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Priests' Continuing Formation

by *Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua*

DESCRIPTION

Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua delivered this address to the Oct. 23-28, 1995 international symposium at the Vatican marking the 30th anniversary of "Presbyterorum Ordinis." In his address, the Cardinal reflected on every priest's need for continual human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation. He also set forward a practical plan of action, especially drawing from Pope John Paul's encyclical *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

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I am honored to participate in this symposium marking the 30th anniversary of the promulgation of the conciliar decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*.¹ I have been invited to address the topic "The Permanent or Continuing Formation of Priests." This is an area of increasingly more

critical importance to each diocese and to the church universal in the years since the Second Vatican Council.

Although the specific topic of continuing formation finds a place in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the council fathers dealt with such formation only in the broadest of outlines, speaking in Sections 18 and 19 of "helps for the priest's life," principally in terms of the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of life. In the intervening 30 years, much greater attention has been directed to the question of ongoing formation for priests, most particularly in our Holy Father's apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*² and in the Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests³ as well as in various statements by national episcopal conferences.⁴

It is my purpose here this afternoon to explore the various dimensions of an effective program of continuing formation, one which will adequately prepare our priests for pastoral ministry in the third millennium. I will share with you as a concrete illustration how in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia we have attempted to initiate such a program of continuing formation as part of our nine-year program of spiritual renewal for all the people of the archdiocese in anticipation of the arrival of the year 2000.

This presentation has three principal sections: first, the reaffirmation of the need for continuing formation in light of a threefold contemporary

context of significant factors in the varied personal backgrounds of priests ordained since the council, significant factors in the modern world in which priests live and minister, and significant factors within the church in which priests serve today; second, a consideration of the fundamental vision of continuing formation as delineated in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*, with specific attention to the theological foundation for continuing formation and several key elements in the teaching of the two documents; and third, the development of an integrated program of continuing formation for today's priests, using as an illustrative reference the recent experience in priestly renewal within the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I will conclude with a brief summary and finally, a reflection both on the pains associated with such continuing formation and on the reason to have hope for the effective renewal of our priests and through them, for the renewal of all our people as we approach the third millennium.

The Contemporary Context

In our own times there is a more urgent need for the ongoing formation of our priests because of a number of significant factors in the personal backgrounds of priests ordained since the council and in the modern world in which priests live and minister, as well as in the church in which priests serve today. Each of these three contexts-

person, world and church-merits our attention here.

Most of us are already familiar with the various psychological and developmental studies of seminarians and newly ordained priests that have been done in recent years.⁵ The composite picture which emerges from such studies confirms that over the past two to three decades an ever-growing number of both candidates for the priesthood and those ordained to the priesthood enter priestly formation programs with seriously problematic, one could rightly say "dysfunctional," family backgrounds. The rampant spread of divorce, the high frequency of single-parent households, painful experiences of addiction to drugs and alcohol, domestic violence and even sexual abuse at home and related conflicted family situations have compounded the need for seminary formation programs which engage candidates on a deeply emotional and relational level as well as attending to their spiritual maturity and theological education. Many of those same candidates and recently ordained priests enjoy little family and community support for their vocational journey and often enough stand against family and relatives in their pursuit of faithful Christian living, let alone a life of priestly service.

Even those who begin their priesthood at a later age, after some years of living on their own with everyday experience in the secular

workplace, do not necessarily bring a commensurate emotional maturity to their lives as priests. Similarly, those who have already completed a good amount of post-secondary school education come with admittedly varied educational backgrounds. Yet their intellectual foundations in the liberal arts and the Judeo-Christian philosophical heritage are typically quite limited. Moreover, as more of our candidates and then priests come from families with little active practice of the faith, they bring with them seriously underdeveloped catechetical and spiritual backgrounds, and they have much less familiarity with ordinary parish and church life than could frequently be assumed in past years. It should be no surprise, then, that five to nine years of seminary formation, however well-designed and implemented, constitute now more than ever an inadequate preparation for a lifetime of priestly ministry. However well-intentioned their motivations and however genuine their personal dedication to the church and their concern for society, the priests of our time need a comprehensive and well-designed program of continuing formation to build upon and sustain the formation begun in their seminary years.

In *Presbyterorum Ordinis* the council fathers had already noted the "unprecedented rate" at which secular culture, particularly the scientific, medical and communication fields, and even the sacred sciences were advancing.

Such changes necessitate that priests continue their study of "things divine and human" in order to "enter with greater advantage into dialogue with their contemporaries."⁶

In the early sections of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II highlights for us both the hopes and the obstacles to the Gospel which are found in our modern world, inviting us "to be as open as possible to light from on high from the Holy Spirit, in order to discover the tendencies of contemporary society, recognize the deepest spiritual needs, determine the most important concrete tasks and the pastoral methods to adopt and thus to respond adequately to human expectations."⁷

The Holy Father affirms the good news of a deeper awareness of the dignity of the human person, a powerful thirst for peace and justice, a more open search for truth and the opening to unexpected possibilities for evangelization and rebirth of religious values in many parts of our world. At the same time he also warns us of problematic or negative elements in modern society, including an overly personal subjectivity and the sustained allure of materialism and hedonism. He gives special mention to the breakdown of the human family and the distortion of the true meaning of human sexuality.⁸ Such problematic factors contribute to an environment in which the priest no longer finds strong support in the community

around him; instead, he may find himself lacking much of the human and cultural support that he looks for to sustain him in ministry.

Not only do many in modern society tend to disregard any form of religious and moral values, society itself seems to have changed in its attitude toward the priesthood. In more recent years the priest faces a powerfully challenging climate of distrust and questioning of his priestly integrity. This is evident in much that comes to us through the media. Problems and scandals involving priests are not reported with a sense of sadness at human failure so much as with a kind of glee at having finally learned "the terrible truth."

There was once significant support for the priesthood, even among those who did not fully understand it. Respect for what was seen as a kind of "mystique" to the priesthood, even when it was not fully understood, is now rarely reflected in the secular world. The tenor in many quarters has shifted from a uncertain respect to a sad skepticism and finally, to a far sadder cynicism about the priesthood.

The priesthood finds itself not only confronted with its failures, but often simply ignored as having nothing to offer in any case. The world has little use for or openness to the priest's faith convictions and theological knowledge. His theological knowledge is treated as though it were less valuable than the

knowledge of the physical sciences. His vision of a fullness of life with God in heaven is considered less engaging than a vain struggle for happiness here and now.

But in truth, the priest is rejected, not because he offers the world too little, but because he offers too much. For the priest holds out the awesome promises of life eternal to a world willing to settle for the false comfort of the quick solution. The world is all too willing to find satisfaction in immediate gratification, no matter how small, instead of accepting the offer of eternal glory. Modern society prefers to settle for what it can get now and shrinks back from the hope of something more to come. In this world there is often little room for the priest.

There are likewise significant factors in the church today which generate a more pressing need for continuing formation. This theme is developed in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, where the Holy Father notes that "there are also worrying and negative factors within the church herself which have a direct influence on the lives and ministry of priests."⁹

All are familiar with the impact of the decreasing number of priests in many parts of the world: Much more is being demanded of far fewer healthy and active priests. This demand places great strain upon our priests, who need tremendous spiritual and intellectual depth to meet the challenges of pastoral ministry today.

Pope John Paul II addresses not only the scarcity of priests, but other critical factors as well. Among these he includes the lack of knowledge of the faith among many believers; an incorrectly understood pluralism in theology, culture and pastoral teaching; an attitude of indifference toward the magisterium; and the phenomenon of subjectivism in matters of faith. He concludes that we now face a situation which "gives rise to the phenomenon of belonging to the church in ways which are ever more partial and conditional, with a resulting negative influence on the birth of new vocations to the priesthood, on the priest's own self-awareness and on his ministry within the community."¹⁰

All too common in our day is the proclivity of the laity to criticize priests irresponsibly and to consider themselves "good Catholics" despite their rejection of certain magisterial teachings. Others no longer respect any priest because of the notoriety of the cases of sexual abuse of minors by but a few clergymen. Moreover, as fewer and fewer of our parishioners are committed to the regular practice of the faith, priests find themselves saddened, dispirited and at times filled with a sense of malaise: All their efforts to enliven the faith of their people appear to be in vain.

There is at the same time a greater expectation placed upon priests, both to respond to a call for more effective collaboration with the laity in carrying out the mission of the

church and also to provide a courageous spiritual and moral leadership of the faith community in engaging the modern world. Indeed, much more is being demanded of our priests today, both within the church and in society as a whole.

In sum, then, this threefold contemporary context of problematic personal and family backgrounds, an unreceptive and at times hostile society and significantly more complex priestly leadership in the postconciliar church demands of every priest, regardless of his years of priestly experience, a greatly deepened personal spirituality, regular and ongoing catechetical and theological updating, and the development of more extensive pastoral skills. Without a well-developed, comprehensive and integrated program of continuing formation, today's and tomorrow's priests will inevitably lack the personal, spiritual, theological and pastoral capabilities to engage in the new evangelization called for by our Holy Father and to lead the church into the third millennium.

What the Documents Say

Although there are, as we have seen, a number of contemporary factors which contribute an urgency to the need for continuing formation in the life of the priest today, this need has much deeper theological roots. It is hardly accidental that both *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* open their treatments of ongoing formation with reference to

Paul's words to Timothy: "I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you."¹¹

Both documents clearly affirm that continuing formation, like all priestly formation, is first of all a work of God's Spirit within the life of each individual priest, calling him to ever more complete rebirth in Christ. Thus the directory introduces its chapter on continuing formation with this affirmation:

"Permanent formation springs from a grace which produces a supernatural force destined to assimilate continually, in ever broader and deeper terms, the entire life and activity of the priest in fidelity to the gift received."¹²

Ongoing formation is founded upon the profound truth that every Christian believer, and most especially the priest-believer, is called to continual rebirth into the fullness of life in Christ. Each one experiences that process of rebirth not only in a general way, but also within the very specific mode of Christian life which is expressed in the particular vocation to which each has responded. Indeed, continuing formation is in reality the very living out of the priestly vocation which, for the priest, is the way in which he will live the fullness of his union with Christ.

In the words of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the yes to Christ's call which each priest articulates at his ordination "must be expressed anew and reaffirmed through the years of

his priesthood in countless other responses, all of them rooted in and enlivened by that yes of holy orders. In this sense one can speak of a vocation 'within' the priesthood. The fact is that God continues to call and send forth, revealing his saving plan in the historical development of the priest's life and the life of the church and of society. It is in this perspective that the meaning of ongoing formation emerges. Permanent formation is necessary in order to discern and follow this constant call or will of God."¹³

Thus it is that each priest fulfills this "vocation within his vocation" through his personal commitment to continuing formation throughout the years of his priestly ministry.

Continuing formation for the priest is necessarily a lifelong process of ever-deepening personal incorporation into Christ. For it is our shared belief that Jesus, the Son of God, by his crucifixion and resurrection has transformed our lives in a way most wonderful, yet not easy to understand. We have been reborn, made anew, redeemed from our sins and brought into union with the life of the triune God. And yet here we are, still living in a world that seems anything but glorious; still we remain incomplete: We are redeemed, yet sinners still.

What seems most amazing is perhaps this: Like the first disciples of Jesus,¹⁴ we too are truly reborn and yet at the very same time are still in process of being reborn. From this mysterious truth comes both the

absolute wonder of our salvation and the constant struggle to live that salvation each day. Genuine ongoing formation disposes the priest toward receptivity to God's Spirit, realizing in his daily life this fundamental reality of salvation in Christ.

Just as *Presbyterorum Ordinis* understood genuine priestly formation as the work of a lifetime, so too in an even more amplified manner do both *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* reflect the same growing realization that was presented in seminal form at the Second Vatican Council: The priest, from ordination until death, is involved in a life-giving and creative formation process that is essential both to him and to the church. So the Congregation for the Clergy, reiterating the apostolic exhortation, affirms:

"The activity of formation is based on a dynamic demand intrinsic to the ministerial charism, which is permanent and irreversible in itself. Therefore this can never be considered finished, neither on the part of the church which imparts it, nor on the part of the minister who received it."¹⁵

There are, of course, purely human reasons for such for nation. Every profession requires a constant updating on the part of its participants, and we must demand no less of those who are ordained to the priesthood. There is constant need for intellectual renewal, and

this is a reality that must not be underestimated. Even the long years of academic preparation in the seminary are but the beginning of a lifetime of learning. But there is another, more basic dimension of which we must not lose sight. While new knowledge is constantly needed and already acquired knowledge must be deepened, beneath both is this further demand: Continued formation in the priesthood fundamentally entails a spiritual deepening and revivification as well, for this formation is rooted in the very identity of the priest himself.

The priest, in the sacrament of orders, does not merely enter into a new occupation, a new profession. He does not merely assume a new role. Rather, ordination confers a much deeper reality, which we have traditionally described as the "indelible character" of the sacrament. This character is a new reality, a new quality, a new identity which is conferred upon the man being ordained. In the sacrament of holy orders the priest is configured to the likeness of Jesus as head and shepherd of the church and is given a pastoral mission.

"In this way each priest is marked permanently and indelibly in his inner being as a minister of Jesus and of the church. He comes to share in a permanent and irreversible way of life and is entrusted with a pastoral ministry which, because it is rooted in his being and involves his entire life, is itself permanent."¹⁶

It is in this new and permanent reality of the priest that we find the ultimate foundation for permanent and ongoing formation. The basis of this is not simply the assumption of a job to be done or role to be played by the priest. It is, rather, the truth of a newly acquired and lasting identity. The fact of who the priest is and not merely the fact of what the priest does demands constant growth if the priest is to be faithful both to what he has become and to the grace of God which has so transformed him.

This ongoing formation is part of the very life and reality of the priest, as "the natural and absolutely necessary continuation of the process of building priestly personality which began and developed in the seminary or the religious house with the training program which aimed at ordination."¹⁷ It is equally critical that seminary formation programs instill in each seminarian the realization of his own need for ongoing formation and a personal commitment to continue his priestly formation after ordination. Thus we read in the 1992 Program of Priestly Formation of the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, reflecting the vision of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*:

"The seminary should teach seminarians that their formation and development is a lifelong process of conversion and does not end with ordination. It is equally important that seminarians know that, as priests, they have a right to expect

assistance in their continuing formation and also have a duty to the church and to themselves to pursue the various available avenues of lifelong formation."¹⁸

The priest's continuing formation is not simply a matter of developing professional techniques. Rather, its aim must be that of promoting a general and integral process of "constant growth, deepening each of the aspects of formation- human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral -as well as ensuring their active and harmonious integration, based on pastoral charity and in reference to it."¹⁹

Here the church defines a very specific and well-focused goal; that is, "ongoing formation presents itself as a necessary means to the priest of today in order to achieve the aim of his vocation: the service of God and of his people."²⁰ Programs of ongoing formation, whatever their particular focus and format, are intended to assist the priest in developing his identity and vocation within the church and in sanctifying himself and others through the exercise of his pastoral ministry.²¹

In sum, if we are to be faithful to the vision of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*, the program of continuing formation designed in each diocese needs to include and harmonize these four essential dimensions of formation-the human, the spiritual, the intellectual and the pastoral. The integration of these

four aspects of formation must be carried out in such a way as to assist each priest in the development of a full human personality matured in the spirit of service to others, intellectually prepared in the theological and human sciences, spiritually nourished by his communion with Jesus Christ and his love for the church, and engaged with zeal and dedication in the pastoral ministry to which he is assigned.²²

Developing an Integrated Program

From the earliest days of his pontificate, our Holy Father has called for a complete spiritual and pastoral renewal of all aspects of Catholic life in preparation for the year 2000 and the arrival of the third millennium of Christianity. Prior to Pope John Paul II's November 1994 apostolic letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, we in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia initiated in 1991 a nine-year period of renewal in anticipation of the new millennium; our renewal program is titled "Catholic Faith and Life 2000."

One significant component of this spiritual and pastoral renewal of the archdiocese has been the particular program for priestly renewal in which our priests have been engaged since the spring of 1991. This program has been founded upon the conviction that the renewal of the priests is a vital and, in fact, necessary catalyst for the spiritual renewal of the people of the Archdiocese.

Between 1992 and the present, the priests of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, of which there are more than 800, have participated in a sequential program for renewal, initially designed in response to the needs and concerns expressed by the priests who attended regional meetings on spiritual renewal during the fall and winter of 1990-1991 and clergy conferences in the fall of 1991. A five-phase program was developed as a means to engage all the priests of the archdiocese in their own personal renewal and to enhance their role as leaders of the spiritual renewal of the people of the archdiocese in preparation for the third millennium.

In Phase 1 of the program, all our priests gathered as a presbyterate at St. Charles Borromeo Archdiocesan Seminary, Overbrook, so that I might personally encourage the priests' participation in their own renewal and in the spiritual renewal of the archdiocese and explain to them the broad outline of the priests' renewal program prepared for and by the priests themselves.

The second and third phases of the program each consisted in a series of two-day overnight reflection experiences at which our priests gathered in vicariate groups. The priests prayed together, discussed their personal visions of the priesthood and reflected upon the essential elements of the priesthood, both as concretely lived out by the priests themselves and as presented to us in the church's teachings on the priesthood,

particularly as expressed in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

Next, through the diocesan-wide program of week-long retreats which constituted Phase 4, our priests continued to pray over and to reflect more attentively upon their personal experiences of priestly living and the church's teachings on the priesthood which were shared in the earlier gatherings. The retreat program was founded upon the conviction that only in response to the grace of the Holy Spirit would each priest commit himself more fully to the renewal of his own priesthood and to his particular role in the spiritual renewal of the people of the archdiocese.

Finally, Phase 5 of our program for priestly renewal was conducted in the spring of 1995, during which the priests of each of six vicariates gathered once again, this time for two and one-half days of reflection and discussion. They came to pray together, to deepen their personal commitment to ongoing formation in priestly ministry and to reflect upon their role as leaders in the spiritual renewal of the archdiocese. The specific goal of Phase 5 was the development of concrete proposals which the priests might recommend to one another and to the archdiocese for the renewal of their personal lives and their priestly ministry.

In order to reflect the fourfold and integral vision of continuing formation presented in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, each phase of the

program of priestly renewal incorporated significant time for prayer and reflection, for theological input, for comfortable socializing and formal discussion among the priests as a presbyterate, and for developing on the basis of their reflection and discussion, some concrete, practical means to actualize a spiritual renewal among the people of the archdiocese through their pastoral ministry. The priests were challenged throughout the whole program to accept responsibility for their own personal renewal and to offer priestly leadership to the spiritual renewal of the people of the archdiocese in preparation for the celebration of the third millennium.

This five-phase program of priestly renewal has resulted in a heightened awareness of priestly identity among our priests and a keener recognition of its impact upon their own spiritual lives and their pastoral service to the church. This past summer of 1995 the priests received a formal report of the program, structured around the four areas of continuing formation delineated in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. Each area of the report identified those needs given priority by the priests themselves and a series of concrete proposals which might be developed in response to those needs.

Overall, more than 50 specific proposals were drawn up by the priests, touching all areas of priestly life and ministry, from everyday rectory living to improved skills for

working with and leading others; from greater availability of and commitment to personal spiritual direction to local-level prayer gatherings for small groups of priests; from a variety of educational programs of theological updating and sabbaticals to preaching workshops and more extensive preparatory programs for newly assigned pastors.

I have assigned responsibility to follow up on the variety of proposals developed by our presbyterate to a full-time director for continuing formation for diocesan priests, assisted by a team of experienced priests whom I have appointed to serve as a standing committee within the archdiocese titled the "Diocesan Priests Continuing Formation Committee."

As we now consider in more detail each of the four essential dimensions of continuing formation, I will add brief reflections from our priestly renewal experience in Philadelphia in support of the mandates presented to us in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and in the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*.

Human Formation

Many of us are more accustomed to thinking of ongoing formation in terms of continuing education programs for the updating of the priest's theological knowledge and pastoral methods in confronting a rapidly changing world. Given today's circumstances and the backgrounds of today's seminarians

and priests,²³ greater attention must be given to the human dimension of continuing formation since, as our Holy Father clearly teaches in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: "The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation."²⁴

This human aspect provides the basis and ground for all the other dimensions of formation. It is an essential dimension, for it is precisely the human which is transformed by grace and brought into the fullness of life in the Trinity. It is our human nature which is sanctified by the very fact that the Son of God himself chose to share it with us. Far from understanding a priestly vocation as a suspension or denial of our humanness or as some form of aloofness from or superiority over the rest of men, the council fathers had already noted in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*:

"Priests, while being taken from among men and appointed for men in the things that appertain to God that they may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins, live with the rest of men as with brothers.... They are set apart in the midst of the people of God, but this is not in order that they be separated from that people or from any man, but that they should be completely consecrated to the task for which God chooses them.... They would be powerless to serve men if they remained aloof from their life and circumstances. Their very ministry makes a special

claim on them not to conform themselves to this world; still it requires at the same time that they should live among men in this world."²⁵

Maturity in human formation entails a twofold demand. First, the priest must come to know and continue to deepen his knowledge of himself in all his humanness as a creature of this world with particular strengths and weaknesses, so as to understand in the depth of his interior self the God who has created him and there speaks to him most intimately. This means that he must look honestly at the reality of his own experience and reflect on that experience in order to discern within it God's ongoing call to daily priestly living.

Second, genuine human formation is not simply internal to the individual, but must be understood within the framework of the relationships which form the context of the priest's life. The life of every human being is a life of relationships. As the priest grows both in his knowledge of himself and in his relationships with others, he will be more deeply formed into his priesthood. This is why Pope John Paul II can say:

Through his daily contact with people, his sharing in their daily lives, the priest needs to develop and sharpen his human sensitivity so as to understand their needs, respond to their demands, perceive their unvoiced questions and share the hopes and expectations, the joys

and burdens which are part of life: Thus he will be able to meet and enter into dialogue with all people."²⁶

In a similar vein, the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* reaffirms the teaching of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* in speaking of human formation in terms of the abundance of those human virtues which are held in esteem in human relations. The priest is called upon to "practice goodness of heart, patience, kindness, strength of soul, love for justice, even-mindedness, truthfulness to his word, coherence in the duties freely assumed, etc."²⁷ These are the virtues which must be reflected in the priest's conduct, relationships and friendships.

For the priest, the process of coming to know himself is in many ways one with the process of knowing others. It is in and through his loving service to his people that he will come even more deeply to know himself. If the priest is to be truly involved in his own human formation, then he must grow in truly holy friendships, and he must both love and allow himself to be loved by his people -something that sounds both evident and easy, and yet is for many of us not so easy at all.

It may seem paradoxical, but it is absolutely true that the more isolated the priest allows himself to become, the less will he really know himself. Similarly, without the bonds of loving relationships with other people, he will be all the more drawn away from the real love of God. In

an effective program of human formation, each priest is challenged to exercise his priestly vocation with keen awareness of the reality of his human strengths and weaknesses, his loves and his relationships, all of which reveal to him the hand of God in his daily life.

This understanding of human formation was clearly attested in the concrete proposals developed by the priests of Philadelphia in our recent renewal program. Special attention was given to the need to develop more effective ways of living and working together with other priests and with the people of the parish community. Moreover, a growing number of our priests are becoming more aware of the critical need for priests to tend to their physical and emotional health, to their relational abilities and to their friendships with other priests and with laity, all with the conviction that the more effectively priests live a mature human life, the more fully enriched will be their pastoral ministry to God's people.

Spiritual Formation

In *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the council fathers quite naturally accented the demand for personal holiness and other special spiritual requirements in the life of the priest. In discussing helps toward fostering the interior life and the continuing sanctification of the priest, the council document highlights the nourishment which a priest draws 'through the word of God from the double table of holy Scripture and

the Eucharist," and recommends fruitful reception of penance, faithful devotion to the Blessed Virgin, daily conversational prayer with Christ the Lord, and regular time for spiritual reading, a personal retreat and regular participation in individual spiritual direction."²⁸

This call to priestly holiness implies the need constantly to look into ourselves so as to be able to discover there the abiding presence of God. We might be easily tempted to think of ongoing formation as a potpourri of isolated tasks. We might think of it as projects, workshops, lectures and information. In reality, we must never lose sight of the fact that it is really a continuing process of integrated growth into a relationship with God himself. It is not simply a matter of learning to do more things and perform more services for the church. It is rather a question of opening ourselves ever more completely to the transformation that in the end will give meaning to everything else.

Both *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* emphasize an integral relationship between the priest's personal spirituality and his pastoral ministry. As expressed in the directory: "This means that priests must avoid any dualism between spirituality and ministry, for it is the origin of some profound crises."²⁹ The priest must never become so immersed in what he does for others that he ends up losing his vision of what he himself should be in his life

with God. Indeed, it is this necessary attention to his union with God that makes it possible for the priest to be able to devote himself to others.

So it is with the prayer life of the priest as well. He does not pray so as to become adept at techniques of prayer. Rather, he prays so that he can, without reserve, put his life totally into the hands of God and trust in the strength of those hands even when he feels most helpless. If the priest is to share in the mission of the Son in his priesthood, then he must himself become with Jesus both servant and sacrifice. He must pray so as to yield totally to the will of the Father. He must learn that only in this manner can he find the real meaning of prayer as it joins him totally to the will of his Father.

The forms of prayer, methods of prayer, the insights of prayer and even the consolations of prayer are never an end in themselves. They are all but part of the means leading to that final loving union of the oneness of will with that of the Father. And that oneness of will can never come to be if the priest is not faithful daily to the prayer of the Mass, the Hours, adoration of the Lord in the blessed sacrament, devotion to Mary, meditation and the simplest prayers of heartfelt adoration, thanksgiving, contrition and petition.

The essential significance of spiritual formation is also reflected in the renewal proposals of our priests in Philadelphia. They stressed their

own need to commit themselves to more regular spiritual direction and sacramental reconciliation; they proposed regular opportunities for groups of priests to gather specifically for prayer and spiritual reflection; they called for workshops on prayer and priestly spirituality; and they requested both a diocesan spirituality center or house of prayer for priests (as noted, too, in the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*³⁰) and more communal prayer within individual rectories.

Pope John Paul II includes among hopes for the Gospel today a growing "thirst for God and for an active meaningful relationship with him."³¹ This same spiritual hunger fills the hearts of many priests today, as they search for a continuing formation program which addresses their spiritual maturity in Christ.

Intellectual Formation

The council fathers were equally insistent on affirming the intellectual dimensions of a well-integrated continuing formation program. They rightly insist that the true sources of a priest's "maturity in knowledge" are drawn "primarily from the reading and meditation of sacred Scripture" and "fruitfully nourished by the study of the fathers and doctors of the church and other ancient records of tradition."³² This study cannot be neglected if the priest is to come to a positive love of the magisterium and sacred tradition.

The teaching of theology is no mere

academic enterprise, for it "must lead to an authentic formation: toward prayer, communion and pastoral action."³³ The council called priests to renew themselves through academic courses and pastoral studies, so as to continue to develop in the methods of evangelization and the apostolate. For this each priest must make a commitment to a personal discipline of reading and study.

The *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* builds upon the vision of *Presbyterorum Ordinis* in insisting that the intellectual component of continuing formation must include not only the study of the revealed truths of the faith, but also a greater knowledge of scientific advances, cultural and ethical debates in light of the church's social doctrine, and the use of the means of social communication. The directory cites Canon 279.3 of the Code of Canon Law in asserting that programs of intellectual formation should "deal with the more relevant humanistic and philosophical themes or those that are linked to the sacred sciences, particularly insofar as they benefit the exercise of the pastoral ministry."³⁴

Moreover, as with other dimensions of continuing formation, so too this study and intellectual renewal are understood not merely as something preparatory to the priesthood nor as something to be accomplished within the first few years of the ministry. Rather, such intellectual

development must continue throughout the priest's lifetime if he is "to faithfully carry out the ministry of the word, proclaiming it clearly and without ambiguity, distinguishing it from mere human opinion, no matter how renowned and widespread these might be."³⁵

Those areas of continuing education highlighted by our priests during the Philadelphia renewal program include, naturally enough, topics such as sacred Scripture and theology, the sacred liturgy and sacramental preparation for adults. At the same time special attention was given to social justice and other moral teachings of the church, and to a variety of pastoral concerns such as leadership skills, time management, listening and confrontation skills.

Our priests proposed that these programs be made available on both diocesan-wide and more local levels. Even more significant, they emphasized the critical need for the integration of spiritual renewal and intellectual development in such educational programs. In this they reflect a healthy realization that, like the human aspects of continuing formation, so their intellectual development is essential to continued growth in the life of the priest. Both dimensions are assumed into the life of grace, which transforms them and gives them a new depth of reality in that mystery of Christ which must ground the life of every priest.

Pastoral Formation

All of the aspects of continuing formation of which we have spoken thus far -human, spiritual and intellectual- are given their fundamental direction by the inherently pastoral focus of priestly ministry. Every priest is a priest not for his own sake but for the sake of God's people. Thus continuing formation must be pastoral: The formation of the priest must lead him to follow in the footsteps of the good Shepherd. This means that whatever maturity and development a priest attains humanly, spiritually and intellectually, this must not simply bear fruit in the perfection of the priest himself, but equally bear fruit in the service of God's church. It is to this end that Pope John Paul II speaks of "pastoral charity."³⁶

Pastoral charity is the summation of "the way of thinking and acting proper to Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the church."³⁷ this means that "the authority of Jesus Christ as head coincides then with his service, with his gift, with his total humble and loving dedication on behalf of the church."³⁸ This is the authority in which the priest shares; it is an authority that is fully directed to the giving of his life to others. Pastoral charity is the internal principle of the living of the life of the priest. 'The essential content of this pastoral charity is the gift of self, the total gift of self to the church, following the example of Christ."³⁹

The priest is called to accept and

exercise within himself the pastoral charity of Jesus Christ. This implies a great gift, but it just as surely implies a tremendous responsibility. It must be this way with the priest. What he has been given is for others and never simply for himself. Ongoing formation is a necessity if the priest is not to find the press of everyday activities causing him to become so wrapped up in the details of all that he is required to know and to do that he begins to forget why he is doing it. As our Holy Father reminds us:

"Ongoing formation helps the priest to overcome the temptations to reduce his ministry to an activism which becomes an end in itself, to the provision of impersonal services, even if these are spiritual or sacred, or to a businesslike function which he carries out for the church."⁴⁰

If the priest can retain the vision of true pastoral charity, then he will also find himself growing in a deepening appreciation of the various ministries which can and do exist in addition to the priesthood. He will find himself growing in his appreciation and love for the particular church into which he is incardinated, because he will love the people who form it. He will find himself growing in the longing to be a full and active participant in the life of the whole church. He will more consciously exercise his ministry as a member of a presbyterate for which he has a deep and abiding affection, in spite of his own faults and those of his brother priests.

The *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* extends this call to pastoral charity with a call for special attention to the priest's mature appreciation for the life and spirituality of permanent deacons, religious and laity.⁴¹ The directory also proposes a number of topics for inclusion in an effective pastoral formation, topics such as catechesis; ministry to the family; the promotion of vocations; care for youth, the elderly and the infirm; engagement in ecumenical activities; and attention to the unchurched and the "fallen away," all addressed with a particular eye to the teachings of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.⁴²

In a similar fashion, our Philadelphia priests' renewal proposals in the area of pastoral formation addressed such practical pastoral issues as preaching institutes; more extensive preparatory training for pastors, especially in organizational and leadership skills; pastoral counseling; parish development and new methods of evangelization; and opportunities for shared reflection on the roles and responsibilities of pastors in guiding the parish community into the third millennium.

Conclusion

This fourfold model of ongoing priestly formation—the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral—so familiar to us from the texts of *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*, finds its true ground in the vision of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*,

where the council fathers assert that an integrated program should be designed "to give [priests an opportunity of increasing their knowledge of pastoral methods and theological science, and at the same time strengthening their spiritual life and sharing their pastoral experiences with their brother priests."⁴³

It likewise marks subsequent episcopal documents on the formation of seminarians such as the 1992 Program of Priestly Formation of the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops.⁴⁴ Such continuing formation, however, entails both growing pains and reason to have hope.

Over and over again we speak of formation, transformation, growth, change; yet the ease with which such words can be spoken must not lull us into forgetting that for any human being such a constant need for growth and development will be fulfilled only with some measure of pain. The deeper the growth envisioned, the deeper the pain. While growth can be a wonderful thing to look back upon once it reaches some level of completion, it is not equally wonderful in our eyes as we look forward to it without having yet experienced it. So St. Paul reminds us:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory that is to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the revelation of the children of God; for

creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies."⁴⁵

The continuing formation of our priests and the full realization of their priestly calling will only be complete with this final redemption of the whole body of Christ which is the church. Needless to say, we will necessarily encounter much pain in the work of continuing formation.

Although an enormous responsibility, the priesthood is no less an enormous gift. And this responsibility need not overwhelm us nor need it inspire us with fear. Instead, it must fill us with hope, even though we are yet without the consolation of seeing the final completion- a completion which is no less real for all our inability to grasp it fully here and now. For both hope and longing are ours in the priesthood at the same time. We are well aware of the longing for hopes not yet fulfilled, even though we are blessed even now with glimpses of light in the midst of darkness, for "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."⁴⁶

This is the whole point of continuing formation. It is a lifelong process by which we discover the emptiness that is ours when we think that we are self-sufficient and the fullness that comes to be when we open that emptiness to the Lord and allow him to fill it. So together with Paul, let us "give thanks to God at every remembrance" of our priests and let us be confident of this: that "the One who has begun this good work" in our priests will "continue to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus."⁴⁷

ENDNOTES

1 Vatican II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*).

2 John Paul II, postsynod apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (March 25, 1992). Note especially Chapter 4 on the ongoing formation of priests, 70-81.

3 Congregation for the Clergy, *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*, (Holy Thursday 1994).

4 See, for example, the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "The Continuing Formation of Priests: Growing in Wisdom, Age and Grace" (USCC, Washington, D.C., 1984).

5 See, for example, Eugene F. Hemrick and Dean R. Hoge, *A Survey of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years*, Seminary Department of the National Catholic Educational Association, 1991; Rev. Vincent Dwyer, OCSO, *The Challenge of the 1990s: Formation of Priests*, Center

for Human Development,
Washington, D.C., 1990.

6 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 19.

7 *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 5.

8 *Ibid.*, 6-7.

9 *Ibid.* 7.

10 *Ibid.*

11 2 Tm. 1:6; cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 70; *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 69.

12 *Directory*, 69.

13 *Pastores*, 70.

14 Consider, for example, Paul's words on this mystery to the early Christians of Rome in Rom. 6-8.

15 *Directory*, 73; cf. *Pastores*, 76.

16 *Pastores*, 70.

17 *Ibid.*, 71.

18 U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Program of Priestly Formation, 4th ea.: November 1992 (USCC, Washington, D.C., 1992), No. 552.

19 *Pastores*, 71.

20 *Directory*, 71.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*, 74.

23 See pages 3-8, above.

24 *Pastores*, 43.

25 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3.

26 *Pastores*, 72.

27 *Directory*, 75; cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3.

28 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 18.

29 *Directory*, 71.

30 Cf. *ibid.*, 84-85.

31 *Pastores*, 6.

32 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 19. The council fathers continue: "Moreover, if priests are to give adequate answers to the problems discussed by people at the present time, they should be well-versed in the statements of the church's magisterium, especially of the councils and popes. They should also consult the best approved writers on the science of theology.... Priests are therefore urged to adequate and continuous perfection of their knowledge of things divine and human. In this way they will prepare themselves to enter with greater advantage into dialogue with their contemporaries."

33 *Directory*, 77.

34 *Ibid.*, 77.

35 *Pastores*, 72.

36 Cf. *ibid.*, 72. This concept of pastoral charity is more fully explored in Nos. 21-23 of the apostolic exhortation.

37 *Pastores*, 21.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, 23.

40 Ibid., 73.

41 *Directory*, 78.

42 Ibid.

43 *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 19; see also the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops (*Christus Dominus*), 16, d.

44 Cf. "The Continuing Formation of Priests," Chapter 6 of the Program of Priestly Formation, 549-572.

45 Rom. 8:18-23.

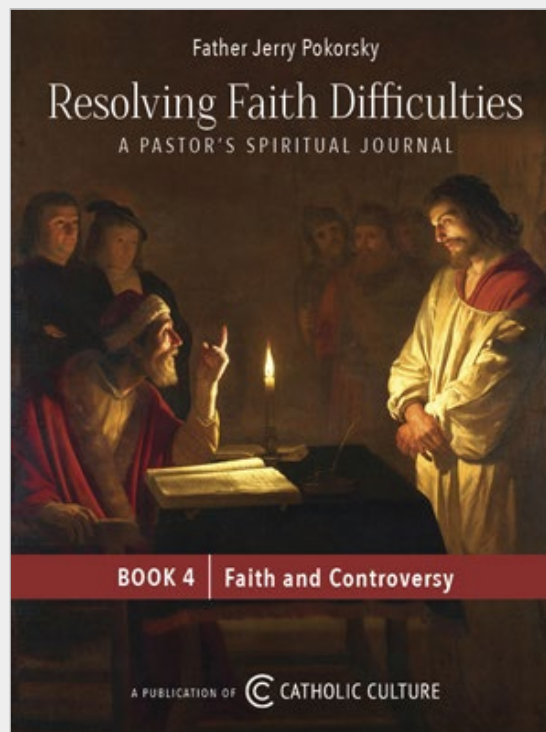
46 Jn. 1:5.

47 Cf. Phil. 1:3-6.

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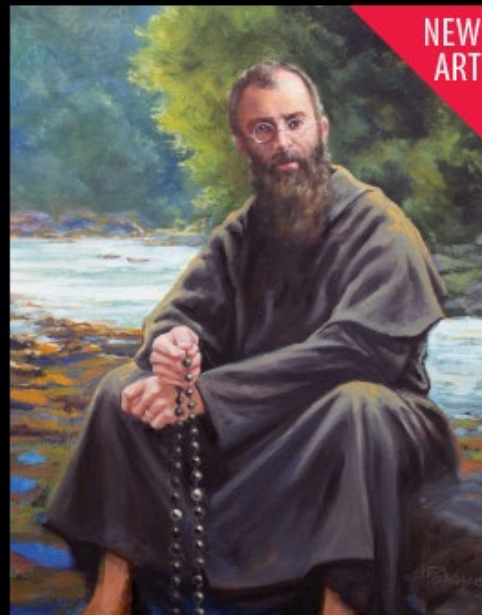
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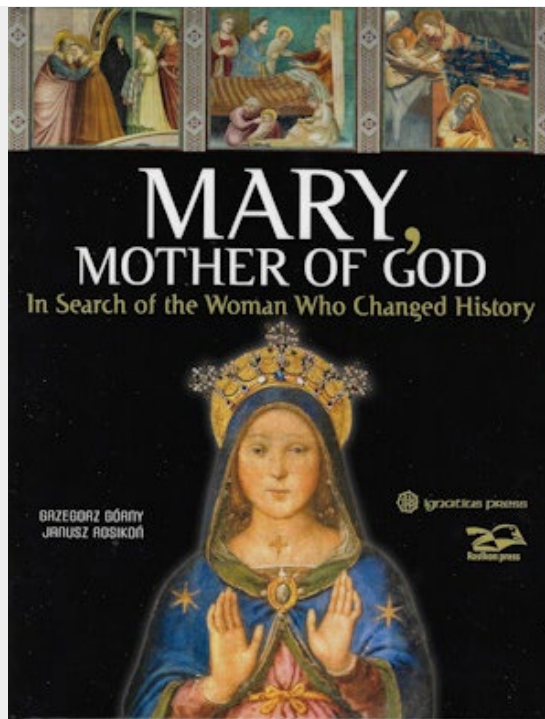
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