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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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## Some Thoughts on the Future Formation of Priests

July/August 2019

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In recent months there has been a discussion on priestly formation. One of the suggestions put forward was that the basic locale for the process of priestly formation should be the parish rather than the seminary.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that the idea that students for the priesthood need real exposure to parish life is good. However, that does not mean that the whole formation process needs to be parish-based. I think the seminary still has a role to play.

I have some experience of the formation process, having received my own formation in St Patrick's College, Maynooth and having been a post-graduate student at the Pontifical Irish College, Rome. I also spent a number of years on the staff of St John's College, Waterford, which gave me an experience of the process from the angle of those providing it. All of these experiences were positive. I do not claim to be an expert, but I have some ideas that I would like to share on the topic. I hope these may be a useful contribution to the present discussion.

Priestly formation includes various elements, namely, human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation. The formation process is spread over a number of years, which means that it does not all have to take place in the one setting, and while the various elements need to be integrated together, one aspect may be given particular emphasis for part of the time. Immersion in parish would be appropriate for that part of the process where the emphasis is on pastoral formation. The reason why students come into the formation process is that they are responding to a call to follow the Lord and to serve his people. So, the spiritual and pastoral aspects are there from the start as the motivation for the process and they need to be cultivated. To answer the call and to be equipped to serve God's people involve developing one's human potential and acquiring professional knowledge. These are catered for by human and intellectual formation.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *The Irish Catholic*, March 21 and March 28, 2019. *The Catholic Times*, March 29, 2019.

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## SOME THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE FORMATION OF PRIESTS

### PROPAEDEUTIC YEAR

Recently a ‘propaedeutic’ or preparatory year has been introduced. Its purpose is “to provide a solid basis for the spiritual life and to nurture a greater self-awareness for personal growth.”<sup>2</sup> This is a good idea. Nowadays students need to be given a basic map of the faith. By this I mean an overview of such things as the Bible, the Liturgical Year and the Catechism. During the year students should be introduced to liturgical prayer and to the various approaches to personal prayer in our tradition. They should be helped to develop a form of spirituality which is appropriate for the parish clergy.

The spirituality of the secular priest derives from the ministry itself. It is centred on the Eucharist and oriented towards pastoral charity. The exercise of the ministry of pastoral charity is a means to holiness, not a distraction from its pursuit. The source of this charity is the Eucharist. Objectively, the Mass itself is the greatest prayer. It needs to become the centre of the individual’s prayer life by being approached with attention and recollection. *Lectio Divina* and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament derive from the Mass and lead back to it. The Liturgy of the Hours is the other great mainstay of priestly spirituality. It provides an invaluable structure of prayer times during the day which can keep one anchored even in the busy life of a parish. The Rosary is also important in the life of the priest.

The ‘Paris Model’ has been mentioned in the discussion.<sup>3</sup> This might be described as a half-way house between the seminary and the parish. In Paris students live in formation houses in different parts of the city. These houses are not presbyteries, but designated student houses, each with its own priest director. The houses are run quite strictly and the students attend lectures in a studium set up by the diocese. In Paris one particular house is dedicated to the propaedeutic year, with the emphasis on the twin pillars of prayer and service. The students are given some experience of parish life, mainly through involvement in the liturgy. They also get involved in some charitable work with groups that help those in need.

I think the ‘Paris Model’ would not be a realistic proposal, in an Irish context, for the years of philosophical and theological studies. However, I think it could be useful for the propaedeutic year. A centre for the propaedeutic year could be established in a city or town in Ireland, where students could have some contact with parish life. The advantage of this would be that students would be kept in touch with the life of the Church on the ground. If

2 Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis, The Gift of Priestly Vocation* (2016), 59.

3 I am indebted to Rev. Dr Noel O’Sullivan of St Patrick’s College, Maynooth, for information on priestly formation in Paris.

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they are kept in an isolated situation at this stage there is the danger that they would develop a kind of spirituality which would be fine when it had lots of support and a quiet atmosphere, but which would not survive amid the many distractions of parish life. This grounding in reality is particularly necessary for those students who come in on an emotional high having had an Evangelical-type conversion experience.

### INTELLECTUAL FORMATION

Intellectual formation is more important than ever. We constantly hear about how each successive generation of young people in Ireland is better educated than the preceding one. The priest needs to be able to hold his own in this environment. He needs to be able to explain the reason for the hope that is in him (cf. 1 Peter 3: 15). As well as being a vocation, the priesthood is a profession. Like other professionals, such as doctors and teachers, the priest needs to have proper academic qualifications.

There is a thirst among the laity for religious knowledge, particularly in the area of Sacred Scripture. The role of the priest as teacher of the faith will become increasingly important in the coming years, particularly in the area of parish-based adult education. It is one of the unfortunate consequences of the current reduction in the numbers of priests that the priesthood has come to be seen almost exclusively in terms of its liturgical and sacramental functions. The Catholic tradition has always had a broader view of priestly ministry. Intellectual formation requires study. College life is more conducive to study than the fragmented ambience of the parish. So, during that part of the formation process when the emphasis is on intellectual formation, it is best for students to be based in the seminary.

Traditionally, the study of theology for four years was preceded by two years of philosophy or by an arts or science degree. Nowadays the formal study of theology is usually for three years. Scholastic theology employed the categories of Scholastic philosophy, so it was necessary to learn about those first. Most students came straight from secondary school, so the initial two or three years served to complete their basic education and also equipped them to teach secular subjects in the many diocesan colleges around the country. Nowadays most students are older and many already have third level qualifications. Theology is no longer dependent on philosophy in the way it once was. So, I think that the traditional division of studies into two parts is no longer necessary. Philosophy is still important, however, as it is necessary to engage with secular thought and culture, to show the reasonableness of faith and to foster the dialogue between faith

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and reason. I think it should be possible to integrate the study of philosophy with theology into a four-year course. The advantage of this integrated programme would be that students would be engaging with theology from the start of their time in seminary. This engagement with theology, and especially with Sacred Scripture, would enrich their spiritual formation. I think that the main concern of the Roman authorities in this regard is that the study of philosophy not be neglected, which it would not be. Quite a lot could be covered in four years.

### PASTORAL FORMATION

Since Vatican II all seminaries have developed pastoral programmes. Many seminaries, including St Patrick's College, Maynooth, have a pastoral year. This provides the kind of immersion in parish life which is being advocated in the current debate. It includes returning to college on a weekly basis to reflect in a systematic way on the experience in the parish. Part of the year is given over to Clinical Pastoral Education. Apart from the pastoral year, students are also involved in pastoral activities when they are in college.

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* envisages the pastoral training as being concentrated mainly in the year between ordination to the diaconate and ordination to the priesthood, with pastoral placements during the other years.<sup>4</sup> The diaconate year is seen as synthesising all the preceding formation. I think that this is a good vision. It does not preclude having a more intensive period of pastoral training earlier in the course. The present practice of many seminaries, including Maynooth, of having a pastoral year half-way through the academic course, could be seen as complementing the final synthesis which will come about with the experience of pastoral ministry after diaconate ordination. I know from speaking to priests ordained in recent years, that they found the pastoral year very useful in helping them to discern definitively their vocation to the priesthood. Pastoral formation could be further augmented by immersion in parish life in the students' own dioceses as part of the summer holidays. A block of four weeks at either end of the summer holidays would still leave most of July and August for actual vacation.

### TRANSITION TO FULL-TIME PARISH MINISTRY

The *Ratio Fundamentalis* envisages the student leaving the seminary when he is ordained to the diaconate.<sup>5</sup> I think this is a good idea. Actual pastoral ministry should begin with ordination

4 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 74-76, 124.

5 *Ibid.*, 74.

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to the diaconate. I think that it would be a good idea for the newly ordained deacon to be given his first parish appointment in his own diocese at that stage. Having ministered as a deacon in the parish for a year, he would be ordained to the priesthood and then, continue in the *same* parish for three years after that. This would help the transition to parish life, because as a deacon he would be working closely with the priests. Priestly ministry would grow organically from diaconal ministry. It would be necessary for the new deacon to have a mentor, either his parish priest or a member of the pastoral formation team in the seminary whom he would meet on a regular basis. After ordination to the priesthood ongoing formation would be provided.

Many young priests find the transition from seminary to parish difficult. They move from a very supportive set-up to a feeling of being on their own. The fault here is not with the seminary, but with the clerical culture in many dioceses and parishes. There is a lack of team work between priests themselves and between priests and parishioners. The growing phenomenon of one priest parishes has made this situation worse. A more communitarian model of ministry and of parish needs to be fostered.

## CONCLUSION

I would envisage the formation process in the future as falling into three parts and being centred on three locations. The propaedeutic year would be in a formation house set aside for that purpose and in close contact with a parish. The course of studies in philosophy and theology, at present five years, but which I think could be done as an integrated course in four years, would take place in the seminary. Half-way through this academic course would be the pastoral year which would be based in a parish. At the end of the six or seven years of initial formation would come ordination to the diaconate and the beginning of ministry in one's diocese.

The seminary for the course of studies could be either St Patrick's College, Maynooth or the Pontifical Irish College, Rome. It would be very short-sighted to abandon either of them as seminaries. They are part of the heritage of the Irish Church and both have made huge contributions to it through their *alumni*. We may be at a low ebb in terms of numbers of seminarians at present, but I am confident that in ten years' time numbers will have doubled or trebled and we will be glad to have kept both institutions.