

**ADDRESS OF HIS EXCELLENCY CHRISTOPHE PIERRE, APOSTOLIC NUNCIO
FORMING PRIESTS IN AN ERA OF EPOCHAL CHANGE
MOUNT SAINT MARY'S SEMINARY
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Introduction

I am very pleased to be with you here at Mount Saint Mary's Seminary. I wish to thank Monsignor Andrew Baker for inviting me to speak to you. I was to visit you last year, but unfortunately the event was cancelled due to the death of Cardinal Keeler. The delay has only increased my desire to visit this historic seminary. I want to thank the Board of Trustees, Seminary Faculty, and Staff for their important work in the continuing formation of ministers of the Church. Certainly, this venerable institution is responsible for nurturing and guiding priestly vocations for more than two centuries. As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative in this country, I wish to assure you of his spiritual closeness and affection for each of you.

We know that the recent Popes have spoken of the need for a New Evangelization. This requires a profound reconsideration of how we communicate the Christian experience; this is the core of the new missionary spirit that must take hold of the Church. To that end and to fulfill the desire of the Holy Father that each episcopal conference reflect on the best way to implement *Evangelii Gaudium* in its own country, the American bishops organized a conference in Orlando at last July.

Central to this theme of Evangelization is a lived-faith that must be learned and deepened constantly amid a changing landscape, marked not only by a change in demographics but also by a noticeable increase in the number of baptized Catholics, especially those under age thirty, who identify as having no religion. The need for this missionary spirit is becoming more urgent as challenges in transmitting the faith grow in an increasingly secularized world.

In his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis invites "the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization", marked by the "joy of the Gospel." (CF. POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, 24 NOVEMBER 2013, 1)

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.

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).

Today, I would like 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 and to see how they are complemented by the new Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium*, which governs ecclesiastical universities and faculties, touching upon the norms for faculties of theology, philosophy, and canon law.

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.” In 1970, following the Second Vatican Council, a *Ratio Fundamentalis* was published; this was later updated in 1985, following the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law. Subsequently, the Pontificates of Pope John Paul II and Benedict XVI made significant contributions to the understanding of the approach to Priestly Formation.

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Saint John Paul II offered an *integrated* vision of the dimensions of priestly formation: the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. With his Apostolic Letter *Ministorum Institutio*, Benedict XVI highlighted how seminary formation naturally continues in the priesthood through ongoing formation. As such, the Office of Seminaries was transferred to the Congregation for Clergy, which began preparing the new *Ratio Fundamentalis* in 2014, in response to Pope Francis.

In speaking of priestly vocations, the Holy Father 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).

The model of formation proposed in the new *Ratio Fundamentalis* presupposes the integration of the four dimensions of formation offered in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. This integrated formation prepares the seminarian and priest to make a gift of himself to the Church – to go out of himself, to not be self-referential but to look to the essential needs of the flock. Indeed, the Holy Father wishes priests not to be managers or mere functionaries of the sacred, but rather to be priests with inclusive and compassionate hearts, who show forth the tenderness of God.

A recent joint letter from the Congregation for Clergy and the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life states:

“To form priests with this profile – as the Holy Father often has recommended – it is necessary that the initial formation ensure a balanced human maturity, a solid spirituality, and an attentive vigilance toward that worldly spirit which would be fatal for a fruitful exercise of the ministry. This worldly spirit is expressed, for example, under the form of vainglory, of the search for money and power or in legalistic rigidity.” (JOINT LETTER OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY AND THE CONGREGATION FOR THE INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, 13 MAY 2017)

The importance of a “balanced human formation” cannot be overstated. Human relationships that are nurtured and interpreted by the grace of God, especially in the context of seminary formation, are the ordinary vehicle for the transmission of values necessary to exercise priestly ministry. The formation of priests is to happen 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 health fraternal relationship among themselves. In this way, the dominant patterns of individualism can be overcome gradually and communally as happens in family life. A healthy model of fatherhood and fraternity can generate an atmosphere for continuous learning in the seminary, so that future priests may also come to understand the dynamics of the families entrusted to their care.

As I said, The *Ratio* sees this formation taking place gradually, that is, 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 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 or uneven, and in an era marked by the reconfiguration of the family and clear cultural shifts which are not always supportive of the priestly vocation. The propaedeutic period is to provide 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. It ought to help the seminarian obtain a more objective and universal understanding of the apostolate of the Church. It should be noted that this is the *introduction* to formation; therefore, there should be realistic expectations and outcomes.

The discipleship stage corresponds to the period of philosophical studies in a college seminary or pre-theology program. 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 the discipleship stage, the seminarian is rooted in the *sequela Christi* – the following of Christ. Authentic human formation at this stage is essential, as grace will build upon nature and perfect it. Character formation, which involves “sincerity of mind, a constant concern for justice, fidelity to one’s promises, refinement in manners, modesty in speech coupled with charity”, should be a focus of formation programs. Critical to this stage of formation is the *systematic* approach to the experience of the spiritual life, to the work on the candidate’s own personality, and to the sharing of one’s faith through apostolic works and studies by which one gains insights into *reality*.

The seminarian gradually 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) Building on the formation of the first two stages, the seminarian begins to develop a specific priestly spirituality, which involves praying for the People of God, carrying out *specific* liturgical tasks as lector and acolyte.

During this period of formation, the sentiments and attitudes of Christ should arise within the seminarian both in his relationship with God and in his relationship to the People of God who will be entrusted to his care. 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, the study of theology in this stage should form the candidate to have a specific priestly and liturgical spirituality, as well as to have an ever-greater sense of what it means to be a minister of the Church. Thus, the formation is now more *specific* to the priesthood.

This Pastoral Stage 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.

Focusing on the “stages” of priestly formation should not distract us from the other key for understanding the new *Ratio Fundamentalis*: integration. That is, the four pillars or dimensions of formation, mentioned in *Pastores dabō vobis* and the *Program of Priestly Formation*, ought to be integrated throughout seminary formation *and* within each individual seminarian.

The *Ratio* remarks that “the appropriate involvement of the priestly ministry in the culture of today, with all the complex problems that it brings in its wake” demands not only that the priest remain open and up-to-date, but also that priests “remain firmly anchored to the four dimensions of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral.” (*Ratio*, 84c) Elements of contemporary culture, unfortunately have left many seminarians in the predicament of being self-referential, without the realization of the seminarian. Seminary formation ought to address this in preparation for evangelization as the new *Ratio* notes:

The seminarian is called to ‘go out of himself’, to make his way in Christ, towards the Father and towards others, embracing the call to the priesthood, dedicating himself to work with the Holy Spirit, to achieve a serene and creative interior synthesis between strength and weakness. The educational endeavor helps seminarians to bring all aspects of their personality to Christ, in this way making them consciously free for God and for others. In fact, it is only in the crucified and risen Christ that this path of integration finds meaning and completion; all things are united in him (cf. Eph 1:10), so that “God might be all in all” (cf. 1Cor 15:28). (*Ratio*, 29)

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, might be one in which the future priest is not merely a functionary of the sacred or a manager of a business, but is a Pastor, anointed for the People, a missionary announcing the Gospel, called to have the same inclusive heart of Christ and to be, therefore, 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.

Veritatis Gaudium

The priest is one who is called to go forth announcing the Gospel: the Gospel of truth, who is the person of Jesus Christ. The new Apostolic Constitution *Veritatis Gaudium* begins:

The joy of truth expresses the restlessness of the human heart until it encounters and dwells within God's Light, and shares that Light with all people. For truth is not an abstract idea, but is Jesus himself, the Word of God in whom is the Life that is the Light of man (cf. Jn 1:4), the Son of God who is also the Son of Man. He alone, "in revealing the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself and brings to light its very high calling". (POPE FRANCIS, APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION *VERITATIS GAUDIUM*, 8 DECEMBER 2017, 1)

Signed exactly one year after the *Ratio Fundamentalis* was promulgated and made public in late January, the new Constitution, which governs Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, also provides insights into the type of priests necessary for the Church today. Building on the foundation laid by Pope John Paul II in *Sapientia Christiana*, the new Constitution wishes to account for the fundamental changes in the Church and society that have occurred since 1979 and desires to give a missionary impulse, one consistent with the program of evangelization articulated by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*. Certainly, it has implications for priestly formation as the People of God "embark upon a new stage of 'Spirit-filled' evangelization."

Just as the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, invited the whole Church to be "attentive to the signs of the times", this same attentiveness is necessary if the Church is to be a "Church that goes forth." Pope Francis writes:

This is essential for a Church that "goes forth"! All the more so because today we are not only living in a time of changes but are experiencing a true epochal shift, marked by a wide-ranging "anthropological" and "environmental crisis". Indeed, we daily see "signs that things are now reaching a breaking point, due to the rapid pace of change and degradation; these are evident in large-scale natural disasters as well as social and even financial crises". In a word, this calls for "changing the models of global development" and "redefining our notion of progress". Yet "the problem is that we still lack the culture necessary to confront this crisis. We lack leadership capable of striking out on new paths".

In one way, this seminary is called to form the leaders who can strike out on these new paths and who can animate the lay faithful to proclaim the Gospel during an epochal shift. Catholic universities and seminaries must offer a "decisive contribution of leaven, salt and light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the living Tradition of the Church, which is ever open to new situations and ideas." If the Catholic educational endeavor is to be successful, then theology and philosophy must not only be taught rightly so as to help students acquire the "convictions that structure and strengthen the intelligence and illuminate the will", but they must first inculcate a sense of humility before God. The best theology is one done on one's knees! Kneeling before God, with an open heart and an open mind, one learns amid the complexities of life and culture how to discern the path of truth that leads to authentic joy.

In prayer, we also learn the art of discernment. During a private meeting with Jesuits in Poland at the time of World Youth Day, he revealed the influence of Father Hugo Rahner, SJ, who suggested that:

the Jesuit must have a nose for the supernatural, that is, he should be endowed with a sense of the divine and the diabolical relative to the occurrences of human life and history. The Jesuit must, therefore, be able to discern what is from God and what is from the devil. For this, in the Exercises of Saint Ignatius asks that he be introduced both to the intentions of the Lord of Life and to those of the enemy of human nature and his lies. What he has written is truly bold; it is bold, but discernment is precisely this ... We need to truly understand this: in life, not all is black on white or white on black. No! The shades of grey prevail in life. We must teach them to discern in this grey area." ("UN INCONTRO PRIVATO A CRACOVIA CON PAPA FRANCESCO," *LA CIVILTA CATTOLICA*, 10 SETTEMBRE 2016, 3989/17, P. 349)

Pope Francis is a man of discernment, and he wants future priests to be men who know how to discern in changing times. To speak of shades of grey is not to imply that there is no black or white; nor is it to say that because one sees areas of grey that his vision is blurry. Rather, the man of discernment is like a great explorer on a ship, who must be attentive to the winds, the seas, and the stars, but who looks toward the horizon as he embarks on a magnificent adventure. He does not necessarily know what things will look like or where exactly he will arrive in the end, but he understands that he goes toward the horizon to meet Christ, the center of his life, attentive to reality which guides his discernment.

Against the new horizon of a changing, highly-secularized, globalized, and technologically-driven culture that often expresses itself in post-Christian or anti-Christian fashion, there is a need for a renewal in ecclesiastic studies so that the Church may be both a missionary Church and an *effective* missionary Church. To that end, *Gaudium Veritatis* proposes four criteria, emerging from the Second Vatican Council and post-Conciliar Magisterium, that can help bring about the desired renewal.

The first and "most urgent and enduring criterion is that of contemplation and the presentation of a spiritual, intellectual and existential introduction to the heart of the kerygma, namely the ever fresh and attractive good news of the Gospel of Jesus Christ..." (*Gaudium Veritatis*, 4a) The Church is a sign and instrument of salvation and she exists concretely in history. She must consistently contemplate the face of her Spouse, which helps her to realize her own sense of communion and fraternity among the members of the Body, which makes her "capable of seeing the sacred grandeur of our neighbor, of finding God in every human being, of tolerating the nuisances of life in common by clinging to the love of God, of opening the heart to divine love and seeking the happiness of others just as their heavenly Father does." (Ibid.)

Thus, what we said earlier about fostering a sense of genuine fraternity and having a sense of a seminary community as a family is reinforced by *Gaudium et Veritatis*. The understanding of the social dimension of the Church, articulated, for example, by Henri De Lubac in his classic work *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, helps students in Catholic institutions not only overcome being self-referential and individualistic, but also helps them realize the social dimension of evangelization, which

necessarily must include the preferential option for the poor and discarded, which the same Constitution says “must pervade the presentation and study of Christian truth.”

The Constitution continues:

“From this comes the particular feature, in the formation of a Christian culture, of discovering in the whole of creation the Trinitarian imprint that makes the cosmos in which we live a “network of relations” in which “it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things”. This in turn fosters “a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity”. (Ibid.)

A second criterion is that of “wide-ranging dialogue, not as a mere tactical approach, but as an intrinsic requirement for experiencing in community the joy of the Truth and appreciating more fully its meaning and practical implications.” (*Gaudium et Veritatis*, 4b) The Holy Father has been consistent in calling the Church to foster a culture of encounter between people of different cultures and different religions in which there is mutual exchange and enrichment.

The dialogue must be authentic, and for that to happen, the Christian must be firmly rooted in his own baptismal identity, orthodox in faith, and have a profound sense of belonging to the Church. Dialogue is sometimes criticized as not yielding tangible results. In addressing the Pontifical Institute for Arab Studies, the Holy Father noted that dialogue requires “patience and humility along with extensive study, because approximation and improvisation can be counterproductive, or can even cause discomfort or embarrassment. A lasting continuous commitment is needed in order to not be caught unprepared in various situations and in different contexts.” (ADDRESS TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE MEETING SPONSORED BY THE PONTIFICAL INSTITUTE FOR ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES, 24 JANUARY 2015)

In addition to patience, humility, and study, it is important to keep in mind the goal of dialogue: to help shape and form a more just society – “to devise a means for building consensus and agreement while seeking the goal of a just, responsive, and inclusive society.” The present Constitution allows the Church and seminaries to examine whether the structure and method of academic reflect or incorporate the goal of dialogue. The Holy Father writes:

Today, in fact, “what is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 74)

The third criterion proposed in *Gaudium Veritatis* is “inter-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary approaches carried out with wisdom and creativity in the light of Revelation.” (cf. *Gaudium et Veritatis*, 4c) A distinguishing mark of Catholic ecclesiastical studies is the intellectual principle of unity in difference of knowledge. The implication here is that courses of study should offer a “a variety of disciplines corresponding to the multifaceted richness of reality disclosed by the event of Revelation, yet harmoniously and dynamically converging in the unity of their transcendent source and their historical and metahistorical intentionality, which is eschatologically disclosed in Christ Jesus.” (IBID.)

This sometimes means taking an inter-disciplinary approach to studies to formulate a guiding synthesis for knowledge, in light of Revelation, as a means for overcoming the uncertain and fragmented pluralism of the modern period. As such, this integrated

approach can have a “real cultural and humanizing importance.” For example, the recent “Seminaries and Science Project”, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation attempts to overcome an artificial and often ideological barrier between faith and the sciences. Many of the courses and seminars attempted to show how faith enlightens science and how scientific knowledge can deepen and reaffirm one’s faith. Young people, many of them “nones”, often cite that one reason they no longer believe is because faith seems incompatible with science. An integrated, multi-disciplinary approach might be an effective means of engaging in dialogue and evangelization, relying on the Wisdom of the Church.

In fact, the Constitution suggests that “Ecclesiastical studies, in the spirit of a Church that ‘goes forth’, are likewise called to develop specialized centers capable of deeper dialogue with the different scientific fields. Specifically, shared and converging research between specialists of different disciplines represents a particular service to the people of God, and especially to the Magisterium.” (*Gaudium Veritatis*, 5)

Finally, a fourth criterion proposed in the Constitution is “networking” between institutions that promote ecclesiastical studies. Rather than seeing other seminaries and universities as rivals for students, for money, and for resources, there needs to be a better collaboration and cooperation among institutions within the Church, recognizing our inter-dependence.

For this reason, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis used the image of a polyhedron rather than sphere to describe the world. A polyhedron, “which reflects the convergence of all its parts, each of which preserves its distinctiveness.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 236)

A polyhedron is a solid figure with many plane faces, usually more than six. The different faces are connected one to another at the edges. Each surface preserves its uniqueness and identity, which shows its differences with respect to the others, and yet, the whole polyhedron remains a single unit. This is the way Pope Francis views the world – as a common home – with many nations and peoples who are interconnected. Some are living near the center; while others are living at the peripheries. Nevertheless, those near the center can offer what they have to those at the margins, and those at the margins can offer what they have to those at the centers, cooperating in an inter-dependent and fruitful way.

This sharing of ecclesiastical knowledge and experience, across cultures, is the work of the Spirit, who helps build the Church in unity while enriching her in diversity, allowing us to appreciate the beauty and catholicity of the Church. Thus, the Constitution notes:

“Theology must doubtless be rooted and grounded in sacred Scripture and in the living tradition, but for this very reason it must simultaneously accompany cultural and social processes, and particularly difficult transitions.” (*Gaudium Veritatis*, 4d)

Attentive to differences in culture and the ongoing social processes, Catholic institutions, including seminaries, which form future priests, will be uniquely positioned to study and address the epochal issues facing humanity today. The “rarified air” of the seminary cannot be one that isolates or quarantines seminarians from the globalized and polarized world in which we live; rather, the “rarified air” of the seminary should be one in

which the rich cultures of a universal Church in a globalized world are experienced, offering challenges and opening new horizons.

Today, the Church faces a great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge if she is to meet the needs of her people, with their hopes, dreams, sufferings and trials, but at the same time, guided by the Spirit, she can be confident that once more her institutions, including her seminaries, will be willing to take the necessary risks, while remaining faithful, to make the Gospel known.

Conclusion

I want to conclude now with just a few (more) words. 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.

The new Apostolic Constitution *Gaudium Veritatis* directs Ecclesiastical Universities and Faculties, including seminaries and faculties of philosophy, theology, and canon law, to maintain their high standards while adapting to the changed cultural and social context in which evangelization must take place. Again, the priest-evangelist must be a man of prayer and discernment, who contemplates Christ and understands the social dimension of the Church and her teaching. He is to be a man of dialogue, rooted in his own identity yet willing to listen to and engage others in pursuit of the common good. The priest should have an appreciation for the inter-disciplinary approach to the sciences and to knowledge, yet should strive to preserve the unity of knowledge, in the midst of diversity, through the revealed Wisdom of the Church. Finally, the priest must be a man who recognizes our mutual inter-dependence in our common home and who is willing to share the best of the Catholic tradition in order to address the new social and cultural changes facing humanity.

At the beginning of this lecture, I thanked the Board of Trustees, the Faculty, and the Staff for their important work. I should have said, “your *very difficult and important work*.” Thank you once again. Finally, if it is a difficult task for seminary formators, it is going to be a great challenge to you, our future priests. Do not lose heart! Walk together, with your seminary formators, and, above all, with Christ. He will direct you on the path that leads to life!