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Training of Priests in the 21st Century

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Introduction

In the 1990s, the different formation houses situated on the campus of Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth (JDV), Pune, began to voice their concern about the spirituality of the students.¹ The superiors of these houses felt that the students' lack of attendance at community exercises was the result of messages communicated to them by the JDV faculty and their radical teaching, and they wanted to know the "impact of JDV on the spirituality of the students." The superiors' anxiety was expressed in the following words: "If at JDV they are told that the rosary, the benediction and the way of the cross are exercises that arose in a specific historical and cultural milieu many centuries back and therefore may not have the same relevance today, then it is highly unlikely that the students will consider it important to attend these exercises today in their own communities."² Hence, they commissioned an exploratory study to learn "what the students actually think about spirituality." The study showed that the students appreciated the contribution (by way of a progressive theology) that the JDV Theological Faculty made to their spirituality. But could the campus houses offer them suitable support systems to integrate that theology in their lives? If they did, priestly training could

help form creative and innovative students.³

The concern voiced by the superiors centres on a problem that is not explained away by saying that the students appreciated the JDV Theological Faculty's progressive theology. The end product of theological formation cannot be a mere understanding of the more progressive points in theology, but depends on whether the student can integrate in his life the theology that is offered. In fact, successful priestly training requires that the formees (the students) and the formators (the Theological Faculty and Houses) have a common understanding of the priesthood. If we question the need of the formee to take part in the usual exercises of traditional piety, we must also enquire whether the impact of JDV leads him to self-doubt and/or, ultimately, to loss of faith!

How does one construct a programme for priestly training? Not merely by having recourse to past patterns and the findings of traditional dogmatic (systematic) theology.⁴ A programme for priestly training must take into account the changing needs of the community that the priest must serve. While the traditional Christian understanding of the priest's role re-

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mains constant, the changing needs of society will suggest new types of service that the priest should offer.

The first part of the article reviews how priest's training programmes underwent changes in the past. The second part reflects on specific items that should form part of a programme for priestly training in the 21st century.

Part One: Priestly Training in Pre-Vatican II Times

In the past, when changes in the model of priestly training were envisaged, the needs of the Church community were taken into consideration. During the centuries before the Council of Trent (1545-63), seminaries did not exist for the training of priests. In the absence of a system for formal training – it is the diocesan priest that we have in mind – the would-be priest lacked a training in philosophy and theology. Charles the Great (c.742-814) set up schools and patronized scholars to improve the literacy of the Frankish clergy. He enacted laws (787) which obliged monasteries and bishops' houses to provide conditions for study. In the feudal society of that time, Cathedral schools provided religious instruction to the poor students and clerics.⁵ However, it is not clear that such schools made for an educated diocesan clergy. The Constitutions of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), No. 11, ask churches – especially the cathedral – to appoint a master

to teach grammar and other branches of study, as far as is possible, to the clerics of those and other churches.

The metropolitan church shall have a

theologian to teach scripture to priests and others and especially to instruct them in matters which are recognized as pertaining to the care of souls.”⁶

Such preparation gave future priests a limited ability for apostolic work in the parishes. Some of the ecumenical councils of the Church before Trent had to insist on the presence of qualified persons in scripture and dogma in each diocese as resource persons to guarantee soundness in the sacred sciences.⁷

It is a moot point whether a more enlightened clergy could have dealt more successfully with the reform movements that took their inspiration from the Bible and paved the way for the Protestant Reformation.⁸ Those who decided to make reform their life's goal eventually took to preaching the word of God and encountered much opposition from the established Church. A clergy that could correctly appreciate the Bible as a source of revelation, counter superstition and prevent a magical understanding of sacraments was sorely needed.

The Council of Trent understood the problems occasioned by an uneducated clergy and decreed that each bishop should set up a college near his cathedral or 'in another convenient place' to train persons for the priesthood. After setting down the "true and catholic doctrine of the sacrament of order," the Council of Trent issued canon 18 (1563) in its decree of reform.⁹ It obliges bishops to make sure that the college where boys are educated "becomes a perpetual seminary of ministers of God." While these boys were to

be trained in spirituality and piety, their being in a college underlined the importance of academic study in their priestly formation.

In the years after Trent, the seminary provided the environment for sustained religious practices, prescribed study and a sheltered existence. However, the practice of celibacy, the embracing of solitude and being separated from the outside world uncovered needs that had to be addressed. Games, tournaments, entertainment and occasional celebrations offered relaxation, leisure and social life to those confined within the seminary walls, but they also succeeded in making seminary life exclusive and strongly clerical.

While in general the establishment of seminaries provided the Church with a clergy that was more theologically literate and pastorally effective, the strictly controlled environment of the seminary contrasted with the atmosphere of classical study and search prevailing in the universities. In the aftermath of the Enlightenment, the priest found himself out of step with the world of secular learning and its scientific culture. An insistence on Thomism – mandated by Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) – in seminary teaching resulted in priests having a universal and scholastic synthesis in theology. The unitary system present in the theology taught in seminaries contributed to logical thinking in the abstract, but prevented seminal thinking and theologizing that could offer solutions to the challenges of everyday life. In general, the 19th century was a century of caution for Catholic theology, and except for the Catholic

faculty of theology that was set up in Tübingen in 1817 and sought new avenues in theological reflection, there was only the abortive attempt of the Modernists that was tolerated by Leo XIII for some time. Seminary formation depended in great part on exposure to Church doctrine that grew increasingly distant from the world of people.

It was the aim of Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895-1990) to understand doctrine in the context of everyday human experience. He did this by using the historical method to study the texts of Aquinas. Appointed rector of Le Saulchoir (a Dominican house of studies) from 1932-1942, Chenu explained his method in a book (published in 1937) meant for private circulation. He was committed to the worker-priest movement and he sent Dominican students into the mines as workers.¹⁰ However, persons influential in the Vatican opposed him; in 1942 his book was placed on the Index, and he himself was removed from his post.

The efforts of Chenu witness to the need for priestly training to be done in a living context. But he was not anti-intellectual and valued deep and engaging study. Although he lay great store by his being a scholar in medievalism, Chenu was no less committed to relevance in priestly formation. He was surely a forerunner of those who adopted new patterns of priestly training in the years following Vatican II.

Until Vatican II, priests were seen as persons essentially linked with the celebration of cult (sacrifice) as the Council of Trent had described them (ND 1707). Vatican II, in keeping with

the ideas expressed in Pius XII's *Mediator Dei* (1947), affirmed the unequaled priesthood of Christ and the priestly status of the entire community. It also spoke of the ministerial priesthood of the ordained minister through which service is rendered to the Church. The Vatican II image of the priest is more holistic than that of Trent. Vatican II describes the office of the priest as one of proclaiming the word of God, of celebrating the sacraments for the community and of offering leadership to the community of believers (*Lumen Gentium* no. 28).

In the Old Testament times, one discharged the function of a priest because he belonged to a particular group or family. That function was linked to temple worship. In the New Testament, the priesthood of Christ encompasses the entire community. In the words of George Soares-Prabhu: "The New Testament sees this ministry realized collectively in the common or social priesthood of all Christians, and individually in the professional, 'ministerial' priesthood of certain 'officials' in the Church."¹¹ Vatican II does not define the priesthood solely in terms of cult; rather the cult is integrated into the total function that the priest is called to perform.

If *Lumen Gentium* stresses his [the priest's] traditional cultic role, affirming that "in virtue of the sacred power with which he is endowed the ministerial priest instructs and rules the priestly people, performs in the person of Christ the eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people" (10), this traditional understanding must (according to the

normal hermeneutics of conciliar documents) be integrated into the newer understanding that the decree on priestly life provides. The cultic role of the priest, even though reaffirmed in the Council is, therefore, not to be taken as his primary role. It is part of his mission to gather together "God's family as a brotherhood of unity". Such an understanding of the Christian priesthood is certainly much closer to the New Testament than the popular identification of the priest as an agent of cultic power.¹²

In the years following Vatican II, there have been innovations in priestly formation but the seminary structure remains the single stable factor of formation alongside the new methods adopted to train priests. Does the seminary formation help train a future priest in an optimal way and, if not, how can it be suitably modified?

Part Two: Priestly Training in a Post-Vatican II Era

If Vatican II understands the priest more comprehensively than Trent, then priestly training needs to be changed or modified. Before, the priest received his identity through the performance of a cultic function; now he is characterized as a community-builder.

The total activity of the community – and not merely its cultic celebrations – is seen as giving glory and praise to God. According to the theology of Vatican II, the priest is ordained for the building up of the whole community, and the cultic function would constitute only part of his total activity. In keeping with this understanding, it would seem that the following areas should

feature in priestly training if he is to be relevant in the 21st century.

A. A New Self-understanding

In his closing remarks at the ceremony at which Pope John Paul II gave his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Cardinal Julius Darmaatmadja spoke the following words:

4. ...In the context of immersing ourselves in these [Asian] local cultural and religious values, what we are speaking of is: the existence of authentic values that we can discover therein, such as: mercy, submission to the will of God, compassion, rectitude, non-violence, righteousness, filial piety, harmony with creation, etc... Precisely because this task urges us to root the Church in this [Asian] local religious culture and reality, we therefore support "inculturation in the field of theology, liturgy, formation of priests and religious, catechesis, spirituality, etc."

The Cardinal's words invite Christians to discover wholesomeness and gospel values already present in the Asian context. His words underscore an attitude of learning from others by paying reverent and painstaking attention to the Asian context in which the Church finds herself. If in the past the Church tended to understand herself by (absolute) self-affirmation in a so-called universal context – one recalls the four marks of the Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic – today, she is asked to affirm herself in an Asian context and in relation to other communities of faith.

The changed self-understanding would imply that the study of theology should always be related to the ground

reality where the priest is called to build a community with Kingdom values. In fact, such study is already taking place where students engage in apostolates that make them aware of new questions and issues that people raise. Careful reflection on the questions and concerns of people in the light of Christian faith will surely raise the level of involvement and interest of students for the priesthood. But for the Church to be truly immersed in the Asian context, such reflection should not be confined to traditional thomistic and/or systematized theology but should include all that Asia's faith traditions have to offer. Such theological reflection will not only be universal in its scope but it will also help the future priest to serve the community at large and not only those belonging to the Christian Church.

B. The Scope of Contextual Theology

It would be a truism to say that all theology is contextual, that it always has its specific concerns and/or objectives. A theologizing subject is always historically conditioned and the theology that such a subject elaborates is partly the result of such conditioning. To do contextualized theology today means that specific concerns or objectives of the 'here and now' are seen as the accepted point of departure for the theologizing subject.

In India, with its varied regional and ethnic groups, the concept of contextual theology becomes exceedingly complex. To what extent does priestly training equip a person to recognize and deal successfully with the context that

he will encounter as a priest? Ms Jean Fernandez describes the problem and suggests a way of equipping the future priest for his task.

To begin with, the Indian Catholic Priest faces a far more culturally heterogeneous body of laity. The Indian priest does not deal with a Pan-Catholic, or a Pan-Indian sensibility. He encounters Tamilian Catholics, Telugu Catholics, Malayali Catholics, Anglo-Indians, Mangaloreans, Goans, tribals, Catholics of different caste and class origins. Unless his training takes into account this heterogeneity and prepares him for it, his pastoral work will remain largely unsuccessful. A Catholic priest is frequently a neophyte even after several years in the priesthood because his training has not enabled him to recognize the different value-systems and assumptions from which different social groups in the Church operate. A great deal of cultural ignorance and bewilderment prevails in our Catholic priests, especially since the Indian adolescent has a constrained social life, and may join the seminary innocent of cultural differences, with many of his naive misconceptions unchallenged... A sociology of the Indian Church needs to be taught in our seminaries along with a general sociology of the Indian people.¹³

Learning to live with people who profess different faiths and who base their lives on assumptions that suppose a novel worldview cannot take place within the walls of a seminary. The stability of the seminary's life style ill-equips persons to enter into normal human intercourse with the people he will serve as a priest. It is not enough to acquire psychological skills and have

group therapy training. One must make one's own a theological perspective that does justice to people of all faiths. Exposure programmes, live-ins with groups of different faith persuasions and varied types of field experience must be part of the priestly training syllabus.

C. *The Scope of Dialogue*

In its very first section, *Ecclesia in Asia* pointed to dialogue as a key activity of today's Christian. Pope John Paul II states that he had observed "directly the *encounter in dialogue* of the particular Churches, including the Eastern Churches, in the person of their Pastors."¹⁴ He then describes "dialogue as a *characteristic mode of the Church's life in Asia*."¹⁵ Further on, there is explicit mention of dialogue as the mission of the Church (no. 29) – ecumenical dialogue (30) and interreligious dialogue (31). Speaking about the efforts of the Church to enter into dialogue, the pope says:

Her [the Church's] efforts to engage in dialogue are directed in the first place to those who share her belief in Jesus Christ the Lord and Saviour. It extends beyond the Christian world to the followers of every other religious tradition, on the basis of the religious yearnings found in every human heart. Ecumenical dialogue and interreligious dialogue constitute a veritable vocation for the Church (no. 29).

The future priest must be skilled in dialogue during the years of priestly formation. One must be convinced that others beside oneself are also striving to encounter God and subscribe to a life-style that is humanizing and godly. Further, knowledge about religions cannot

be gleaned only from books and study but also from conferences, meetings and collaborative efforts with people of other faith persuasions. Finally, dialogue presumes that one understands the definitive status of one's religious beliefs but realizes that they are not exhaustive. Hence, dialogue is a context for the mutual enrichment of both parties.

In the pluralist context of India, dialogue is not an accidental activity of the priest. It is a way of life that he must practise so that the community at large is built. The opportunity for dialogue begins with a fostering of internal democracy in the seminary itself where priestly training must emphasize how respect and consideration for another's point of view must be shown.

D. Corporate Management

Priestly training is meant to prepare a person to deal not only with individual persons but also with communities or societies as a whole. Such training must provide for corporate management so that the future priest can benefit the persons he serves. Corporate management will be viewed from three points of view.

(i) The Customer

The customer is the body of parishioners who have a variety of needs. As members of the Church they look to the priest duly appointed by the bishop to satisfy those needs. The priest who is appointed to a parish is one who is supposed to have the skills and temperament to attend to those needs. During the years of priestly formation, there must be provision for interaction between the potential priest and church

communities. There must be an awareness of the different constituencies that the priest must recognize, prioritize and address. Evidently, the constituencies that are made up of the poor and suffering require principal attention. The customer is one who is characterized by his/her needs in the parish community. Could it happen that the customer finds little that meets his/her requirements in what the priest offers? Does the priest as seller come across as a person who is minimally interested in making available to the customer the commodities that affect his/her decision-making, ethical living and God-centred activity? Should that be the case, the customer will slowly, but surely, cease to recognize in the priest's image a person who can benefit him/her.

The parishioners as customers have a right to expect from the management (the priest in charge) an intelligent and cogent explanation of the word of God that confirms and confronts him/her in life's varied situations. They look to the management to stimulate creative thinking and purposeful action in the different constituencies that make up the parish. Can those in charge of the parish offer help in conflict resolving and building up of persons? The management must offer the parishioners a product that they can use and that perfects them as human beings. Such a product can be understood as the offering of material help to those in need, the rendering of appropriate services to the parishioners in their daily life and in the celebration of the sacramental life of the Church. Priestly training must provide for the offering of such a product.

(ii) Core offering

Core offering refers to the commodity that the priest puts out in the belief that the commodity will enhance the life of the parishioner. The core offering should be a product that is specific not general, easily recognizable not vague, and customer-oriented. The core offering obliges the priest to acquire expertise to market it. In parish ministry, being available is not enough. Availability becomes a marketable product only when the priest has something to offer.

Priests who are part of the management in a parish have a duty to offer a product that is meaningful to the customer. Although one may not know exactly his/her appointment in the future, it is necessary to prepare oneself to be a seller in a very concrete way. This suggests that during the years of formation, the formee himself as the primary agent responsible for his formation should work hard to acquire skills and competencies that can be marketed. A formation programme should offer scope for such acquisition. Here, it will be helpful to ask if reflection on apostolic work during formation urges those in training to cultivate their minds to assess what they read or hear, and whether they have concrete customers in mind when choosing areas of study. The core offering should be a well-defined product that a potential priest invests in so that he can offer a wholesome and marketable commodity to the customer.

(iii) Competition

Selling and buying in the market by different parties creates com-

petition. Not only does competition help in generating quality products, but it also attaches affordable price tags to these. Does the security that attends Church-related management (the priests in charge) make them less serious in marketing their products? Is there good reason to believe that the customer will choose products from the management in the parish over other available ones?

A salesperson who does not renovate his/her shop in which he/she does business will soon lose out to others. In today's market, newer versions of products appear almost daily and products never seen before make their appearance as a matter of course. In the face of a changing world, can the management in a parish merely repeat the past and steel itself against change?

Conclusion

The elements that would make for a contributive priestly training in the 21st century are: an attitude that seeks one's personal identity in a continuing relationship with those of Christian and other faith persuasions; a recognition that those belonging to groupings other than Christian also have a God experience from which one can learn; engaging in dialogue as a way of life so that mutual enrichment takes place in both dialogue partners. Finally, one must also keep in mind the corporate nature of society that one finds in parishes. Could the seminary be the most suitable place for priestly training that includes these elements?

Notes

1. John D'Mello: *An Exploratory Study of Spiritual Formation in Seminaries affiliated to Jnana Deepa Vidyapeeth* (mimeographed sheets), 1993-94, p. 4.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.* p. 27.
4. Refer "Theology" by Gerald O'Collins in *The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* edited by Richard P. McBrien, Harper San Francisco, 1995, p. 1250.
5. Cathedral schools were "established in medieval or later times for the education of choirboys of cathedral churches. They sometimes served also the purposes of a grammar school, providing free education for poor boys living in the cathedral city." (Refer *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* edited by F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, Oxford, 1997, p. 303).
6. Norman Tanner (editor): *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* Volume I (Trent-Vatican II), Georgetown University Press, 1990, p. 240.
7. Refer to "Priestly Formation and Seminary Structure" in VIDYAJYOTI 58 (1994, November), pp. 693-4.
8. Reform groups included the Waldensians who took their origin from Peter Waldo, in the late 12th century and the followers of John Hus (c. 1372-1415) and others.
9. Norman Tanner (editor): *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* Volume II (Trent-Vatican II), Georgetown University Press, 1990, pp. 750-751.
10. Mark Schoof: *A Survey of Catholic Theology 1800-1970* (translated by N.D. Smith), Paulist Newman Press, New York, p. 103.
11. Refer Chapter 13, "Christian Priesthood in India Today: A Biblical Reflection," in *A Biblical Theology for India* (Collected Writings of George M. Soares, S.J. Vol. 2) edited with an Introduction by Scaria Kuthirakkattel, S.V.D., published by Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, 1999, p. 225.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 237-8.
13. Refer *The New Leader*, Vol. 80, October 16-31, 1990, No. 20, "What Should be the Focus of Priestly Formation?" p. 17.
14. *Ecclesia in Asia*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of John Paul II, Vatican City, 1999, no. 3.
15. *Ibid.*

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Formation or Training? An Intercultural Perspective

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There are two educations:
the one that teaches how to make a living
and the one that teaches how to live.¹

0. Formation and Training

The difference between formation and training is perhaps best illustrated through concrete examples.

Recently as I was awaiting my turn at one of the immigration counters at the Frankfurt airport I noticed two Africans before me. Being a bit sleepy I did not at first realize that something was amiss. As the two German officials who examined the passports began to raise their voices it dawned on me that the Africans were having visa-problems. But I could not say what exactly the problem was. I only heard the two German officials, a lady and a gentleman, shouting at the helpless Africans, "Go away, you do not have a visa!" As the two Africans were withdrawing from the counter the lady official shouted an obscenity in German at them.

Undoubtedly, the two officials only were doing their duty having undergone *training* in matters relating to their task of checking up and examining passports and visas of people coming from different cultures, but it is doubtful if they had any *formation* with

regard to encountering people of other cultures.

Now let us turn to the following story.

It intrigued the congregation to see their rabbi disappear each week on the eve of the Sabbath. They suspected he was secretly meeting the Almighty, so they deputed one of their number to follow him.

This is what the man saw: the rabbi disguised himself in peasant clothes and served a paralysed Gentile woman in her cottage, cleaning out the room and preparing a Sabbath meal for her.

When the spy got back the congregation asked,

"Where did the rabbi go? Did he ascend to heaven?"

"No," the man replied, "he went even higher."²

Clearly no amount of training could possibly prepare a rabbi for an intercultural commitment.

For far too long formation has been understood in a narrowly religious sense: formation of persons in a reli-

gious congregation. The centre of this formation is the so-called charism of the congregation. Seen interculturally, this is just plain navel gazing. Formation has to have just the opposite goal, namely, of opening us up to the other, the other culture, the other religion. It is precisely the religious who have given up everything who are invited to be open to face any thing, any situation. That is why formation has to be understood in our times more comprehensively than in former times. In our global and intercultural village there is need of a formation that not only ensures and guarantees the existence of this village but also enables a harmonious living together of all peoples.

This means that there is need of an intercultural consciousness. For the survival of the individual cultures there is need of the awareness of interculturality, which takes note of diverse cultures and sees to it that they are all able to survive. Today the goal of formation has to be broadened so that formation can move in the direction of deepening intercultural awareness. Such an awareness ensures intraculturality (being in touch with one's culture, religion and spirituality) by promoting interculturality where religions and cultures interact positively with one another.

0.1 An Open Horizon Of Understanding

Interculturality demands openness. An important question that needs to be raised right at the beginning is, what is our access to reality, to the world, to the world of humans? Whatever our re-

sponse to this question – obviously it depends on our understanding of reality – one thing is clear, there is need for openness towards reality, need for an open horizon on our part. The kind of openness that is operative in us determines the kind of access we have to reality.

Without some sort of openness no access is possible. An access is the concretization of a specific kind of openness. The validity of this statement is seen in the opposite case where there is lack of openness. For what do the many conflicts – whatever be their nature – of our times both in India as well as in the rest of the world tell us? Genuine interaction takes place even where a minimum of openness is operative. Thus our age is beginning to show an increasing openness towards the environment. This implies a new access to reality. Such an access means a mode of approach and conduct with regard to the environment.

The different accesses constitute in effect our life and life-style. They are expressed in our attitudes and values, in our traditions and our cultures. The latter comprise the area of our discussion in this paper because they manifest themselves in whatever our society, our nation and our world do, produce and proclaim.

An open horizon is open to a certain extent only because the very horizon determines the extent of the openness.³ This is so because such openness bears the characteristics of its horizon. It is open to the extent that its horizon is open. To generalize, traditions are open, each in its own unique manner.