.

4. Discernment of the seminarian's vocation and his appropriation of priestly values are important parts of this relationship.

5. The director must also help the seminarian free him-

self from obstacles to his being open to the Spirit.

6. The spiritual director needs to have the experience of at least a solid spiritual life of his own, to have a friendly and welcoming attitude and a sincere desire to help the particular seminarian to grow in his relationship with God, and to be a good listener.

7. He needs a basic knowledge of human psychology and counseling skills. He is bound to an absolute confidentiality regarding what he knows from spiritual direction.

8. The seminarian needs to have complete frankness with his director and trust in him.

Recommendations

1. That the spiritual director, besides a deeper knowledge of prayer and the spiritual life, be encouraged to acquire deeper knowledge of human psychology and counseling skills. However, he must be aware that spiritual direction does not consist in problem-solving or psychological counseling.

2. That he be concerned to help the seminarians to develop complete frankness and trust during spiritual direction.

3. That the seminarian have spiritual direction from a freely chosen director approved by the rector at least once a month.

Formation to Celibacy

Convictions

1. Celibacy is a special gift of God offered only to some and intended not only for the individual himself but also for the Church.

2. It is a special way of loving God with an "undivided heart" (1 Cor. 7:35) and of loving others especially the poor and the unloved, with a non-exclusive love.

3. Though some Asian cultures esteem celibacy while others do not, there is uniqueness in the way it is understood and lived out in the Catholic priesthood.

4. There are many influences militating against the appreciation and practice of Christian celibacy - for example,

the negative view of celibacy in some cultures, materialism, permissiveness and hedonism of modern society propagated by the mass media, the widespread taboo against discussing sexual matters and consequent ignorance and misinformation, and the bad example of priests who are unfaithful to their commitment to celibacy.

5. formation should take into account problems in sexuality, especially masturbation and homosexuality.

Recommendations

1. That all aspects of sexuality, chastity and celibacy be openly and completely discussed with the seminarians both in groups and individually. Experts may well be invited to assist in this education. In discussing these matters in spiritual direction the seminarian needs to be completely frank about his inclinations and experiences.

2. That the seminarian be helped to appreciate celibacy as the special gift of God which it is, to understand its appropriateness and value in the priestly ministry and to come to live his celibacy with generosity and joy as a very special way of loving God and his neighbor. Classes, retreats, spiritual conferences and spiritual direction can be used for this purpose.

3. That special importance be given to the seminarian's contact with priests who by the peace, joy and generosity of their lives demonstrate how great a gift celibacy is.

4. That special importance be given to the seminarian's contacts with married people, religious women and unmarried women and girls and learn what is appropriate behavior with members of the opposite sex.

5. That the seminarians be encouraged to form mature friendships, to understand the phenomenon of loneliness, and to appreciate the renunciations involved in celibacy.

6. That the seminary community consciously strive to provide various models of community support for personal growth which the seminarian can carry into the presbyterium after ordination.

7. That the importance of asceticism and a healthy emotional and physical life, as well as a solid prayer life for fidelity to his commitment, be made clear.

8. That mistakes and failures be neither overestimated

nor underestimated since we can grow through our mistakes, though failures may also indicate that one lacks the gift of celibacy. When formators are not able to address problems adequately, they may have recourse to professional help but without dismissing their own responsibility.

9. That the formators discuss among themselves and possibly seek further formation for themselves in order to be of adequate help to the seminarians in their formation to celibacy.

10. That sexual problems be addressed by formators, and in particular by the spiritual director, with compassion, patience and perseverance.

11. That a seminarian with sexual problems be helped honestly to accept himself humbly to pray and strive to acquire a solid chastity, and clearly to discern his vocation to the celibate priesthood.

12. That anyone who has not demonstrated his ability to live a chaste celibate life with generosity and joy, and to be at peace with his own sexuality, never be ordained.

Formation in the Spirit of Poverty

Convictions

1. Evangelical poverty is first and foremost a dependence on God our Father who is rich and bountiful in providing for our everyday needs. The one who is poor has his center not in himself but in God and the Kingdom.

2. Evangelical poverty is for us a call, and thus a grace to imitate Christ in detachment and full dedication to our ministry. It demands sharing in the kenosis of Christ and leads to pastoral availability.

3. The priest is called to a lifestyle that is prophetic in relation to his fellow human beings.

4. Evangelical poverty, demanding a spirit of detachment from worldly possessions (or stewardship of the earth) and solidarity with the poor can be lived meaningfully only in the context of a specific Christian community.

Recommendations

1. That seminarians be made aware that evangelical

poverty should find concrete expression in action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of society.

2. That courses on the crucial issues of poverty be integrated in all stages of seminary formation.

3. That during vacation periods seminarians be sent in small groups to live with poor people and to find their own means of subsistence.

4. That seminarians be encouraged to raise funds for the poor by manual work and other projects.

5. That seminarians be taught responsible stewardship by being made more personally involved in making and keeping the seminary budget in those areas that concern them directly as well as their own personal budgets.

6. That seminarians be formed in the exercise of responsible stewardship by the critical acquisition and disposition of possessions.

7. That seminarians be formed not only in material poverty, but also in poverty of spirit in silence, solitude and contemplation.

Missionary Formation

Convictions

1. The missionary formation of the future priests in Asia, with its emphasis on evangelization and dialogue, assumes vital importance particularly because a vast majority of the people of the continent are yet to experience the redemptive love of God manifested in Jesus Christ.

2. The missionary apostolate is an essential dimension of the Church and of priestly life; therefore, everyone concerned with their formation should strive hard to instill in the seminarians a strong missionary spirit.

3. Team spirit - the spirit of working together in close collaboration - along with a sharing with formators, is important as a preparation for apostolate.

4. In the context of our religious pluralism and cultural diversity dialogue is imperative. While for us Jesus Christ is the basis of interreligious dialogue, we admit the difficulties implied in this arduous task.

Recommendations

1. That the missionary spirit permeate the whole formation of seminarians, and that it be present in all subjects taught.

2. That formators be an example of this spirit and of team work.

3. That this spirit and apostolic zeal be fostered by inviting to the seminary active missionaries who can serve as role models and share their experiences thus inspiring the seminarians.

4. That missionary intentions and concerns have their place in our liturgical celebrations.

5. That practical training be given to seminarians to foster in them a missionary attitude. This should be done during semester sessions and also through actual experiences.

6. That in the seminary a group for pastoral and evangelizing activity be set up and missionary groups be created.

7. That in regional seminaries diocesan groups be the basis for the team work to be fostered.

8. That in the seminary curriculum there be a study of other religions and the orientation of the Church regarding interreligious dialogue.

9. That an exposure program be set up for seminarians to live in relationship with followers of other religions.

10. That interreligious prayer meetings be organized on certain occasions.

Formation in the Social Doctrine of the Church

Convictions

1. It is of paramount importance that the seminarians have a good understanding and awareness of the economic and socio-political realities which threaten the life of our people. This study would take into consideration the deep aspiration of the people for God.

2. It is important to relate and integrate the three aspects of social analysis: philosophical, doctrinal and contextual (i.e., in the context of concrete situations). The analysis would affirm that every person has something to offer no matter how poor, oppressed and exploited he or she is for everyone

can reveal God to us and evangelize us.

3. It is essential to form a correct personal conscience for the proper discernment of one's instinctive tendencies and of the rapidly changing values system, and for responsible interaction with social situations.

Recommendations

1. That seminarians be given a complete education in the social teaching of the Church an exposure-immersion program to sensitize them to the social conditions of our people.

2. That the students be made aware of the "structures of sin" which we all have a role and responsibility to transform.

3. That the social apostolate include a thorough understanding of the ecological crisis threatening our planet.

4. That seminarians be made aware of the ever-increasing threat to human life and dignity (abortion, contraception, violence, war, etc.) and be encouraged to foster respect for human life and to uphold dignity and rights.

5. That the seminarians cultivate a habit and be given a method of reflection on social matters namely: "See-Judge-Act", and be helped to integrate social action into their life with the help of the pastoral spiral (situation/reality-> reflection in faith-> response/judgment/decision-> planning-> action-> evaluation-> new situation/reality, all centered around prayer and love).

6. That the seminarians be given ample opportunity and encouragement to work with Church organizations dealing with social problems.

7. That care be taken that the seminarians not forget the apostolic dimension of their social action which alone would distinguish priests and seminarians engaged in social action from social workers.

8. That everyone engaged in social action be given time and place for solitude, silence and contemplation.

Providing for Integrated Formation

Convictions

1. Priestly formation, as a ministry in the Church, is as multi-faceted as the human person being formed. Each

aspect needs to be developed separately and linked with the other aspects. All aspects need to be integrated in order to promote the human maturity of the seminarian enabling him to commit himself more and more fully to the Lord Jesus and His people.

2. There is need for an adequate formation of formators.

3. Seminary professors are called to be formators as well. Being men and women of faith and love, they are also called to collaborate as a team in accompanying seminarians in discipleship and apostleship.

4. Formators and professors should be assigned to the seminary for a specified term.

5. The community life of the formators must be an example to the seminarians. A team spirit among students and a healthy rapport between staff and students promote good formation.

6. The seminarians should be involved in elaborating the seminary program. The seminary charter, goals, means and activities should be presented to them.

7. The evaluation of seminarians is meant not only to rate the performance of candidates but also to point out areas of potential growth and to provide an opportunity for integration.

8. A certain degree of fear and anxiety regarding evaluations will always be present in seminarians. Besides the bishop, the student too has the right to know about his evaluation.

9. Bishops should be intimately related to the formation program.

Recommendations

1. That formators be selected, prepared and formed continuously in such a way that they are able to accompany the seminarians more effectively through training in spiritual direction and counseling.

2. That the formator or professor be given a fixed renewable term (perhaps of six years), and a one-year sabbatical or renewal program.

3. That information on formation centers in India and

the Philippines be disseminated. That regional centers be established if these are inadequate. That every new formator be sent to such a center. That others avail themselves of training during vacations or their sabbatical year.

4. That the formation team meet two or three days before opening the semester in order to identify short-term goals.

5. That the formation team members clarify their vision, goals and roles, that they work as a team and that they periodically evaluate their exercise of the ministry, even with the help of the seminarians themselves.

6. That seminary formators (including professors) build and promote a Christian community among themselves, engaging regularly in common prayer and contemplation, discernment and decision, work and recreation, thus giving witness to Christ who calls the Church to unity and solidarity.

7. That the rector and resident professors partake in community activities, e.g., liturgy and prayer, games and recreation, outings and recollections.

8. That the seminary community be structured so that the seminarians with the help of formators are formed more deeply and integrally.

9. That the intellectual formation program be developed so that its intrinsic connection with spiritual formation is manifested more clearly.

10. That the fear and anxiety syndrome caused by evaluation be kept at a minimum. That evaluation be held at least once a year by the staff, by peers and by the seminarian himself. That the contents of the evaluation be made known to the individual.

11. That bishops stay in the seminary for a few days every year to meet the seminarians and the formators. That the bishop be requested to give due weight to the recommendations and advice of the rector and staff in the appointment or withdrawal of staff members.

The Role of the Rector and the Spiritual Director and their Relationship

Convictions

1. The rector is a pastor building up the spirit of the

community, correcting when necessary, distributing responsibilities, bringing out the charisms and talents of all and helping them read the signs of the times.

2. The rector, together with his administrative council, is to assess the work load of each staff member.

3. The rector has the unique opportunity, role and obligation of fostering the development of a formation team, who together with the local Ordinary, has the duty of developing and implementing an integrated formation program.

4. The seminary is to provide enough spiritual directors for the student body. Every student should be required to see his spiritual director at least once a month.

5. All formators, except the rector can be spiritual directors. They should be compassionate and encouraging towards the students. They are to point out to the seminarian matters known in the community about his prayer life and discipline. They should encourage him in the practice of virtues.

6. The rector has the right to know who the spiritual directors of the seminarians are.

7. Confidentiality must be scrupulously observed by the spiritual director.

8. Monthly recollections of staff and students should be organized by the rector and the spiritual director respectively. Staff members should be prepared to help with the students' recollections.

Recommendations

1. That whenever possible, the rector be consulted regarding appointments or transfers of new priests and discussions of seminary matters.

2. That before receiving the ministries and holy orders, the candidate be required to state that he has consulted his spiritual director.

3. That the spiritual director notify the rector if any student refuses to come to him regularly.

4. That the spiritual director refrain from attending evaluation meetings if the students fear that confidentiality may be broken.

5. That daily Mass, meditation, spiritual direction, the sacrament of reconciliation and study be counted among the non-negotiable elements of student participation in the

seminary spiritual program.

Spiritual Formation (Propaedeutic) Year

Convictions

1. There must be a harmonious relationship between the spirituality of the spiritual year and that practiced in the major seminary.

2. There must be a certain degree of continuity between the spiritual year and the school of philosophy.

Recommendations

1. That the rector and the spiritual director of the major seminary be consulted when determining the program for the spiritual year.

2. That already in this period the student develop an understanding and appreciation of spiritual direction.

Conclusion

As we end this most fruitful seminar, we are filled with gratitude and joy. We have been blessed by God with financial support and an abundance of material help. The clerical help and assistance for our work along with the prayerful support of so many dedicated people--laity, cloistered sisters, religious of many different congregations and clergy - gave us abundant cause for gratitude.

From the sponsorship of the conference to the places where we stayed everyone was most gracious and kind. The lay people who welcomed us went out of their way to make our stay pleasant. They gave us a witness of the love that people have for priests and the hope that they place in the priests' well-being.

We have tried to face the responsibilities which are ours as openly and honestly as possible and we were enriched by the sharing of each of our brothers. With one another, we gave flesh to the living word: may we likewise become living reminders of God's grace to those whom we hope to form as we live daily the paschal mystery under the care of Mary, Mother of God, Mother of the Church and Patroness of Asia.