

Seminary Formation

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As a diocesan seminary, the Holy Spirit Seminary has a very clear mission, which is to cultivate seminarians to be disciples who follow the Lord faithfully, so that in their priestly ministry in the future, they are configured to Jesus Christ as a leader and shepherd of the Church. According to *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, in the formation and priestly life there are four dimensions—human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral dimensions—that interact with one another. Each dimension aims at making one's heart configured to the heart of Christ. According to the different stages of seminarian formation, I will share the key points of the four dimensions.

The propaedeutic stage

This is the first year in the seminary, which is a period of getting to know the seminary and adapting to life in this setting. No matter how much he knew about the seminary, or how many times he took part in seminary activities, entering the seminary and formally becoming a seminarian is a major change in life. This stage of formation focuses on a better understanding of oneself, discerning personal vocation, and learning about the Church's expectations on candidates for the priesthood. He has to observe in his daily life whether or not he is adapting to the community, which is to live under discipline, to get along with others, to cooperate and help one another, etc. Meanwhile, he is given more time to pray individually so that he can integrate amidst the change and let his spiritual life grow.

Community life is an important place for the formation of personality. A seminarian's involvement in seminary life, his willingness to live in the seminary as a home, his learning to lay down and entrust the previous life styles and relationships are the focus of personality formation at this stage. Sometimes we need to

draw attention to some details which look as if they are superficial, such as self-care in daily life, care for the seminary's property, verbal decorum and manners, etc. In an age when not many young people have siblings, these may be worth paying attention to. And in order to provide seminarians with more opportunities in character formation, in recent years we also take advantage of some relevant outside courses, for example, on personality growth, family remodeling and other workshops.

Besides community life among seminarians, the relationship between seminarians and the formation team is also a crucial part at this stage. When a seminarian is open to the rector and spiritual director regarding his physical, mental and spiritual conditions, this often reflects his openness to God, and the seriousness of his response to vocation.

In the spiritual dimension, a seminarian could receive systematic and tailor-made spiritual guidance from his spiritual director who would consciously arrange for him an opportunity for a longer period of personal retreat for a deep experience of prayer. Indeed, without a deep and intimate personal relationship with God, the ministry would simply become work, which is hard to generate the power to transform lives.

In terms of knowledge, it is mainly foundational, for instance, learning about the priestly vocation, how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, introduction to spirituality, and reviewing the Christian doctrine (by studying the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). The aim is to attune to the direction of one's vocation, to help the seminarians get involved with the community life, and to prepare for the study of philosophy and theology afterward. For pastoral work, seminarians are sent to serve in elderly homes, with the aim of nurturing an attitude of serving the least of our brothers and sisters.

The stage of philosophical studies

After the propaedeutic year, seminarians should be familiar with, and grasp the rhythm of life in the seminary, be more certain of their priestly vocation, and have a more intimate personal relationship with God.

On the formation of personality, there are arrangements to help seminarians develop greater involvement in community life. They are asked to take on some duties, for example, be a senior among peers, or represent the community in meetings outside. These opportunities enable the seminarians to further understand and accept their own strengths and weaknesses, and deepen a sense of community so they are willing to contribute to its growth.

In regard to spirituality, the focus of formation gradually emphasises the initiative of seminarians. The formators and spiritual directors certainly give spiritual guidance, but the seminarians have to learn to take responsibility for their own priestly vocation and growth. The maturity referred to at this stage should be reflected in their everyday personal and community life, including prayer and liturgical life, love for the Word of God and the Eucharist, etc. While the relationship with God is deepening, the seminarians' relationship with others and the Church should also deepen. Since seminarians are candidates for the priesthood, it is vital to have a profound sense of the Church. Undoubtedly this should be one of the priorities of the entire formation.

Few seminarians have studied philosophy before entering the seminary, and some may have been away from school for some years. It is often difficult to become a student again. That is why the priests who have care of their academic development play a significant role at this stage. Their timely guidance, effective encouragement and practical advice are very important for the seminarians. The seminarians should also show interest in, and put efforts into their studies, through active participation in class, encouraging each other outside the classroom, and taking the initiative to learn. Oftentimes, the seriousness with which they undertake their studies also reflects the seminarians' determination in pursuing their vocation.

Concerning pastoral experience, we arrange for the seminarians to go to hospitals, prisons, youth centers and labour centers etc., to reach out to people from different sectors of society, broaden their life experience and deepen their reflections on life, in preparation for their pastoral ministry in the future.

The stage of theological studies

This is the fourth year a seminarian is at the seminary! The formation focuses on providing sufficient space and the necessary guidance for seminarians, to enable them to take active responsibility for self-formation, and to work together with the formation team to discern the will of God in his vocation journey. Therefore, on the growth of personality, a seminarian must show a balance of life that he is a good manager of his own life with the ability to deal with stress and face difficulties. What gets reflected in community life is that, he should gradually cultivate an attitude characterised by kindness, sensibility, temperance and fraternal love, be firm in his convictions, yet open to constructive criticism.

In terms of spirituality, through the phased reception of the ministries of lector and acolyte, and through the formation of theological knowledge, the seminarians should gradually realise the importance of the Church's presence in the personal relationship with God, and be more eager to nurture a sense of commitment and mission for the spiritual growth of their brothers and sisters. Besides deepening their understanding of the Lord and strengthening their relationship with God through theological studies, they should also try to digest and share what they have learned in a way that general members of the Church can understand. For related pastoral experience, seminarians are sent to parishes for placement so they can put into practice what they have learned. Moreover, this enables them to be more firm in their priestly vocation, and to be better prepared to soon receive the diaconate and priestly ordination.

After the first year of theological formation, the seminarians spend one pastoral year in full-time experience in a parish. Experience tells us that after a year of more comprehensive and in-depth pastoral placement, seminarians would grow in many ways salutary to their study of theology.

The deacon and new priesthood (the pastoral stage)

Although the diaconate is a transitional period that is generally not very long, still we need to focus on formation. After ordination to the diaconate, seminarians need to leave the seminary with

resolve. They leave the community of seminarians where they have lived for many years, then live in a parish and take up the ministry assigned by the Church. All this is quite a big change. At this stage we need to help the deacon internalise the values he had learned for many years, develop a healthy sense of the Church, respect the Church leaders, and cooperate with other clergy to serve the brothers and sisters and prepare to receive the priestly ministry.

Since deacons spend their full time in the parish, naturally the parish priest becomes an important formator at this stage. The seminary's formation team must maintain close contact with him so that they can know well about the various conditions and progress of the deacon. Usually, the seminary arranges for the seminarians to have their pastoral placement and service in the same parish from their third year in theology through the first or second year after diaconal and priestly ordination. Virtuous and capable parish priests are identified to accompany and guide the seminarians, so as to ensure the successful completion of this final stage of seminary formation. As the saying goes, "One is never too old to learn." Formation is a lifelong process. Hence in recent years, we have started a series of regular face-to-face sharing with new priests during the first two years after their ordination. We hope this will further accompany them and give them support in terms of formation.

Conclusion

In "The Gift of the Priestly Vocation" published in 2016, the Congregation for the Clergy of the Holy See mentioned that, it is "a journey that allows the formative community to cooperate with the action of the Holy Spirit, ensuring a proper balance between the different dimensions of formation." (#92) Each seminarian who enters the Holy Spirit Seminary is really a gift and responsibility given by God to us, the formative community. May we do our part and cooperate with the Holy Spirit, so that every seminarian who graduates from the Seminary will become a competent pastor of the Diocese of Hong Kong.