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Contemporary Youth and the Preparation for Priesthood

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Contemporary Youth and the Preparation for Priesthood

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Introduction

A discussion on contemporary youth and the preparation for priesthood can take various directions. The approach taken in the present contribution is determined by two things: the mission of the author as a canon lawyer and the orientation of the journal for which the article is written.

In any case, it is necessary to start from the theological and spiritual realities because it is by them — in the first place — that the life is formed, and the ecclesial practice and discipline must follow. Therefore, our first chapter is an attempt to summarize in a concise way most fundamental points concerning the nature of a vocation understood as a relationship.

The second chapter, related to Church documents on the formation for priesthood, is devoted to the various areas of formation (human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral), inasmuch as these are necessary and suitable during the period before entering a priestly seminary. The third chapter is concerned with the places and milieux of formation of young people before they enter the priestly seminary; a discussion of the institutions specifically devoted to this preparation is accentuated.

1. Vocation as a relationship

1.1. Ongoing ambiguity in the situation of the youth with relation to a vocation

At present, just as it was the case in the past and will be in the future, the overall disposition of young people towards a spiritual vocation and vocation in general is quite ambiguous.

This fact is already stated by Pope St. John Paul II in the beginning of his post-synodal exhortation on the formation of priests in the present conditions *Pastores dabo vobis* (hereinafter: “PDV”)¹ as of 25th March, 1992 in Nos. 8 and 9 where he describes both the positive and the negative traits of young people’s life: a thirst for freedom; the recognition of the supreme value of the human person; a demand for authenticity and clarity; a search for justice; general openness to dialogue, on the one hand; but on the other hand, a consumerist lifestyle reflected, among other things, in a concept of sexuality; a distorted understanding of freedom, enforced by the overwhelming multitude of possibilities of choice; strong subjectivism of faith, and what is related to it, a partial and conditional participation in the life of the Church.²

Pope John Paul II offers in No. 10 the key to reading this ambiguous situation: evangelic discretion (*evangelica discretio*) based on trust in the love and power of Christ, the only Lord and Master, drawing light from the might of the Holy Spirit while always relying on the Father’s faithfulness to his own promises. This way of interpretation will be applied to what follows.

1.2. Main characteristic traits of a personal Christian vocation

The main characteristics of the vocation of a Christian are well covered in Christian literature. Here, we will start especially from the docu-

¹ JOHN PAUL II: *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Pastores dabo vobis to the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day* [25.03.1992], Nos. 8 and 9.

² Cf. PONTIFICAL WORK FOR ECCLESIASTICAL VOCATIONS: *New Vocations for a New Europe* [6.01.1998], No. 11.

ment *New vocations for new Europe* (further, “NVNE”), published in the early year 1998.

In the beginning, as a deep foundation of any specific vocation, there is a basic vocation: the vocation to being, issuing from the will and predilection of the triune Creator and to his image. It must be noted that even this fundamental vocation is not always readily recognized and accepted. The number of people, including young people, who find it difficult to accept the very vocation to being as a gratuitous gift of love, is considerable (NVNE Nos. 13a, 16a). The fundamental, though not very commonly heard human saying: “It is good that you are” is an unambiguous result of the “God saw that all he has made was very good” (Gn 1:31).

The fact that every human being is limited — because each of us is just an imperfect and incomplete image of the divine being — leads to the diversity of specific delimited vocations; vocations that should complete, not contradict, each other. To accept the fact that we are limited means to discover our *own* true richness; our eyes are directed not to our shortcomings when we compare ourselves with other people but to the gifts we have received for ourselves and for others (NVNE No. 13a). This view of a vocation is capable of transcending the narrow (and often rightly irritating) concentration on a vocation only within the Christian community, and even more so, only a spiritual vocation (NVNE No. 13c). On the contrary: it is in this wide perspective that the vocation to priesthood, as a spiritual vocation, can find its true place and mission that can be expressed in the unwieldy word: serviceability (NVNE No. 22a).³

Here we are touching the basic trait of every life and every vocation: its fundamental being-in-relation, which is born, develops and grows in an atmosphere of dialogue: the dialogue with God (the theological virtues) and with fellow human beings; a dialogue of mutual respect and self-giving. Thus we necessarily come back to the basic reality which is love as the source of life and a lifestyle.

It is not surprising that these fundamental and profound themes form the contents of the Papal messages to the World Days of Prayer for Vocations. Let us recall their titles since the pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI:⁴

- 2007 — Vocation in the mystery of the Church,
- 2008 — The vocation to the service of the Church as communion,
- 2009 — Faith in the divine initiative — the human response,
- 2010 — Witness Awakens Vocations,
- 2011 — Proposing Vocations in the Local Church,

³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II: *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita consecrata*.

⁴ Full reference to the Messages can be found in the bibliography.

- 2012 — Vocations, the Gift of the Love of God,
- 2013 — Vocations as a sign of hope founded in faith,
- 2014 — Vocations, Witness to the Truth,
- 2015 — Exodus, a fundamental experience of vocation,
- 2016 — The Church, Mother of Vocations.

2. Areas of Christian formation with a view of the vocation to priesthood

Formation concerns four basic areas: the human, spiritual, intellectual and “professional” area; the last one is, in the case of the formation for priesthood, realized as pastoral formation. This chapter is devoted to the various areas of formation in the time before entering the priestly seminary, with regard to the vocation to priesthood.

2.1. Human formation

In recent years, the most attention is clearly attributed to the human formation, also in the Church documents in which this formation is seen as something really necessary during the time of preparation for entry to a priestly seminary.

The human formation is remarkably discussed in the above mentioned Apostolic Exhortation *PDV* in which the pertinent passage is emblematically called *Human Formation, the Basis of All Priestly Formation* (Nos. 43 and 44). It is also treated in documents of some episcopal conferences, especially (in much detail) in the document of the Commission for Clergy of the Italian Bishops’ Conference *Linee comuni per la vita dei nostri seminari* from 1999, in its lengthy first chapter *L’esigenza di favorire nella persona le condizioni per una vera e fruttuosa formazione* (Nos. 9—22)⁵; also in a much shorter way in the document of the Czech Bishops’ Conference *National frame programme of the formation for priesthood*⁶ from 2008, in its dense No. 2.1.

⁵ CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA: *Linee comuni per la vita dei nostri seminari. Nota della Commissione Episcopale per il clero* (1999).

⁶ ČESKÁ BISKUPSKÁ KONFERENCE: *Národní rámcový program kněžské formace, Ratio nationalis institutionis sacerdotalis* (28.01.2008).

The document of the Commission for Clergy of the Italian Bishops' Conference strongly underlines the positive aspects: an adequate human maturity as a necessary condition for the working of divine grace (No. 9); balance between subjectivity and objectivity (No. 10); true anthropology marking clearly the boundaries of human autonomy (No. 11); the necessary discernment of the signs of maturity and immaturity (No. 12); supporting true dimensions of human persons and offering help in the struggle for their development (No. 13). What follows is a list of the negative elements: the fact that achieving human maturity is not self-evident (No. 14); individual problems in both the personal and the spiritual levels (No. 15); a description of the serious pathologies dangerous for priestly service (No. 16); a description of less serious pathologies that have to be resolved before receiving the priestly service (No. 17). The first chapter is concluded by hinting at the ways of solving the described problems: personal traits giving hope for growth (No. 18); adequate pedagogy (No. 19); psychological dimension included in formation (No. 20) by rightly availing of professional psychological help (No. 21); directing of the human formation to a healthy spiritual life (No. 22).

General Church documents issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education do not hide the gravity of human deficiencies that have to be treated in the formation for priesthood. For practical reasons they specify some negative elements that deserve explicit attention:

- The question of sexual orientation and maturity: *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders* from 2005;
- The question of right use of psychology and psychiatry in the formation: *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood* from 2008.

The first document emphasizes the necessary emotional maturity that must characterize a man who is to represent Christ — the Head of the Church; therefore it gives due attention to the question of homosexuality. A clear distinction is made between a homosexual tendency that is not sinful in itself and can be mastered, and homosexual acts which, of their nature, are immoderate and seriously sinful as a rule. However, even homosexual tendencies which are of a transient nature should be duly overcome with professional help at least three years before the receiving of the diaconate consecration.

The second document emphasizes personal maturity that can be hindered by reasons of lesser problems that can be solved during the seminarian formation but more serious problems requiring regular psychotherapy have to be resolved either before entering the seminary or during the time

of a break in the formation. These problems are clearly situated in the area of human formation, so neither a seminary superior nor a spiritual director, even when having the necessary specialization, should try to resolve them by providing professional help.

2.2. Spiritual formation

The spiritual formation is the second most important area of formation before the priestly seminary.

In this area, the role of acquiring two habits is very important: regular personal prayer, including meditation (the practice of *lectio divina* being a great help), and the regular reception of the sacraments, especially the often neglected sacrament of penitence, (PDV Nos. 46—48). The goal of this formation is clearly described in the Decree on Priestly Training of the Second Vatican Council *Optatam totius*:⁷

Spiritual formation... should be conducted in such a way that the students may learn to live in intimate and unceasing union with God the Father through his Son Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit.

Very important is also a formation to the understanding and the practice of celibacy as a positive experience strengthening one's union with Christ and spiritual fecundity, without belittling other vocations, especially to the married life (PDV No. 5).

Evidence shows that a great deal of those interested in priesthood is spiritually rooted, not in an ordinary parish but in groups and spiritual movements to which the candidates of priesthood remain strongly attached. In these cases it is necessary to enforce union with the local church and the diocesan bishop. This is a spiritual element with a fundamental theological meaning. It is also necessary to develop a spiritual understanding marked by true Catholicity (*Il periodo propedeutico, Riflessioni conclusive*, No. 5).

⁷ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: *Decree on Priestly Training Optatam totius* (28.10.1965), No. 8.

2.3. Intellectual formation

The goal of an intellectual formation of the candidates for priesthood before they come to the seminary is to ensure that as many of them as possible have the necessary preparation, both in terms of knowledge and study habits, for philosophical and theological study.

The reason for this is the varied level of the institutions offering secondary education with a leaving certificate: these institutions, for the most part, are not upper forms of grammar school but very often they are technical schools and training centres with a leaving certificate. Such schools do not provide the necessary basis for a third level study in the humanities.

Beside the study orientation there is a secondary aim — to form the cultural foundation for a study leading to priesthood.⁸

2.4. Pastoral formation

Pastoral formation is not the most important part of the preparation for the entering of a priestly seminary. Having some kind of a pastoral experience is, of course, good but not at all necessary. However, what *is* necessary is to deepen the pastoral aspect of the human and the spiritual parts of formation, in order to develop the ability of self-giving and to come to the attitude that can be called a “pastoral charity.”⁹

⁸ CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE ITALIANA: *Le vocazioni al ministero ordinato e alla vita consacrata nella comunità cristiana* (1999), *Orientamenti emersi dai lavori della XLVI Assemblea generale della CEI* (17.12.1999) (hereinafter: “VMOVC”), No. 28.

⁹ Cf. VMOVC, No. 44; ČESKÁ BISKUPSKÁ KONFERENCE: *Národní rámcový program kněžské formace*, No. 2.4.

3. Milieux and places of formation of the youth to receive the vocation to priesthood

3.1. General delimitation of the milieux and places of formation of young men

General delimitation of the milieux and places of formation of young men in receiving the vocation to priesthood leads us to notice that the variety of milieux and places is great and it coincides, to a great extent, with the milieux and places of the Christian life as such.¹⁰

It is not surprising (in light of the social teaching of the Church) that two natural milieux are mentioned: the family¹¹ and the ecclesial community, represented first by the parish with its priest, and secondly by the diocese with its presbytery.¹² Other important places are groups, communities and Church movements.¹³

Schools, especially the Catholic ones, can also play an important role,¹⁴ as well as places of catechesis in general.¹⁵

To describe the importance of these places and milieux would be lengthy and for the most part very general. Thus, in the following sub-chapters we will focus on the special formation-training institutions orientated exclusively, or predominantly, to the preparation of future seminarians.

3.2. Minor seminaries

It is the mission of minor seminaries to form the male youth in such a way that nurtures seeds of a spiritual vocation. Minor seminaries, therefore, are not aimed exclusively at the preparation of future seminarians.

The institution of minor seminaries is anchored in both Codices. The Code of Canon Law from the year 1983 (hereinafter: “CIC/1983”) speaks

¹⁰ This issue is discussed in detail in the above mentioned document VMOVC, quoted here often.

¹¹ VMOVC, No. 15.

¹² VMOVC, Nos. 14. 18.

¹³ VMOVC, No. 20.

¹⁴ VMOVC, No. 16.

¹⁵ VMOVC, No. 28.

about it in Can. 234; the Code of Canons of Eastern Churches (further: “CCEO”) treats it even more thoroughly in Can. 344. While the CIC/1983 explicitly points out education in the first place, that is, the religious education, the humanities and the natural sciences, the CCEO puts more emphasis on the formation by supporting family ties and peer contacts, healthy psychological development (especially emotional) and a spiritual guidance that protects freedom in the decision-making process regarding the entering of the way of priesthood. Both Codices stress that aspirants to priesthood should acquire the same level of education as is required for admittance to university studies in a given country.

The PDV apostolic exhortation treats minor seminaries in No. 63, in relation to the general pastoral care of vocations in the diocese. The definition of the goal of minor seminaries as it is formulated in the Conciliar decree *Optatam totius* in No. 3, is repeated in it:

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.

In European countries, most minor seminaries ceased to exist. In the Czech Republic there is not a single minor seminary; in Poland, a minor seminary exists only in Częstochowa as an independent institution¹⁶; as a boarding school, it forms part of the General Catholic Lyceum of St. Stanislaus Kostka in Sikorz by Płock.¹⁷

3.3. Other institutions preparing for the entry to a priestly seminary

The need of some kind of institutions preparing for the entry to a priestly seminary is emphasized explicitly in the PDV exhortation, in

¹⁶ NIŻSZE SEMINARIUM DUCHOWNE W CZĘSTOCHOWIE: *Historia Niższego Seminarium Duchownego w Częstochowie*, available online at: www.nsd.niedziela.pl/historia.php (date of access 19.11.2016).

¹⁷ KATOLICKIE LICEUM OGÓLNOKSZTAŁCĄCE: *Niższe Seminarium Duchowne*, available online at: <http://www.liceumkostka.pl/index.php/nizsze-seminarium-duchowne> (date of access 19.11.2016).

Nos. 62 and 64. The CIC/1983 mentions them together with the minor seminaries in Can. 234 § 1; the CCEO, in Can. 344 § 5, but only with regard to the older candidates for priesthood.

The PDV No. 62 begins by stating that in the present times, most aspirants to priesthood no longer pass through minor seminaries, and so the necessary preparation has to be provided otherwise. The synod of bishops asked in its proposition No. 19 that the experience gained so far in various countries be summarized and the results made accessible. The proposal is quoted literally in PDV towards the end of No. 62:

The synod asks that the Congregation for Catholic Education gather all the information on experiments of such initial formation that have been done or are being done. At a suitable time, the congregation is requested to communicate its findings on this matter to the episcopal conferences.

The Congregation for Catholic Education sent out a questionnaire, in 1992, to all the Papal Nuncios, asking them, in collaboration with the episcopal conferences, to provide the necessary data. These were subsequently summarized and sent to all episcopal conferences in the form of a letter bearing the abbreviated title: *Il periodo propedeutico*.¹⁸

This document in its first part provides a complex summary of the practical ways of going through the propaedeutic phase in various countries. In its second part it proposes a typology of ways of realization of this period, outlining three basic forms:

1. An autonomous propaedeutic period in an independent training institution;
2. A propaedeutic period integrated with a minor or a major seminary;
3. A propaedeutic period integrated within a programme of vocational pastoral care, usually realized by way of special educational-training courses in the form of a daily or combined study.

The third part of the document summarizes the information acquired and formulates some open questions for the future. First, it states that the propaedeutic period should be aimed at an integral preparation; therefore, it should include, apart from the human formation, also the intellectual and spiritual areas of formation (Introduction to Part 3).¹⁹ Inserting the

¹⁸ CONGREGAZIONE PER L'EDUCAZIONE CATTOLICA (DEI SEMINARI E DEGLI ISTITUTI DI STUDI): *Documento informativo Il periodo propedeutico* (10.05.1998). Only the Italian and Portuguese versions are available at the website of the Apostolic See, cf. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/index.htm (date of access: 20.11.2016).

¹⁹ It is not unusual that the specific aim of an institution varies with the passage of time. For example, in the Czech Republic, a yearly preparatory course entitled the *Theological Convict* was started in 1990; it was aimed specifically at an intellectual formation, with the goal of compensating for the very diversified educational preparation of those

specific form of a propaedeutic period in the national plan of formation for priesthood is appropriate (No. 3). Continual emphasis is put on the building of mutual relations between the aspirants and the formators, and among the aspirants themselves. These relationships are to support the greatly needed integration into the life of the diocese and with its presbytery (No. 5).

The main goal, however, remains to be a formation to a specific life-style corresponding to the mission of a priest; the life-style differs remarkably from the general life-style of the youth as a result of an immense rupture between the generally accepted culture and the gospel (No. 8).

Conclusion

Although this article is aimed at the area of the Canon Law, and thus rather on the external organization and the necessary or suitable institutions, it has to be emphasized that the most important thing is always human collaboration with the divine vocation characterized by a gift and a relationship; the starting points being: the basic vocation to life which is a gift of God's love; and the fact of our limitedness, leading to the variety of vocations and missions, both in the general sense and within the community of the Church.

The situation of the young with regard to priesthood was, is and will be ambivalent; this is reinforced in the present by the great rupture between the generally accepted culture and the gospel. This situation clearly calls for the achieving of a considerably high level of human maturity as a condition for a fruitful undergoing of the preparation for priesthood in major seminaries. This is the reason why the preparation of the young for entering into a priestly seminary is predominantly aimed at the human and spiritual parts of the formation, less to the intellectual part of it, and less still to the pastoral part.

The places and milieux of the formation are first of all the natural communities: the family and the community of the Church, with the help of the Catholic school. Nevertheless, a need for specifically aimed

entering the Convict, in order to prepare them for their study at the Faculty of Theology. In the latter half of the 1990s, this orientation was changed to a predominantly biblical and spiritual formation. The present concept, formed since the year 2002, combines the elements of both approaches, so the Convict can now be compared to novitiates in religious institutes and societies of apostolic life. Cf. *TEOLOGICKÝ KONVIKT OLOMOUC: Historie*, available online at: <http://konvikt.signaly.cz/teologicky-konvikt/historie/> (19.11.2016).

and institutionalized preparatory formation is perceived; this formation is provided partly by minor seminaries, to a lesser degree, and much more frequently by way of a propaedeutic period. This period has three basic forms: 1. an autonomous propaedeutic period in an independent training institution; 2. a propaedeutic period integrated with a minor or a major seminary; 3. a propaedeutic period integrated within a programme of vocational pastoral care, usually realized by way of special educational-training courses in the form of a daily or combined study.

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Contemporary Youth and the Preparation for Priesthood

Summary

Starting from a short analysis of the foundation of a vocation, particularly of the vocation to priesthood, the Author presents four areas of formation of young people before entering the priestly seminary: the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral areas of formation; and the measure of the realization of the mentioned areas. Subsequently he presents the places and milieux of this formation, especially the minor seminaries and some other ways of realization of the propaedeutic period. Finally he returns to the very essence of the priestly vocation: the building of a specific way of life.

DAMIÁN NĚMEC

Les jeunes gens d'aujourd'hui et la préparation à la vie sacerdotale

Résumé

En sortant d'une brève analyse des fondements de la vocation de l'homme, notamment de la vocation sacerdotale, l'auteur de l'article présente quatre domaines de la formation des jeunes gens avant d'entrer au séminaire: formation humaine, spirituelle, intellectuelle et pastorale, ainsi que la mesure de la réalisation des domaines de formation mentionnés. Ensuite, il présente les villes et les milieux de cette formation, en particulier un petit séminaire et d'autres manières de réaliser la période propédeutique, en revenant à l'essentiel même de la vocation sacerdotale: la construction d'un mode de vie spécifique.

Mots clés: prêtrise, vocation, jeunes gens, formation spirituelle

DAMIÁN NĚMEC

I giovani contemporanei e la preparazione alla vita sacerdotale

Sommario

Partendo da una breve analisi dei fondamenti della vocazione dell'uomo, in particolare della vocazione sacerdotale, l'autore dell'articolo presenta quattro settori della formazione dei giovani prima dell'entrata nel seminario spirituale maggiore: la formazione umana, spirituale, intellettuale e pastorale e la misura della realizzazione dei settori citati della formazione. In seguito presenta le città e gli ambienti di tale formazione, in particolare il piccolo seminario ed altri modi di realizzazione del periodo propedeutico, tornando all'essenza stessa della vocazione sacerdotale: la costruzione di un modo di vita specifico.

Parole chiave: sacerdozio, vocazione, giovani, formazione spirituale