**WHAT’S INVOLVED IN PRIESTLY FORMATION?**

*The following excerpts from the USCCB, Program of Priestly Formation, 5th edition*

*are offered only as an informative introduction to the complete version.*

**Introduction**

Priestly formation takes place in a given ecclesial and historical context. Identifying that context is a critical task for giving specific shape to particular programs of formation. There are also many significant elements of context particular to the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Here we can name *three …*of the more significant elements of context.

* In the United States at this time, there is the paradox of a widespread thirst for

spirituality and, at the same time, a prevailing secular ethos. From another perspective, the nation finds itself more intensely called to build a “civilization of life and love,” even as it struggles against a “culture of death.”

* Weaknesses of ethical standards and a moral relativism have a corrosive effect on

American public life as seen, for example, in marriage and family life, in business, and in politics. This ethical environment has affected the Church herself.

* The demographics of the Catholic Church in the United States demonstrate the

challenging situation of fewer priests and a growing Catholic population.

**The Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood** [Icon: St. John Vianney, Patron Saint of All Priests]

Formation, as the Church understands it, is not equivalent to a secular sense of schooling or, even less, job training. Formation is first and foremost cooperation with the grace of God. The seminary and its programs foster the formation of future priests by attending specifically to their human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation—the four pillars of priestly formation developed in *Pastores dabo vobis (Pope John Paul II’s exhortation on vocations and priestly formation)*.

The goal is the development not just of a well-rounded person, a prayerful person, or an experienced pastoral practitioner but rather one who understands his spiritual development within the context of his call to service in the Church, his human development within the greater context of his call to advance the mission of the Church, his intellectual development as the appropriation of the Church’s teaching and tradition, and his pastoral formation as participation in the active ministry of the Church.

Clearly human formation is the *foundation* for the other three pillars. Spiritual formation *informs* the other three. Intellectual formation *appropriates* and understands the other three. Pastoral formation *expresses* the other three pillars in practice.

***Human Formation*** The foundation and center of all human formation is Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. In his fully developed humanity, he was truly free and with complete freedom gave himself totally for the salvation of the world. The human formation of candidates for the priesthood aims to prepare them to be apt instruments of Christ’s grace. It does so by fostering the growth of a man who can be described in these ways: (Only a few are listed below.)

• *A person of solid moral character with a finely developed moral conscience, a man open to and capable of conversion*: a man whodemonstrates the human virtues of prudence, fortitude, temperance,justice, humility, constancy, sincerity, patience, good manners,truthfulness, and keeping his word, and who also manifestsgrowth in the practice of these virtues.

• *A prudent and discerning man*: someone who demonstrates a “capacity for critical observation so that [he] can discern true and false values, since this is an essential requirement for establishing a constructive dialogue with the world of today.”

• *A man of communion*: a person who has real and deep relational capacities, someone who can enter into genuine dialogue and friendship, a person of true empathy who can understand and know other persons, a person open to others and available to them with a generosity of spirit.

• *A good communicator*: someone who listens well, is articulate, and has the skills of effective communication, someone capable of public speaking.

• *A man who relates well with others, free of overt prejudice and willing to work with people of diverse cultural backgrounds*: a man capableof wholesome relations with women and men as relatives, friends,colleagues, staff members, and teachers, and as encountered inareas of apostolic work.

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***Spiritual Formation*** Human formation leads to and finds its completion in spiritual formation. Human formation continues in conjunction with and in coordination with the spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions of formation. It steadily points to the center, which is spiritual formation. “For every priest his spiritual formation is the core which unifies and gives life to his *being* a priest and his *acting as* a priest” (*Pastores dabo vobis*). The spirituality cultivated in the seminary is specifically priestly. Seminary formation identifies characteristics and practices that foster spiritual formation including: (Only a few are listed below.)

• *Holy Eucharist*: Spiritual formation is first and foremost a participation in public worship of the Church that is itself a participation in the heavenly liturgy offered by Christ, our great high priest. As source and summit of the Christian life, the daily celebration of the Eucharist is the

“essential moment of the day.”

• *Sacrament of Penance*: The Sacrament of Penance fosters the mature recognition of sin, continuous conversion of heart, growth in the virtues, and conformity to the mind of Christ. The frequent celebration of the Sacrament of Penance is aided by the practice of a daily examination of conscience.

• *Liturgy of the Hours*: Through the Liturgy of the Hours, seminarians learn to pray with the Church and for the Church. They unite themselves with the Body of Christ in unceasing praise and petition.

• *Spiritual direction*: A regular meeting (at least once a month) with an approved spiritual director is an essential part of spiritual direction, especially in arriving at the interiorization and integration needed for growth in sanctity, virtue, and readiness for Holy Orders.

• *Bible*: Receiving the Word of God proclaimed and preached in the Church or the quiet and personal assimilation of that holy Word in *lectio divina* enables those in formation to hear God’s

communication to them as a transforming challenge and hope.

• *Devotions*: Devotional prayer, especially centered on Eucharistic Adoration, the Blessed Virgin Mary—in particular, the rosary— and the saints, assists seminarians in assimilating the mystery of Christ and hearing the invitation to live that mystery in the particular circumstances of their own life.

• *Celibacy*: Spiritual formation in celibacy cultivates the evangelical motivations for embracing this commitment and way of life: the undivided love of the Lord, the spousal love for the

Church, apostolic availability, and the witness to God’s promises and kingdom.

• *Solidarity*: … seminarians are to have a spiritual formation grounded in Trinitarian communion that leads them to solidarity with others, especially those most in need, a commitment to justice and peace, a reciprocal exchange of spiritual and material gifts, and an authentic missionary spirit expressed in a willingness to serve where needed.

***Intellectual Formation*** There is a reciprocal relationship between spiritual and intellectual formation. The intellectual life nourishes the spiritual life, but the spiritual also opens vistas of understanding, in accordance with the classical adage *credo ut intelligam* (‘I believe in order to know’). Intellectual formation is integral to what it means to be human.

In the seminary program, intellectual formation culminates in a deepened understanding of the mysteries of faith that is pastorally oriented toward effective priestly ministry, especially preaching. This understanding, however, requires previous intellectual formation and academic integrity as foundational. The overall goal of every stage of seminary formation is to prepare a candidate who is widely knowledgeable about the human condition, deeply engaged in a process of understanding divine revelation, and adequately skilled in communicating his knowledge to as many people as possible. Moreover, continuing education after ordination is a necessity for effective ministry.

There are four possible preparatory stages of seminary formation prior to the study of theology and immediate preparation for priestly ordination and ministry. They include high school seminary, college seminary, cultural preparation programs, and pre-theology.

Ultimately, intellectual formation in the seminary program centers on theology as a search for “an ever deeper knowledge of the divine mysteries” *(Pastores dabo vobis).* Theology’s theoretical and practical dimensions in priestly mission and ministry mean that it must be rigorous both academically and pastorally in its orientation. Finally, the study of theology must be an initiation into a lifelong study of the truths of faith. If the priest is to be a teacher, he must first be a student who continuously pursues an understanding of the faith to which he commits himself and invites his people.

***Pastoral Formation*** All four pillars of formation are interwoven and go forward concurrently. Still, in a certain sense, pastoral formation is the culmination of the entire formation process: “The whole formation imparted to candidates for the priesthood aims at preparing them to enter into communion with the charity of Christ the Good Shepherd. Hence, their formation in its different aspects must have a fundamentally pastoral character” (*Pastores dabo vobis*).

The aim of pastoral formation—the formation of a “true shepherd” who teaches, sanctifies, and governs or leads—implies that such formation must include a number of essential elements: *(Only a few are listed below.)*

• *Proclamation of the Word*: Pastoral formation needs to emphasize the proclamation of God’s Word, which indeed is the first task of the priest. This proclamation ministry is aimed at the

conversion of sinners and is rooted in the seminarian/preacher’s ability to listen deeply to the lived experiences and realities of the faithful. This listening is followed by the preacher’s ability to interpret those lived experiences in the light of Sacred Scripture and the Church’s Tradition.

• *The sacramental dimension*: The celebration of the sacraments is central to the priest’s ministry. Although the seminarian cannot celebrate the sacraments as a priest does, he can accompany priests who do and he can prepare those who participate in them.

• *The missionary dimension*: All priests are to have the heart of missionaries. The Church is truest to her identity when she is an evangelizing Church. This is because the very nature of the

Church is missionary.

• *The community dimension*: Pastoral formation must initiate seminarians to the care, guidance, and leadership that are extended to a community. The pastor is to be a man of communion and shepherd of a flock.

• *Cultural sensitivity*: Pastoral formation must flow from and move towards an appreciation of the multifaceted reality of the Church. In the United States, this means a genuine appreciation

of the diversity that marks the Catholic Church as well as the diversity that typifies this society generally. Seminarians need exposure to the many cultures and languages that belong to the

Catholic Church in the United States.

• *The poor*: If seminarians are to be formed after the model of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who came “to bring glad tidings to the poor,” then they must have sustained contact with those who are privileged in God’s eyes—the poor, the marginalized, the sick, and the suffering. In the course of these encounters, they learn to cultivate a preferential option for the poor.

Clearly, pastoral formation not only connects with the other three pillars of priestly formation, but in itself it provides a goal that integrates the other dimensions. Human formation enables priests to be bridges to communicate Jesus Christ, a pastoral function. Spiritual formation enables priests to persevere in and give depth to their ministry. Intellectual formation provides criteria and content to ensure that pastoral efforts are directed correctly, properly, and effectively.

***The complete version of the USCCB, Program of Priestly Formation, 5th edition, 143 pages, is available on-line at:***

**http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-formation/upload/ProgramforPriestlyFormation.pdf**