

# Decree On Priestly Training, Optatam Totius | EWTN

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**Author:** Second Vatican Council

### **DECREE ON PRIESTLY TRAINING *OPTATAM TOTIUS***

**PROCLAIMED BY HIS HOLINESS  
POPE PAUL VI  
ON OCTOBER 28, 1965**

Animated by the spirit of Christ, this sacred synod is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole Church depends to a great extent on the ministry of its priests. It proclaims the extreme importance of priestly training and lays down certain basic principles by which those regulations may be strengthened which long use has shown to be sound and by which those new elements can be added which correspond to the constitutions and decrees of this sacred council and to the changed conditions of our times. Because of the very unity of the Catholic priesthood this priestly formation is necessary for all priests, diocesan and religious and of every rite. Wherefore, while these prescriptions directly concern the diocesan clergy, they are to be appropriately adapted to all.

#### **I.**

## **THE PROGRAM OF PRIESTLY TRAINING TO BE UNDERTAKEN BY EACH COUNTRY**

1. Since only general laws can be made where there exists a wide variety of nations and regions, a special "program of priestly training" is to be undertaken by each country or rite. It must be set up by the episcopal conferences, revised from time to time and approved by the Apostolic See. In this way will the universal laws be adapted to the particular circumstances of the times and localities so that the priestly training will always be in tune with the pastoral needs of those regions in which the ministry is to be exercised.

### **II.**

## **THE URGENT FOSTERING OF PRIESTLY VOCATIONS**

2. The duty of fostering vocations pertains to the whole Christian community, which should exercise it above all by a fully Christian life. The principal contributors to this are the families which, animated by the spirit of faith and love and by the sense of duty, become a kind of initial seminary, and the parishes in whose rich life the young people take part. Teachers and all those who are in any way in charge of the training of boys and young men, especially Catholic associations, should carefully guide the young people entrusted to them so that these will recognize and freely accept a divine vocation. All priests especially are to manifest an apostolic zeal in fostering vocations and are to attract the interest of youths to the priesthood by their own life lived in a humble and industrious manner and in a happy spirit as well as by mutual priestly charity and fraternal sharing of labor.

Bishops on the other hand are to encourage their flock to promote vocations and should be concerned with coordinating all forces in a united effort to this end. As fathers, moreover, they must assist without stint those whom they have judged to be called to the Lord's work.

The effective union of the whole people of God in fostering vocations is the proper response to the action of Divine Providence which confers the fitting gifts on those men divinely chosen to participate in the hierarchical priesthood of Christ and helps them by His grace. Moreover, this same Providence charges the legitimate ministers of the Church to call forward and to consecrate with the sign of the Holy Spirit to the worship of God and to the service of the Church

those candidates whose fitness has been acknowledged and who have sought so great an office with the right intention and with full freedom.

The sacred synod commends first of all the traditional means of common effort, such as urgent prayer, Christian penance and a constantly more intensive training of the faithful by preaching, by catechetical instructions or by the many media of social communication that will show forth the need, the nature and the importance of the priestly vocation. The synod moreover orders that the entire pastoral activity of fostering vocations be methodically and coherently planned and, with equal prudence and zeal, fostered by those organizations for promoting vocations which, in accord with the appropriate pontifical documents, have already been or will be set up in the territory of individual dioceses, regions or countries. Also, no opportune aids are to be overlooked which modern Psychological and sociological research has brought to light.

The work of fostering vocations should, in a spirit of openness, transcend the limits of individual dioceses, countries, religious families and rites. Looking to the needs of the universal Church, it should provide aid particularly for those regions in which workers for the Lord's vineyard are being requested more urgently.

3. In minor seminaries erected to develop the seeds of vocations, the students should be prepared by special religious formation, particularly through appropriate spiritual direction, to follow Christ the Redeemer with generosity of spirit and purity of heart. Under the fatherly direction of the superiors, and with the proper cooperation of the parents, their daily routine should be in accord with the age, the character and the stage of development of adolescence and fully adapted to the norms of a healthy psychology. Nor should the fitting opportunity be lacking for social and cultural contacts and for contact with one's own family. Moreover, whatever is decreed in the following paragraphs about major seminaries is also to be adapted to the minor seminary to the extent that it is in accord with its purpose and structure. Also, studies undertaken by the students should be so arranged that they can easily continue them elsewhere should they choose a different state of life.

With equal concern the seeds of vocations among adolescents and young men are also to be fostered in those special institutes which, in accord with the local circumstances, serve the purpose of a minor seminary as well as among those who are trained in other schools or by other educational means. Finally, those

institutions and other schools initiated for those with a belated vocation are to be carefully developed.

### **III.**

#### **THE SETTING UP OF MAJOR SEMINARIES**

4. Major seminaries are necessary for priestly formation. Here the entire training of the students should be oriented to the formation of true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd. They are therefore to be prepared for the ministry of the word: that they might understand ever more perfectly the revealed word of God; that, meditating on it they might possess it more firmly, and that they might express it in words and in example; for the ministry of worship and of sanctification: that through their prayers and their carrying out of the sacred liturgical celebrations they might perfect the work of salvation through the Eucharistic sacrifice and the sacraments; for the ministry of the parish: that they might know how to make Christ present to men, Him who did not "come to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; cf. John 13:12-17), and that, having become the servants of all, they might win over all the more (cf. 1 Cor. 9:19).

Therefore, all the forms of training, spiritual, intellectual, disciplinary, are to be ordered with concerted effort towards this pastoral end, and to attain it all the administrators and teachers are to work zealously and harmoniously together, faithfully obedient to the authority of the bishop.

5. Since the training of students depends both on wise laws and, most of all, on qualified educators, the administrators and teachers of seminaries are to be selected from the best men, and are to be carefully prepared in sound doctrine, suitable pastoral experience and special spiritual and pedagogical training. Institutes, therefore, should be set up to attain this end. Or at least courses are to be arranged with a proper program, and the meetings of seminary directors are to take place at specified times.

Administrators, however, and teachers must be keenly aware of how much the success of the students' formation depends on their manner of thinking and acting. Under the rector's leadership they are to form a very closely knit community both in spirit and in activity and they are to constitute among themselves and with the students that kind of family that will answer to the

Lord's prayer "That they be one" (cf. John 17:11) and that will develop in the students a deep joy in their own vocation. The bishop, on the other hand, should, with a constant and loving solicitude, encourage those who labor in the seminary and prove himself a true father in Christ to the students themselves. Finally, all priests are to look on the seminary as the heart of the diocese and are to offer willingly their own helpful service.

6. With watchful concern for the age of each and for his stage of progress, an inquiry should be made into the candidate's proper intention and freedom of choice, into his spiritual, moral and intellectual qualifications, into his appropriate physical and psychic health-taking into consideration also possible hereditary deficiencies. Also to be considered is the ability of the candidate to bear the priestly burdens and exercise the pastoral offices.

In the entire process of selecting and testing students, however, a due firmness is to be adopted, even if a deplorable lack of priests should exist, since God will not allow His Church to want for ministers if those who are worthy are promoted and those not qualified are, at an early date, guided in a fatherly way to undertake other tasks. The latter should also be given sufficient direction so that, conscious of their vocation as Christians, they might eagerly embrace the lay apostolate.

7. Where individual dioceses are unable to institute their own seminaries properly, seminaries for many dioceses or for an entire region or for a country are to be set up and developed, so that the sound training of the students, which must be considered the supreme law in this matter, can be taken care of in a more effective manner. These seminaries, if they are regional or national, are to be regulated according to directives set down by the bishops concerned and approved by the Apostolic See.

In these seminaries, however, where there are many students, while retaining a unity of direction and of scientific training, the students should be conveniently divided into smaller groups so that a better provision is had for the personal formation of each.

#### **IV.**

### **THE CAREFUL DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPIRITUAL TRAINING**

8. The spiritual training should be closely connected with the doctrinal and pastoral, and, with the special help of the spiritual director, should be imparted in such a way that the students might learn to live in an intimate and unceasing union with the Father through His Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Conformed to Christ the Priest through their sacred ordination they should be accustomed to adhere to Him as friends, in an intimate companionship, their whole life through. They should so live His paschal mystery themselves that they can initiate into it the flock committed to them. They should be taught to seek Christ in the faithful meditation on God's word, in the active participation in the sacred mysteries of the Church, especially in the Eucharist and in the divine office, in the bishop who sends them and in the people to whom they are sent, especially the poor, the children, the sick, the sinners and the unbelievers. They should love and venerate with a filial trust the most blessed Virgin Mary, who was given as mother to the disciple by Christ Jesus as He was dying on the cross.

Those practices of piety that are commended by the long usage of the Church should be zealously cultivated; but care should be taken lest the spiritual formation consist in them alone or lest it develop only a religious affectation. The students should learn to live according to the Gospel ideal, to be strengthened in faith, hope and charity, so that, in the exercise of these practices, they may acquire the spirit of prayer, learn to defend and strengthen their vocation, obtain an increase of other virtues and grow in the zeal to gain all men for Christ.

9. The students should be so saturated with the mystery of the Church, especially as described by this sacred synod, that, bound to the Vicar of Christ in a humble and trusting charity and, once ordained priests, adhering to their own bishop as faithful helpers and engaging in a common effort with their fellow-priests, they bear witness to that unity that attracts men to Christ. They should learn to take part with a generous heart in the life of the whole Church in accord with what St. Augustine wrote: "to the extent that one loves the Church of Christ, to that extent does he possess the Holy Spirit." The students should understand most clearly that they are not destined for domination or for honors but are given over totally to the service of God and to the pastoral ministry. With a particular concern should they be so formed in priestly obedience, in a simple way of life and in the spirit of self-denial that they are accustomed to giving up willingly even those things which are permitted but are not expedient, and to conform themselves to Christ crucified.

The students are to be made clearly aware of the burdens they will be undertaking, and no problem of the priestly life is to be concealed from them. This is to be done, however, not that they should be almost solely concerned with the notion of danger in their future labors, but rather that they might be more readily conformed to a spiritual life that more than in any other way is actually strengthened by the very pastoral work they do.

10. Students who follow the venerable tradition of celibacy according to the holy and fixed laws of their own rite are to be educated to this state with great care. For renouncing thereby the companionship of marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (cf. Matt. 19:12), they embrace the Lord with an undivided love altogether befitting the new covenant, bear witness to the resurrection of the world to come (cf. Luke 20:36), and obtain a most suitable aid for the continual exercise of that perfect charity whereby they can become all things to all men in their priestly ministry. Let them deeply realize how gratefully that state ought to be received, not, indeed, only as commanded by ecclesiastical law, but as a precious gift of God for which they should humbly pray. Through the inspiration and help of the grace of the Holy Spirit let them freely and generously hasten to respond to this gift.

Students ought rightly to acknowledge the duties and dignity of Christian matrimony, which is a sign of the love between Christ and the Church. Let them recognize, however, the surpassing excellence of virginity consecrated to Christ, so that with a maturely deliberate and generous choice they may consecrate themselves to the Lord by a complete gift of body and soul.

They are to be warned of the dangers that threaten their chastity especially in present-day society. Aided by suitable safeguards, both divine and human, let them learn to integrate their renunciation of marriage in such a way that they may suffer in their lives and work not only no harm from celibacy but rather acquire a deeper mastery of soul and body and a fuller maturity, and more perfectly receive the blessedness spoken of in the Gospel.

11. The norms of Christian education are to be religiously observed and properly complemented by the newer findings of sound psychology and pedagogy. Therefore, by a wisely planned training there is also to be developed in the students a due human maturity. This will be made especially evident in stability of mind, in an ability to make weighty decisions, and in a sound evaluation of men and events. The students should be accustomed to work properly at their own development. They are to be formed in strength of

character, and, in general, they are to learn to esteem those virtues which are held in high regard by men and which recommend a minister of Christ. Such virtues are sincerity of mind, a constant concern for justice, fidelity to one's promises, refinement in manners, modesty in speech coupled with charity.

The discipline of seminary life is to be reckoned not only as a strong safeguard of community life and of charity but also as a necessary part of the total whole training formation. For thereby self-mastery is acquired, solid personal maturity is promoted, and the other dispositions of mind are developed which very greatly aid the ordered and fruitful activity of the Church. Seminary discipline should be so maintained, however, that the students acquire an internal attitude whereby they accept the authority of superiors from personal conviction, that is to say, from a motive of conscience (cf. Rom. 13:5), and for supernatural reasons. The norms of discipline are to be applied according to the age of the students so that they themselves, as they gradually learn self-mastery, may become accustomed to use freedom wisely, to act spontaneously and energetically, and to work together harmoniously with their fellows and with the laity.

The whole pattern of seminary life, permeated with a desire for piety and silence and a careful concern for mutual help, must be so arranged that it provides, in a certain sense, an initiation into the future life which the priest shall lead.

12. In order that the spiritual training rest upon a more solid basis and that the students embrace their vocation with a fully deliberate choice, it will be the prerogative of the bishops to establish a fitting period of time for a more intense introduction to the spiritual life. It will also be their charge to determine the opportuneness of providing for a certain interruption in the studies or of establishing a suitable introduction to pastoral work, in order that they may more satisfactorily test the fitness of candidates for the priesthood. In accordance with the conditions of individual regions it will also be the bishops' responsibility to make a decision about extending the age beyond that demanded at present by common law for the reception of sacred orders, and of deliberating whether it be opportune to rule that students, at the end of their course in theology, exercise the order of deacon for a fitting period of time before being promoted to the priesthood.

## V.



## THE REVISION OF ECCLESIASTICAL STUDIES

13. Before beginning specifically ecclesiastical subjects, seminarians should be equipped with that humanistic and scientific training which young men in their own countries are wont to have as a foundation for higher studies. Moreover they are to acquire a knowledge of Latin which will enable them to understand and make use of the sources of so many sciences and of the documents of the Church. The study of the liturgical language proper to each rite should be considered necessary; a suitable knowledge of the languages of the Bible and of Tradition should be greatly encouraged.

14. In revising ecclesiastical studies the aim should first of all be that the philosophical and theological disciplines be more suitably aligned and that they harmoniously work toward opening more and more the minds of the students to the mystery of Christ. For it is this mystery which affects the whole history of the human race, continually influences the Church, and is especially at work in the priestly ministry.

That this vision be communicated to the students from the outset of their training, ecclesiastical studies are to be begun with an introductory course which should last for an appropriate length of time. In this initiation to ecclesiastical studies the mystery of salvation should be so proposed that the students perceive the meaning, order, and pastoral end of their studies. At the same time they should be helped to establish and penetrate their own entire lives with faith and be strengthened in embracing their vocation with a personal dedication and a joyful heart.

15. The philosophical disciplines are to be taught in such a way that the students are first of all led to acquire a solid and coherent knowledge of man, the world, and of God, relying on a philosophical patrimony which is perennially valid and taking into account the philosophical investigations of later ages. This is especially true of those investigations which exercise a greater influence in their own nations. Account should also be taken of the more recent progress of the sciences. The net result should be that the students, correctly understanding the characteristics of the contemporary mind, will be duly prepared for dialogue with men of their time.

The history of philosophy should be so taught that the students, while reaching the ultimate principles of the various systems, will hold on to what is proven to be true therein and will be able to detect the roots of errors and to refute them.

In the very manner of teaching there should be stirred up in the students a love of rigorously searching for the truth and of maintaining and demonstrating it, together with an honest recognition of the limits of human knowledge. Attention must be carefully drawn to the necessary connection between philosophy and the true problems of life, as well as the questions which preoccupy the minds of the students. Likewise students should be helped to perceive the links between the subject-matter of philosophy and the mysteries of salvation which are considered in theology under the higher light of faith.

16. The theological disciplines, in the light of faith and under the guidance of the magisterium of the Church, should be so taught that the students will correctly draw out Catholic doctrine from divine revelation, profoundly penetrate it, make it the food of their own spiritual lives, and be enabled to proclaim, explain, and protect it in their priestly ministry.

The students are to be formed with particular care in the study of the Bible, which ought to be, as it were, the soul of all theology. After a suitable introduction they are to be initiated carefully into the method of exegesis; and they are to see the great themes of divine revelation and to receive from their daily reading of and meditating on the sacred books inspiration and nourishment.

Dogmatic theology should be so arranged that these biblical themes are proposed first of all. Next there should be opened up to the students what the Fathers of the Eastern and Western Church have contributed to the faithful transmission and development of the individual truths of revelation. The further history of dogma should also be presented, account being taken of its relation to the general history of the Church. Next, in order that they may illumine the mysteries of salvation as completely as possible, the students should learn to penetrate them more deeply with the help of speculation, under the guidance of St. Thomas, and to perceive their interconnections. They should be taught to recognize these same mysteries as present and working in liturgical actions and in the entire life of the Church. They should learn to seek the solutions to human problems under the light of revelation, to apply the eternal truths of revelation to the changeable conditions of human affairs and to communicate them in a way suited to men of our day.

Likewise let the other theological disciplines be renewed through a more living contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition,

nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world. Similarly the teaching of canon law and of Church history should take into account the mystery of the Church, according to the dogmatic constitution "De Ecclesia" promulgated by this sacred synod. Sacred liturgy, which is to be considered as the primary and indispensable source of the truly Christian spirit, should be taught according to the mind of articles 15 and 16 of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy.

The circumstances of various regions being duly considered, students are to be brought to a fuller understanding of the churches and ecclesial communities separated from the Apostolic Roman See, so that they may be able to contribute to the work of re- establishing unity among all Christians according to the prescriptions of this holy synod.

Let them also be introduced to a knowledge of other religions which are more widespread in individual regions, so that they may acknowledge more correctly what truth and goodness these religions, in God's providence, possess, and so that they may learn to refute their errors and be able to communicate the full light of truth to those who do not have it.

17. But since doctrinal training ought to tend not to a mere communication of ideas but to a true and intimate formation of the students, teaching methods are to be revised both as regards lectures, discussions, and seminars and also the development of study on the part of the students, whether done privately or in small groups. Unity and soundness of the entire training is carefully to be provided for by avoiding an excessive multiplication of courses and lectures and by the omission of those questions which scarcely retain any importance or which ought to be referred to higher academic studies.

18. It will be the bishops' concern that young men suited by temperament, virtue, and ability be sent to special institutes faculties, or universities so that priests may be trained at a higher scientific level in the sacred sciences and in other fields which may be judged opportune. Thus they will be able to meet the various needs of the apostolate. The spiritual and pastoral training of these men, however, especially if they are not yet ordained as priests, is in no way to be neglected.

## **VI.**

## THE PROMOTION OF STRICTLY PASTORAL TRAINING

19. That pastoral concern which ought to permeate thoroughly the entire training of the students also demands that they be diligently instructed in those matters which are particularly linked to the sacred ministry, especially in catechesis and preaching, in liturgical worship and the administration of the sacraments, in works of charity, in assisting the erring and the unbelieving, and in the other pastoral functions. They are to be carefully instructed in the art of directing souls, whereby they will be able to bring all the sons of the Church first of all to a fully conscious and apostolic Christian life and to the fulfillment of the duties of their state of life. Let them learn to help, with equal solicitude, religious men and women that they may persevere in the grace of their vocations and may make progress according to the spirit of their various Institutes.

In general, those capabilities are to be developed in the students which especially contribute to dialogue with men, such as the ability to listen to others and to open their hearts and minds in the spirit of charity to the various circumstances and needs of men.

20. They should also be taught to use the aids which the disciplines of pedagogy, psychology, and sociology can provide, according to correct methodology and the norms of ecclesiastical authority. Likewise, let them be properly instructed in inspiring and fostering the apostolic activity of the laity and in promoting the various and more effective forms of the apostolate. Let them also be imbued with that truly Catholic spirit which will accustom them to transcend the limits of their own diocese, nation, or rite, and to help the needs of the whole Church, prepared in spirit to preach the Gospel everywhere.

But since it is necessary for the students to learn the art of exercising the apostolate not only theoretically but also practically, and to be able to act both on their own responsibility and in harmonious conjunction with others, they should be initiated into pastoral work, both during their course of studies and also during the time of vacations, by opportune practical projects. These should be carried out in accordance with the age of the students and local conditions, and with the prudent judgment of the bishops, methodically and under the leadership of men skilled in pastoral work, the surpassing power of supernatural means being always remembered.

## VII.

## **TRAINING TO BE ACHIEVED AFTER THE COURSE OF STUDIES**

21. Since priestly training, because of the circumstances particularly of contemporary society, must be pursued and perfected even after the completion of the course of studies in seminaries, it will be the responsibility of episcopal conferences in individual nations to employ suitable means to this end. Such would be pastoral institutes working together with suitably chosen parishes, meetings held at stated times, and appropriate projects whereby the younger clergy would be gradually introduced into the priestly life and apostolic activity, under its spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral aspects, and would be able, day by day, to renew and foster them more effectively.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Fathers of this holy synod have pursued the work begun by the Council of Trent. While they confidently entrust to seminary administrators and teachers the task of forming the future priests of Christ in the spirit of the renewal promoted by this sacred synod, they earnestly exhort those who are preparing for the priestly ministry to realize that the hope of the Church and the salvation of souls is being committed to them. They urge them also to receive the norms of this decree willingly and thus to bring forth most abundant fruit which will always remain.

**[Translation of Latin Original by the Holy See]**