

REMARKS OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
GALA DINNER FOR
REDEMPTORIS MATER SEMINARY OF BRIDGEPORT
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My dear friends in Christ, I am honored to be with you at this Gala Dinner to benefit the Archdiocesan Missionary Seminary Redemptoris Mater of Bridgeport. I thank His Excellency Frank Caggiano for his hospitality and graciousness. I also want to thank the Rector of the Seminary, for his gracious invitation, his kind words, and, above all, for his work, along with his collaborators, in the formation of future priests and missionaries. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's personal representative in the United States, I extend to all of you his warm and heartfelt greetings and wish to assure you of his spiritual closeness. Pope John Paul II said that "missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church."

Reflecting on these words, the Holy Father Pope Francis asked: What would happen if we were to take these words seriously? We would realize that missionary outreach is paradigmatic for all the Church's activity. Along these lines the Latin American bishops stated that we "cannot passively and calmly wait in our church buildings"; we need to move "from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry." (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION EVANGELII GAUDIUM, 15)

I know that those of you who are part of the Way or are benefactors who support the mission have already adopted this missionary attitude, which we hope to inculcate in our future priests and really, in the whole Church. The new Ratio Fundamentalis, the document which guides priestly formation, reminds us that we are first and always disciples called to deepen our communion with the Master. Those called to the priesthood move from a discipleship stage to a configuration stage. During their time in seminary, men are configured more deeply to Christ the Priest and equipped to go forth on mission.

Today, the Church needs joyful, missionary disciples – heralds of the Good News. It might seem strange to think of priests as disciples first rather than immediately as leaders, but the new Ratio Fundamentalis, issued in December 2016, emphasizes just that: it is particularly necessary for the priests today to understand themselves as missionary disciples. In his recent message to the Neo-Catechumenal Way, Pope Francis said:

Certainly, the Church is a teacher, but she cannot be a teacher if first she is not a disciple, just as she cannot be a mother if first she is not a daughter. This is our Mother, a humble Church, daughter of the Father and disciple of the Master, happy to be the sister of humanity. And this dynamic of discipleship – the disciple who makes disciples – is totally different from proselytism. (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO MEMBERS OF THE NEO-CATECHUMENAL WAY, 5 MAY 2018)

The Ratio Fundamentalis is a document written to help those engaged in priestly formation meet the demands of this new era – an era of which Pope Francis has said, "Today we are not living in an age of change so much as a change of age." (POPE FRANCIS, "ADDRESS AT THE MEETING WITH PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIFTH CONVENTION OF THE ITALIAN CHURCH," FIRENZE, 10 NOVEMBER 2015) This evening, I want to outline the main elements of the Ratio Fundamentalis which provide us with an image of the priest capable of meeting the challenges of our day.

The New Ratio Fundamentalis

On December 8, 2016, the Congregation for the Clergy issued a new Ratio Fundamentalis, entitled, “The Gift of the Priestly Vocation.” It follows two previous versions, issued in 1970 and 1985, and incorporates the teachings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Pope Francis.

In speaking of priestly vocations, Pope Francis noted that “They are uncut diamonds, to be formed both patiently and carefully, respecting the conscience of the individual, so that they may shine among the People of God.” (POPE FRANCIS, ADDRESS TO THE PLENARY OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, 3 OCTOBER 2014)

What should these “uncut diamonds” look like? The new Ratio says: The fundamental idea is that Seminaries should form missionary disciples who are ‘in love’ with the Master, shepherds ‘with the smell of the sheep’, who live in their midst to bring the mercy of God to them. Hence, every priest should always feel that he is a disciple on a journey, constantly needing an integrated formation, understood as a continuous configuration to Christ. (CONGREGATION FOR CLERGY, “THE GIFT OF THE PRIESTLY VOCATION,” 8 DECEMBER 2016, INTRODUCTION, 3).

In Pastores Dabo Vobis, Saint John Paul II offered an integrated vision of the dimensions of priestly formation: the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. The model of formation proposed in the new Ratio presupposes the integration of these four dimensions. This integrated formation prepares the future priest to make a gift of himself to the Church – to go out of himself, looking to the essential needs of the flock. Pope Francis wishes priests not to be managers of the sacred, but to be priests with compassionate hearts, showing forth the tenderness of God.

The importance of a “balanced human formation” cannot be overstated. Human relationships, nurtured by God’s grace, in the context of seminary formation, are the ordinary vehicle for the transmission of values necessary to exercise priestly ministry. Human formation happens in a gradual and integrated way in a seminary community; therefore, in any formation program, attention must be given to establishing relationships that correspond to sacramental fraternity. This means that seminary formators ought to have a paternal relationship with seminarians and seminarians ought to have a healthy fraternal relationship among themselves. In this way, the dominant patterns of individualism can be overcome. A healthy model of fatherhood and fraternity can generate an atmosphere for continuous learning in the seminary, so that future priests can understand the dynamics of the families entrusted to their care.

Seminary formation itself takes place in stages: the propaedeutic stage; the discipleship stage; the configuration stage; and the “pastoral stage” or “stage of vocational synthesis.” We could speak of the gradual formation of “the disciple of Jesus, called to be a shepherd.”

The propaedeutic or preparatory stage is necessary in an increasing secularized world, in an era in which the transmission of the Faith has been difficult and in an era marked by the reconfiguration of the family and changes in culture. The propaedeutic period provides a solid foundation for the spiritual life, familiarizing seminarians with the different forms of prayer within the Church and educating them in the fundamentals of the faith.

The discipleship stage corresponds to the period of philosophical studies. Here the emphasis is on increasing one's awareness of being a disciple, who "is the one whom the Lord has called to 'stay with Him', to follow Him, and to become a missionary of the Gospel." (cf. Ratio Fundamentalis, 61). In this stage, the seminarian is rooted in the sequela Christi – the following of Christ. Authentic human formation at this stage is essential, as grace builds upon nature and perfects it. Character formation should be a focus of formation programs.

The seminarian journeys toward an inner freedom and maturity permitting him to begin the configuration stage, which corresponds to the period of theological studies and concentrates on the "configuration of the seminarian to Christ, Shepherd and Servant, so that, united to Him, he can make his life a gift of self to others." (cf. Ratio, 68) Now, the seminarian begins to develop a specific priestly spirituality by praying for the People of God and carrying out specific liturgical tasks as lector and acolyte.

The configuration stage demands commitment to the life of the Good Shepherd in one's willingness to give one's life for his flock and to seek out the lost sheep. The seminarian learns what it means concretely to be a bridge rather than an obstacle. Furthermore, theological studies in this stage should form the candidate to have a specific priestly and liturgical spirituality and an identity as a minister of the Church. Formation becomes more specific to the priesthood.

The pastoral stage or stage of vocational synthesis includes immediate preparation for diaconate and priesthood. Pastoral activity helps the candidate to discover that place of interior freedom from which he can freely, consciously, and definitively state his intention and desire for priesthood of Jesus Christ, whose heart burned with pastoral charity. The Pastoral Stage is marked by two fundamental elements, namely insertion into a Christian community and the reception of Holy Orders. Thus, the continuous formation which the candidate has been undergoing can be applied in the community in which he is placed, among the presbyterate for which he is ordained, in his active readiness to be sent and to serve in collaboration with other priests, deacons, and members of the lay faithful. In the end, this stage is principally-concerned with helping the candidate to give himself freely to others as a priest, wherever he may be sent.

In summary, we could say that the profile of the priest that emerges from the new Ratio Fundamentalis, with its emphasis on a gradual and integrated formation, is that of a Pastor, anointed for the People, a missionary announcing the Gospel, called to have the same inclusive heart of Christ and to be compassionate and merciful toward all. He must be a man, formed in the virtues, capable of relating to and empathizing with others. He must have the ability to see where mercy is needed and the healthy zeal to make himself readily available to apply the healing balm of God's mercy with the love of a genuine father and pastor.

Conclusion

The new Ratio Fundamentalis places a strong emphasis on human formation. It is through the human matrix that grace is mediated. The Ratio envisions a gradual and integrated approach to formation that results in producing men who are willing to be disciples and missionaries, capable of giving themselves freely to the Lord and to the flock. Fundamentally, the priest is a missionary who goes forth to announce the joy of the Gospel.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Way in Rome, the Holy Father described what it means to Go:

Go. Mission calls for departure. But in life there is a strong temptation to linger, to avoid risks, to be content to have the situation under control. It is easier to stay home, surrounded by those who love us, but this is not Jesus' way. He sends forth: "Go". He does not use half measures. He does not authorize short transfers or reimbursed travel, but tells his disciples, all his disciples just one word: "Go". Go: a powerful call that resonates in every cranny of Christian life; a clear invitation to always go out, pilgrims in search of a brother or sister who does not yet know the joy of God's love. (ADDRESS TO MEMBERS OF THE NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY, 5 MAY 2018)

This "going forth" demands taking risks and being committed. It involves being in a permanent state of mission. The good missionary understands the territory and terrain of his mission. Bridgeport and Hartford have a rich Catholic history and tradition. At the same time, it is missionary territory, ripe for the new evangelization for the many who have fallen away, for those at the margins of society, and for the many new immigrants who are arriving. It is mission territory that longs for deep healing for those who have been alienated, disenfranchised, or deeply wounded by members of the Church. Only Christ can provide the true remedy. It is Christ whom we must announce.

To announce Him, we must be free – free from worldly attachments; free for service of God and neighbor. This too requires a genuine commitment to evangelical poverty. The Holy Father continues:

To announce you must renounce. Only a Church that renounces the world announces the Lord well. Only a Church free from power and money, free from triumphalism and clericalism bears witness in a credible way that Christ frees mankind. And those who, through his love, learn to renounce passing things, embrace this great treasure: freedom. They are no longer bridled by their own attachments, which always demand something more but never bring peace; and they feel their heart expand, without concerns, open for God and our brothers and sisters. (ADDRESS TO MEMBERS OF THE NEOCATECHUMENAL WAY, 5 MAY 2018)

The Redemptoris Mater Seminary is a place where seminarians learn to renounce the things of this world and to discover and embrace the beauty of freedom, a freedom which they place, as shepherds of the flock, at the service of those at the physical and existential peripheries. Your gifts, sacrifices, and prayers help make all this possible at the Redemptoris Mater Seminary in Bridgeport and around the world.

I thank you once more for your honoring me, for your generosity and your hospitality and commend you to the Mother of the Redeemer and Queen of the Clergy. May she intercede for you before her Divine Son so that you may receive "grace upon grace." Thank you. May God bless you.