

# Candidates for the Priesthood and Religious Life. Selection, Screening and Formation

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Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out that the change of era which we are living through is generating an “educational emergency”. One can perceive a difficulty in transmitting the fundamental values of a human and Christian existence to the new generations.

In the midst of this secularised and relativistic society, we do find areas which give reason for hope and which are full of work and effort for a Church which is more faithful to the Gospel. Among these privileged areas, where the holy spirit is invigorating various modes of life like “mustard seeds”, are seminaries and houses of formation.

I shall list some of these glimmers of light which are already developing in our seminaries.

## ***The Copernican revolution:***

For 10 years now I have been a close witness of the way the Latin American and Caribbean Seminaries Organization (Oslam), together with national Seminary organisations, has moved towards what we have called a “Copernican revolution”. A radical change in focus.

The centre of gravity no longer lies in the methods, theories and resources directed to seminarians, instead attention has been pointed towards the permanent formation of formators, since experience has taught us that what truly forms the person of the seminarian is the life and example of his formator<sup>1</sup>.

The novelty is that the formator himself, in confronting the challenges of today's mission of formation, realises that the Seminary is a lifelong space of formation for him too and not just for the seminarians; that it is a new call of Christ for him and not only for the candidates to the priesthood; and thus, in his service as a formator, he discovers a path of Christian discipleship and priestly conformation for himself.

The effectiveness and the fruits of the Seminary “depend on the way the formators themselves live their vocation and how they express it in guiding candidates, in team work and in a spirit of communion.”<sup>2</sup>

## ***The Family Environment:***

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr Orientaciones para la formación del formador”. Conclusiones de la XVII Asamblea General de la Oslam, Medellín, Colombia, 1-6 diciembre 2003.

Cfr. Conclusiones de la Asamblea Extraordinaria de la Oslam, Mérida, México , 13-18 octubre 2008

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, n 49

We could spend days speaking of families which are broken or dysfunctional and which are lacking in Christian life. Most of our seminarians come from this reality. The Seminary is a second experience of community life after that of the family. As a second family the Seminary is called upon to appreciate the full value of all the positive things in the person's original family, but at the same time it needs to heal and correct all the negative things and make provisions for all the deficiencies which may be carried in seminarians' hearts and which may spill over into affective relations and community life.

Of utmost importance is the point made in the apostolic exhortation “Pastores dabo vobis”<sup>3</sup>, where it is stated that before being a material place or space, a Seminary must be a spiritual environment, a way of life endowed with an atmosphere which fosters and ensures a process of formation.

The “real environment” in community life depends directly on the human and spiritual solidity of each of its members. In a community, sound and sincere seminarians will provide a mutual stimulus for vocational growth and will help to maintain the environment conducive to priestly ideals. The presence and prevalence of seminarians who are “two-faced” or who have “a double life”, who are used to proclaiming the most elevated priestly ideals publicly and at the same time betraying them in the intimacy of their personal lives, can destroy the spaces and means of formation, generating an environment which is truly anti-vocational.

Moving from an environment which is solely institutional to one which is a genuine family environment is essential in order to achieve real changes in the way seminarians live and think. Paternal, filial, fraternal relations, the common good, service to others, and placing all this before one's own personal interests or preferences, can only be experienced in a family atmosphere.

Those of us who have been formators have found that over the years and in the course of our formative experiences, our roles or relational transferences have changed radically in terms of the affective and perceptive processes which intervene between seminarians and ourselves.

I recall that, in my earliest years as a formator, seminarians saw me, treated me and related to me as an “elder brother”. And I myself – consciously and unconsciously – behaved as such. As the years went by, I discovered that, with the new generations, my relationship had changed so as to make me a father figure. Their attitudes and mine, their conduct and my conduct were those of a relationship similar to that between father and son and between son and father. And later, as rector of the Seminary, I was surprised to find that young people approached me seeking a relationship which was almost grandfather-to-grandson and grandson-to-grandfather, where the experience, patience and vision of a mature, “white-haired” adult was sought as a counterweight to the outlook and the relationship of their “prefects of discipline” who, as good fathers, were engaged in

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<sup>3</sup> PDV 42

immediate corrections and the order and smooth running of the everyday processes of formation.

Each of these roles not only has its own charm, but also its own effectiveness as a pedagogical instrument allowing the values of the Gospel to be experienced in a diversity and complementarity similar to what is found in a family. It is neither through figures of authority who are only concerned with outer compliance with rules of purity and standards of discipline, nor through naive approaches which leave the process of vocation to the supposed freedom and personal maturity of the individual candidate, that the formative relationship can perform its function. It is the presence, the close and daily guidance, the understanding of deep-seated motives and the evangelical confrontation which the formator provides the candidate with which weave the psychological and spiritual restructuring of the person before the call of God's grace.

If this family environment is not established, personal traumas and dissatisfactions will grow and spread to reach unhealthy and scandalous levels in priesthood.

### ***The gradual and diverse nature of the stages of formation:***

From a theological and spiritual perspective the values which are proposed to the candidate are extremely elevated ideals. It is the beginning of a path where the gift of grace has to be assisted by effort, by an ascetic action which depends on knowing and confronting oneself. Specific vocation requires lengthy processes and stages organised according to gradual progression.

The thirst for vocational values and the ability to live these values do not spring from nothing, they are not wild flowers. They are well-tended fruits, intentionally pursued and proposed explicitly and clearly.

This movement of specialisation in methods and content by stages is taking the shape of genuine formative itineraries which promote the gradual and developmental internalisation of being a man, a Christian, a disciple and a Good Shepherd.

Thus the **Minor Seminary** aims at forming good Christians. In the **Introductory Course**, which lasts one year, an in-depth exploration is made of the experience of a Christian in vocational discernment lived in a community, where Christian initiation is examined in terms of catechumenate. The **philosophical stage** is proposed as a way to learn how to be a disciple of Christ, over and beyond mere philosophical study. The **theological stage** includes an itinerary of "specific configuration": the feelings, the attitudes, the life-style of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd. This not only has to be the longest but also the most demanding of the stages in initial formation. The year or **period of pastoral experience** varies from Seminar to Seminar. The most important thing is to ensure that the candidate is living the acquired vocational values and that he is demanding of himself and displays personal generosity, such as to prove his suitability.

In addition to this formative process inside the Major Seminary, which involves at least 9 years of formation (the one year introductory course, three years of philosophy, four years of theology and one year of pastoral experience), and three years more if there has also been the experience of the Minor Seminary, there is also at least one year of vocational guidance prior to admission to the Seminary.

Therefore the traditional educational structure of two years of philosophy and three years of theology, which are the minimum canonical requirements to receive holy orders, is now completely a thing of the past and an approach which no self-respecting house of formation now applies. The selection and formation of candidates for the priesthood now involve a much longer and demanding process than in the past. This is a position which has gradually taken shape in recent years as a response to new emerging challenges.

### **Some high-priority pedagogical approaches and formative principles:**

In the last decade, a number of pedagogical approaches and principles have been established in common at meetings of formators. We will here mention the most important ones which may be of use in relation to the goals of this symposium:

**Integral conversion:** conversion is an event which occurs within the ambit of faith, but which must encompass the whole person. It implies a conversion to truth, goodness and love. In the case of sexual deviancies it will be found that conversion does not occur on these three levels or in a dynamic and permanent fashion.

**The level of Truth:** it is necessary to be open to reality and not to build priestly formation upon fantasies or imaginings or unrealistic expectations. This is the intellectual portion of conversion, which leads us to perceive objective values and contemplate them as the goal of our existence. Even though there is always a character of mystery in vocation, a candidate should be capable of facing up to his personal reality and the reality of his surroundings, even though it might be painful. He must ask himself where his real and deepest motivations lie and why he subscribes to certain values. His unconscious motives and his origins are questioned and he must combine his intelligence with his supernatural spirit in order to encounter the truth of his vocation.

**The level of Goodness:** it is not enough to understand truth, it is necessary that it be significant for the person in the concrete context of his life. It must be perceived as a good which is freely chosen and which opens the person to the subjective experience of an objective value. Some seminarians do not really take this step in some central aspects of the vocation to the priesthood. For example, celibacy may be experienced internally as a rule or a requirement and be accepted as such, but without ever being experienced as a charismatic gift which is a good for the person and which needs to be developed and tended for the community.

**The level of Love:** This is the affective aspect, which is so central and important in living the values proposed. One must be very careful to see that there exist true friendship, warm, mature and fraternal relations and communal life in which one gives and receives.

It is not just any kind of affectivity, but one which is characterised by giving oneself for the benefit of others. Only in conversion to oblation, and not in the gratification of one's personal needs, can a celibate life be built.

### **Verifying a person's relationship with his whole self and his own identity:**

A person who has developed normally achieves the dual ability to differentiate himself and to integrate himself. This ability leads the individual to establish his own limits with regard to others (differentiation) and, at the same time, to assume his own complex and ambivalent reality, linking past and present with an ideal which is projected towards the future (integration). Both movements are related to each other and it is precisely this harmonic correlation which makes it possible to be certain of the subjective amiability and the positive and stable character of the person.

When a candidate does not have both of these movements occurring in his daily process of formation, he is incapable of reworking his life experience, grasping its sense, mending breaks and separations or reconciling himself with experiences which are negative or perceived as such. And these deficiencies prevent vocational ideals from establishing themselves within the total reality of the person. From a functional point of view, the formative processes fall into a void and sooner or later the person will himself perceive the requirement of a consistent life to be absurd or impossible.

This should be verified in houses of formation by examining the concrete signs of everyday life. For example: a) One should not consider solely external conduct, but also include pre-dispositions and motivation in actions, emotions and in conscious and unconscious feelings whenever linked to conflictual relationships with others, particularly when jealousy, scheming and lying are involved. b) When relational abnormalities are not seen as a personal problem but as a conflict which is always caused by others, the candidate perceives his affective needs as legitimate and justifiable. Gratifying his own affective, sexual or power requirements is the real driving force in his vocation and therefore he does not see inside himself any reason to change them. c) The inability to adopt the healthy alternative channels which formation provides in order to live the absence of gratification and step outside of oneself such as: prayer, fraternal life, sports and apostolate.

These elements are vital for future priests, because they generate a stable identity which enables them to have a unified way of living the multiplicity of experiences and relations which can lead to the development of the essential features of the personality of the Good Shepherd: love for truth, loyalty, respect for persons, a sense of justice, and consistency and balance in judgements and behaviour<sup>4</sup>.

It has to be borne in mind that, sociologically, it is not easy for young people today to be certain about their sexual identity and orientation because they have to define them within a "liquid" society, to make use of Bauman's famous definition, which appears to allow all possibilities to be equally feasible, everywhere and at any time, including the

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<sup>4</sup> Concilio Ecueménico Vaticano II, Decreto sobre la formación sacerdotal *Optatum totius*, 11.

virtual illusions of the Internet<sup>5</sup>. This is why it is even more important to have a healthy environment in the Seminary with conduct and language which clearly encourage identity definition.

Things become more complex because even though human sexuality and affectivity are closely linked they do not coincide. Sexuality, seen as genitality, may be a preferred expression of affection, but not necessarily. Sexuality may also be lived in a way which is completely disconnected from affections, as is the case in perversion, when an attempt is made to reduce another person to the condition of an object on which aggressiveness and frustration can be vented.

Conversely, affectivity may not involve any sexual expression, as is the case in consecrated life and celibacy, and find other forms of expression: relations within community life, apostolic ministries and friendship.

This view is confirmed by research in developmental psychology: “Human sexual response can be deferred indefinitely or functionally negated throughout life. No other physiological process can be said to have such malleability in its physical expression [...]. Even though it is a natural physiological function, sexual response can be sublimated, limited, displaced or distorted through the inhibition of its natural components and/or changes in the environment in which they operate. For example: sexual function, as a natural process can be sublimated, for sufficiently valid reasons, achieving a high degree of tolerance to sexual tension with indulgence and distortion»<sup>6</sup>.

This complexity is understandable if one recognises the symbolic character of sexuality and affectivity and its structural reference to hidden meanings which are not explicitly recognised by the person; and therefore the diverse and even contrasting meanings among seminarians who, while formally experiencing one and the same formative process, produce differing and sometimes opposite results.

A wise old priest and psychologist used to comment in his lectures that anything could happen in the sexual and psychological sphere, anything could go together and anything could be imagined. And therefore it was necessary to follow the direct advice Jesus Christ gave us: “pray and watch”. Pray everything, watch everything.

This reality also implies that formators must bear in mind that some difficulties which at first sight might seem to be distinctly sexual, may actually reflect other kinds of problem, such as self-esteem, maturity and difficulty in giving oneself and living deep and stable relationships.

### **The capacity to love and give oneself:**

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<sup>5</sup> H. Zollner, *Il Se –contenuto,processi,mistero*, en A. Manenti, S. Guarinelli, H. Zollner (eds), *Persona e Formazione. Riflessioni per la pratica educativa y psicoterap utica*, Bologna, EDB, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> W. Masters, V. Johnson, *La respuesta sexual humana*, Buenos Aires, Intem dica, 1978.

One of the most important expressions of affective maturity is the ability to recognize and desire the good of others, in the pursuit of empathy. The Christian vocation is an invitation to step outside oneself to make God the centre of one's existence against the temptation of making oneself the centre of one's life.

In the existential substrate of sexual abusers one finds the opposite: narcissism, self-sufficiency and self-fulfilment as the supreme criteria of life. These criteria can easily be accepted as normal and justifiable because the culture of self-fulfilment is currently fashionable as a dogma to achieve a supposed state of happiness.

Father Luis Rulla expresses the psychological dilemma which arises in affective relationships between self-fulfilment and self-transcendence, in relation to Christian values, as follows: "It is important to state that the fundamental motivation of Christian vocation cannot be self-actualization or self-fulfilment as a goal in itself; after all, this would involve an anthropological vision in which man would be centered in himself and would therefore be incapable of loving or receiving love and incapable of having a relationship with others which is not directed to making use of them for the purposes of one's own self-fulfilment [...]. There is a great difference with an anthropology which is underpinned by the self-transcendence of *agape*. Here the motivation is the total gift of oneself for the good, the entire good of the other; in this relationship with the other the individual steps outside of himself up to the point of forgetting himself; in this, it is not the fulfilment of one's personal abilities or potential which is sought: rather, the other person is welcomed without reservations in his totality. Thus man fulfils himself, in his freedom of self-transcendence of love; but this self-fulfilment is the consequence of his self-transcendence. Christian anthropology is a You-and-you personalism, it is not a "me" personalism<sup>7</sup>".

The human verification of self-transcendence which formators should look for in everyday personal and community life, combined with the apostolic experience acquired outside the Seminary, has an equivalent in the field of spiritual life and good Spiritual Directors are capable of detecting it.

Spiritual fathers see that even though the Christocentric and transcendent motivation for priestly vocation and consecrated life should be the main one, unfortunately this is not always the case, and secondary motivations may prevail instead; for example, occupying a position, wanting to be in the limelight, carrying out human development activities or social justice advocacy, but not an authentic experience of God, a true desire for the sacred and a true sense of spiritual life.

Pederasts are people who have not attained an affective spirituality capable of involving their feelings, their minds and their imagination in a Christocentric and transcendent life option. That is something which is found in those who have had an authentic experience of God and are capable of finding in their relationship with Him the real reason of their own lives.

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<sup>7</sup> L. Rulla, *Antropología de la vocación cristiana I. Bases interdisciplinares*, Madrid, Sociedad de Educación Atenas, 1990.

Cardinal Hume gave the following advice to future priests: “The only way to live as celibates is to live a life of disciplined prayer. I believe that this is what, in the final analysis, saves us. You must fill your mind and your heart with a huge aspiration to God and to the things of God. You will not be able to do this at the utmost level, but it should be what you are always aiming for”<sup>8</sup>.

### **The centrality of affectivity:**

In the last decade, Latin American Seminaries have re-discovered the central position of the affective world of each person and of the community. This re-affirmation of affectivity means going to the source of one's vocation, which is not just a renunciation of marriage but a gift. It is the love of Christ which takes possession of the chosen person who thus feels the need to feel free in order to respond fully to the call. It is not that celibacy is the essence of consecrated life, but celibacy is the loving response, in the relationship, to the Lord, who loved us first. A profound reality of which celibacy is a concrete sign in the daily response of the person.

Because of this, it is a matter of great concern to see a lack of feelings in the formative process, a lack of feelings being also one of the most visible features in the personality of child abusers. Even if those excesses are not reached it still remains a worrying sign, because it reveals a lack of joy, while joy should be a characteristic of someone who has found a treasure in a field or a precious pearl ( Mt 13,44-46).

Good formators have learnt not to be complacent with those who act too chastely or too seriously, with those who are rigid and cold, but also with those who have already solved their problems and have no difficulties and think they can read everything, hear everything and see everything[...]. These are the least reliable people. Presumption is another very bad prognostic indicator».<sup>9</sup>

When a candidate excludes affections from his formative itinerary, there is a risk that the priesthood is being embarked upon as a kind of “profession”, in order to exercise a socially recognised power. In this perspective, the dimension of the role played becomes the central motivation. In it, over and beyond any possible benefits, the candidate finds a basic answer to his need for self-esteem and to be protected from fears and insecurities, so that spiritual motivations are relegated to a subordinate and sometimes totally irrelevant position.

In this way, the person ends up identifying himself psychologically “with the role” he plays at the expense of the vocational values he should really express. Because of this, the person will not be worried about not being consistent with the inherent values in the choice he has made, but will be focused on the opportunities for gratification which may be available and upon which he will become increasingly dependent, up to the point of

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<sup>8</sup> B. Hume, *Operai del Vangelo. Diaconi, preti, vescovi, laici, Paulinas*, Milán 1992

<sup>9</sup> A. Cencini, *Nel amore. Libertá e maturitá affettiva nel celibato consacrato*, Bologna, EDB, 1995.

not noticing that certain attitudes or actions clash dramatically with his vocation. And so living a “façade”, something which is easily noticeable on the part of some of the people who come into contact with him, does not entail any involvement of the person's mind or heart, and the signal which is sent is quite the opposite. In actual fact, in these situations “the individual is driven by external factors: obtaining a reward or avoiding punishment or maintaining a gratifying relationship with a person or a group”<sup>10</sup>.

Because of this, during formation special attention is given to how a person relates to himself and tells his own life story in guidance interviews with formators.

In this kind of person, spiritual directors find very little experience of dependency on God and a scarce sense of being creatures; and this leads to a basic inability to recognize one's own weaknesses and sins and thus a complete lack of willingness to work on oneself. The discovery of cases of sexual abuse is always preceded by years of spiritual lying, without any respect for spiritual direction and the sacrament of reconciliation.

### **The formative value of renunciation:**

Another important aspect to be assessed in initial formation is the candidate's capacity to live renunciation. Renunciation shows how far a seminarian will be able to persevere with his choice even without having received the expected gratifications, and even reaching the point of not paying any conscious attention to them.

One practical aid in gauging the value of renunciation is the fundamental distinction between the tension of renunciation and the tension of frustration. In the first case, the renunciation is not considered the central element of motivation and it does not disturb the person or deprive him of peace of mind, because it is not perceived as something indispensable or necessary for his life: if it were so, the tension would only be frustration and would make priestly life the source of obsessions which would lead to the person never being happy with the choice he has made.

Tension of renunciation is rooted in the ability to exercise self-control and to live the source of tension freely and consciously, which is part of the spiritual struggle of Christian life. A mature candidate does not deny or try to conceal the tension of growth with excuses. He does not lose his peace of mind and he is capable of staying with the situation, thus displaying a basic freedom which avoids getting caught up in difficulties and conflicts, such as the lack of social approval which might ensue from a conduct which is consistent with his life choice.

### **A spirituality of communion:**

One of the guiding principles in priestly formation in Seminaries is spirituality of communion. In practice, one has to be able to see two apparently opposite elements that

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

are, however, linked in the experience of communion: the ability to live solitude and having healthy friendships.

### **Being able to live solitude:**

Familiarity with solitude, which derives from familiarity with silence, is an indispensable test bench for the future priest, who, in celibacy, renounces the possibility of living with another person next to him, and renounces any exclusive relationship with another person; it is a test which must be faced in order to know the mystery of God's love, described by Saint Augustine as “more intimate to me than I am to myself”.

If a seminarian is incapable of being comfortable with himself, it will be hard for him to have serene relations with others. A sense of solitude accompanies human life because there is an internal aspect, a void, which no other human being can fill. This “metaphysical solitude”, when not accepted, unavoidably leads to illusory expectations which can never be fulfilled and which lead to failed marriages and, in the case of priests and religious, to a series of serious psychological compensations, including sexual deviations and abuse, the pursuit of power and the accumulation of temporal goods.

### **Healthy friendships:**

One distressing trait in people who have soiled themselves with pedophilia and sexual abuse is a lack of relationships on an equal footing, namely gratuitous, affectionate friendships, where people do not perform roles or act according to their positions in ordinary life; neither do these relations become power games, or merely functional, or even forms of emotional blackmail on the part of one or the other of the people involved.

The rather poor relationships of these persons were normally lived “protectively”, with people who had a lower status, because of their age or position, with a lot of pressure being exercised on them, probably because these persons were incapable of relating to people in any other way. These are persons who are profoundly alone, wounded, frustrated and anguished. Why should someone want to have an emotional relationship with a child if not because they are incapable of relating to their peers?

The presence of good equality-based relationships must be emphasised as an essential condition for entry into holy orders. In the words of the apostolic exhortation “Pastores dabo vobis”: “Since the charism of celibacy, even when it is genuine and has proved itself, leaves one's affections and instinctive impulses intact, candidates to the priesthood need an affective maturity which is prudent, able to renounce anything that is a threat to it, vigilant over both body and spirit, and capable of esteem and respect in interpersonal relationships between men and women. A precious help can be given by a suitable education to true friendship, following the image of the bonds of fraternal affection which Christ himself lived on earth”<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> PDV 44.

On the other hand, where one finds a plurality of affective conflicts one must be very careful to distinguish between normal problems of affective growth in the candidates and the recurrent difficulties caused by people who are psychologically incapable of living a celibate life. The latter should never remain in the Seminary and even less should they be ordained priests.

### **Learning to integrate aggressiveness:**

Aggressiveness is part of human nature and is indispensable in order to live. It is a psychological component, an “irascible passion” which allows us to overcome obstacles, it is the “claw” which gives us the strength and the courage not to give in when faced by difficulties and which allows us to bring to completion the goals we have in life.

Passions are sources of energy which need to be channelled. Responsibility lies not so much in the passion itself but rather in the direction which is imparted to it. It is the choice made by the individual which confers moral connotations on passions: he can use them to confront the difficulties of a transcendent spiritual mission or else to become the boss of a drug trafficking ring.

A highly respected professor of psychology at this Pontifical University which is hosting us, whom I remember for his picturesque and very profound examples, once told us in a course on human development that among candidates for the priesthood one should seek out people who had the energy of a “colt” and not the weakness of a “mule”. And that the role of the formator was to help in transforming this “wild colt” into a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ.

Sixteen years as a formator in the Seminary have shown me that this humorous example concealed a practical wisdom which has always been of help to me in guiding seminarians in their process of coming to know themselves, in listening and giving expression to their own affective world and in integrating aggressiveness as a source of energy in the service of hope.

Denying anger certainly does not lead to a calmer and more peaceful life; in fact it tends to exasperate things. Feelings surface when they are not heeded, when they do not find their right place. And the consequences can be very serious, for oneself and for others. At the root of many episodes of pedophilia and perversion what one finds is precisely denied aggressiveness.

I would here like to quote some of the results of Father Rossetti's research on this issue: “It may be surprising that behind many sexual deviations and pathologies there lies a form of deep-rooted anger, or anger which has been eroticised. This is particularly true for the sexual abuse of children [...]. Many of those involved have told me that when they did it they were trying to give these children the love of a father figure, the love which they had not received from their parents when they were children. In any case, sexual abuse of children is a destructive action which derives from disguised anger and violence,

which leaves its victims terrified. They are reliving the violence they suffered as children with the same destructive results. “You will know them by their fruits”: the harmful fruits of sexual abuse against children unmask the anger and violence which are present inside”<sup>12</sup>.

Because of this, one of the basic steps in treating these people, offenders or victims, is first of all to recognise the importance which anger has in relation to the events: “deep-rooted anger is the fuel driving a sexual perversion in a person's life”<sup>13</sup>.

Preventative and pro-active pedagogy, not only in our Seminars, but also in all educational institutions, should include adequate integration and channelling of aggressiveness. This would improve prevention, not only in terms of sexual abuse, but more generally with regard to most of the violent actions which are proliferating all around us and at all levels in post-modern human coexistence.

### **The formative response: vocational guidance:**

**Vocational guidance** is a formative priority in view of the challenges and realities which arise in integrating the various dimensions of formation; it allows an adequate selection of good aspirants and a preventative and pro-active path of human and Christian growth which can produce priests who follow the heart of Jesus Christ.

It is so central that one could say that the efficacy and efficiency of priestly formation today depends on the quality and frequency of vocational guidance provided to seminarians by formators, both individually and in groups, at each stage of formation.

Formative itineraries, projects and plans remain soulless if there is no living, sincere and profound relationship between the formator and the candidate. When such a relationship does not exist or is superficial, there simply is no real process of formation. Defensive, superficial or untruthful relationships make formation impossible. It is only in the confidence which gives Faith and the Truth which inspires Love that a transformation of the person can be brought about.

### **Marian presence and vocation to holiness:**

One aspect in regard to priestly formation which is in no way minor is the formative significance which the Virgin Mary has in the everyday experience of the affective, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral world of future priests.

Benedict XVI has stressed that, prior to any theology, the true humanity and the true humanism of Christ and his disciples appears in the moving dialogue between Jesus, his mother and the disciple John at the foot of the cross. A human and spiritual symbolic

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<sup>12</sup> S.J. Rossetti, “From Anger to Gratitude- Becoming Eucharistic People: the Journey of Human Formation”, conferencia realizada en la Universidad Pontificia Gregoriana el 26 marzo 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

relationship nurtured with the Virgin Mary is indispensable in order for the future priest to have a healthy affective human relationship in the many interactions he will have with women as mothers, sisters, friends and assistants.

In the words of Benedict XVI: “And even some who find it almost difficult to access Jesus in his greatness as Son of God find it easy to confide in the Mother [...]. And we can turn with great confidence to this Mother, who is for each Christian his or her Mother. It is also true that the Mother also expresses the Church. We cannot be Christians on our own, with a Christianity which is built according to my own idea. The Mother is the image of the Church, of the Mother Church, and, in entrusting ourselves to Mary, we must also entrust ourselves to the Church, live the Church and be the Church with Mary”<sup>14</sup>.

In the same way that the paternal spirituality which formators experience with seminarians is a formative axis, the maternal experience of Mary is essential for vocational development and balance in all its dimensions: for the candidates' personal affective sphere, for them to treat others in a delicate and worthy manner, for their personal life project to follow Jesus Christ closely and faithfully, for their respect for and appreciation of the religious devotion of common people, for their Christological understanding and for their living experience of the Church.

There is no doubt that the Marian personality of the blessed John Paul II has left a vivid trace in the seminarians and priests of a priestly figure with all the due masculine characteristics harmonised by the image of a tender and kind pastor.

The image and example with which John Paul II has imbued the present generations is that of a priest, a bishop and a Pope who was at the same time and in the same person, both very masculine and tender, both full of goodness and demanding, both very paternal and also fraternal. It is an attractive, popular model which is greatly appreciated by the young and which has been reproduced iconically in all kinds of images, videos and computer-based productions made by young people. Among all cultural and social classes it is seen as a possible and real ideal in the life of a consecrated minister in today's world.

## **Conclusion:**

There is much emphasis in the documents of the Church on the role of bishops as main formators and promoters of vocations. Each diocese has its own prospects which are already being worked on with the approval and support of each bishop. National episcopal conferences, in a spirit of communion and collegiality, are developing guidelines for formation and preventative systems.

We are living in times which are favourable for supporting projects which have emerged from a challenging reality which generates confidence and not pessimism; which values

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<sup>14</sup> Benedicto XVI responde en televisión a las preguntas del público. 22 abril 2011. Televisión Italiana (RAI1). L' Osservatore Romano, edición española n.18 Mayo 2011

the small mustard seed which is watered every day and which, through its inner power, becomes a leafy tree; which respects the inheritance of the past and heeds the signs of the future, where fidelity to Christ and not worldly success is pursued.

May Our Mother Mary and the Blessed John Paul II intercede for us so that we may with joy and confidence assist the action of the grace of God inside our Seminaries.

+ Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong  
Coadjutor Bishop of Papantla, México

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