

Forming Missionary Disciples and Servant-Leaders

Gerardo Alminaza, D.D.

Our Lord Jesus, before his ascension, left this command to his disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mk 6:15). The same message continues to reverberate among us and impels us “to make the Good News of Jesus resound in our time” (Pope Francis, June 4, 2017).

Pope Benedict XVI during his pontificate emphasized likewise that the mission of evangelization is one task necessary for the Church which she cannot simply ignore. “It is the duty of the Church to proclaim always and everywhere the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (September 21, 2010). Overlooking such a mandate would be a denial of the Church’s very nature. “The Church is missionary by nature; otherwise, she would no longer be the Church of Christ” (Francis, March 2001).

The necessity for a mission orientation among Christians in general and specifically among the ordained servant-leaders is made more prominent when we survey our present society. It is marked by a weakening “ecclesial fabric,” a loss of the “ability to celebrate and live as a family” (NMI 31), a distancing from faith especially among the young, and is plagued by “a life of mediocrity, a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity” (NMI, Introduction). Today, more than ever, we need to re-tell the story of Jesus, because in the world and its peripheries, there are still more who have not heard, seen and touched Him. The many forms of thirsts and false loves in our modern society simply point to a basic truth, that is, still many are hoping, searching and wanting to see Jesus. As globalization progresses and technological innovations simultaneously constrict and expand the world, the Church as the Bride of Christ, must make her presence more

significantly felt by embracing a missionary spirit to reach out, go outside of herself, and be a witness of the Love that is truly enduring and authentic.

Faithful to this mandate and in response to these signs, the Church recognizes the need to “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 (*Ibid*). The new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (RFIS) highlights this fundamental idea. “Since the priest-disciple comes from the Christian community, and will be sent back to it, to serve it and to guide it as a pastor, formation is clearly missionary in character.” The disciple is the one whom the Lord has called to “stay with Him” (Mk 3:14), to follow Him and to become a “missionary of the Gospel.” He is formed so he



may participate in the one mission desired and entrusted by Christ for and to his Church, that is, evangelization, in all its forms.

The Journey of Formation. The new *Ratio* understands formation as “one unbroken missionary journey of discipleship” (RFIS 54). Within this single, integrated and continuous formation, two phases are identified: “*initial formation*” and “*ongoing formation*.” The priest, in order to be an authentic missionary disciple, must recognize that he is a “disciple on a journey,” and as such, a learner and follower constantly needing an integral formation which is a never-ending process of being configured to Christ.

In the new *Ratio*, the “*initial formation*” which concerns the time leading up to priestly ordination, is subdivided into four principal stages, namely: (1) the *propaedeutic stage* (a necessary period of preparation and introduction to provide a solid basis for spiritual life and nurture greater self-awareness); (2) the *discipleship stage* (during which the seminarian is engaged in the “*sequela Christi*, listening to His word, keeping it in his heart and putting it into practice”); (3) the *configuration stage* (a period where the seminarian “enters profoundly into the contemplation of the person of Jesus Christ,”

leading to an “awareness and assumption of priestly identity”); and, (4) the *pastoral stage* (the stage of “vocational synthesis” where candidates are assisted in their transition from seminary life to getting inducted into pastoral life, assumption of ministerial responsibilities leading eventually to ordination) (RFIS 57-78).

While the terms “discipleship” and “configuration” are labels attached to the customary periods in the seminarian’s intellectual formation, “discipleship and configuration to Christ,” it must be emphasized, form a life-long journey. Having said this, the *Ratio* underscores the equally important second phase of formation, which is actually “longer” in scope, that is, “*ongoing formation*” (RFIS 79-88). Seminary life, early on, must already foster in future priests the encouragement and desire to look forward to and see the necessity of ongoing formation.

“Ongoing” was precisely coined by the *Ratio* as a reminder that “the one experience of discipleship of those called to the priesthood is never interrupted” (RFIS 80). Ongoing formation responds to the need to “feed the fire that gives light and warmth to the exercise of the ministry” (*ibid*). One is misled to view ongoing formation as a simple “updating” (RFIS 56). Without ongoing



formation, the priest as a servant-leader runs the risk of being there in the forefront where the action is but having lost the passion for mission.

The *Ratio* maintains that this phase of formation, belonging to the bishop with the help of his assistants (RFIS 79) is geared at ensuring “fidelity to the priestly ministry in a continuing journey of conversion in order to rekindle the gift received at ordination” (RFIS 81). It is the bishop’s responsibility to ensure that his priests, especially the newly ordained ones, are not immersed in “excessively burdensome or delicate situations” that could seriously endanger and compromise their priestly identity; this is noted in the *Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests* (108).

Identified in the *Ratio* are new challenges in the life of a minister and valuable helps so that the priest can embrace his mission with zeal and enthusiasm (RFIS 84-88). “Intimate sacramental fraternity” is one such help concretized in various expressions such as “fraternal meetings” or encounters, spiritual direction and confession, retreats, “common table” fellowship, “common life” and “priestly associations” (RFIS 87).

Priest as Servant-leader. The *Ratio* highlights the significance of the anointing of the Holy Spirit by which priests participate zealously in the mission of the Church. Priests are called to nourish their missionary zeal shown through the exercise of his “pastoral responsibility with humility as an authoritative leader, teacher of the Word and minister of the sacraments, practicing his spiritual fatherhood fruitfully” (RFIS 33).

In the stage of “configuration to Christ,” the missionary character is intimately linked with the



priestly ministry. The priest participates in the one priesthood and saving mission of Christ, Head and Shepherd, Servant and Spouse (cf. RFIS 35). The *Ratio* borrows the image of the suffering servant (RFIS 38) of the Prophet Isaiah as characteristic of the mission of priests called to follow the way of the cross in order to accomplish the plan of salvation. The gift of priesthood received in Holy Orders includes a commitment to the universal Church and is open to the mission of salvation addressed to all people “to the ends of the earth” (Ac 1:18; RFIS 71). For those being called to service in a local Church, as seminarians they are called to acquire the spirituality of a diocesan priest, marked by selfless dedicated service to the ecclesiastical territory to which they are part of or to the ones in which they will exercise their ministry. This necessitates conforming one’s way of thinking and working in communion with the bishop and brother priests for the good of that diocese (RFIS 71).

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Following the training in the stage of discipleship, the *Ratio* underscores the role of the Holy Spirit in confirming a mindset that is authentically missionary through the priests’ responsibilities and the exercise of the virtues and the commitment to the evangelical counsels (RFIS 69).

Forming Priests with a Missionary Spirit.

The time of formation for priestly ministry is a period of testing, maturing and discernment by both the seminarian (as the protagonist of his own formation) and the house of formation (assisted by other agents of formation) (RFIS 125-152).

To be a priest of Christ is to be inflamed with the same missionary zeal that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, had for his flock. “The priest is called to have within himself the same feelings and attitudes that Christ has towards the Church, loved tenderly through the exercise of his ministry” (RFIS 39). The priest as a disciple is one who believes and who lives like Christ. To be a missionary disciple is to be configured to the person of Christ.



The formation to mission binds the priest with the whole Christian community, since the missionary zeal belongs to the entire Body of Christ and it is the community that the Spirit sends out on mission. Mission orientation animates and allows the priest to exercise and live fully his ministry in the context of community (RFIS 36). Within the same community, the priest becomes an *alter Christus* and his pastoral care becomes the presence and offering of Christ for his flock.

How do we make Jesus then our “contemporary”? The new *Ratio* offers a path: we must imitate Christ’s “singular closeness to God and to humanity” (Francis, Homily).

Closeness to God. In the being and vocation of every Christian is the personal encounter with the Lord. To seek God is to seek his face, to enter into his intimacy. Pope Francis relates that every vocation presupposes a question: “Master, where do you live?” and an answer: “Come and you will see” (Jn 1:37-39). “Come and see” is not a one-time invitation. It is a guiding point of reference in every seminarian’s and priest’s life. Any movement toward our neighbor, any ecclesial service, any participation in the mission, must assume and be based on a closeness to, and familiarity with the Lord.

This closeness and familiarity with God demands a personal response to the Lord’s invitation: *Duc in altum*. To become a missionary disciple necessitates the courage to launch oneself into the deep waters of prayer. An intimate encounter with Jesus Christ through prayer makes one become fertile soil, yielding fruits in abundance. In the life of a minister, there is a constant danger of being choked by the thistles and thorns of life



and be distracted. Prayer and constant communion make the disciple single-hearted in his mission.

Pope Francis reveals a secret formula. “Immersing oneself in silent Eucharistic adoration is the secret to knowing the Lord. One cannot know the Lord without being in the habit of adoring ... in silence” (October 19, 2017). In the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, one can experience the nearness of the Good Shepherd, the tenderness of the One who calls us to mission, and the presence of a faithful companion and co-journeyer on the road.

In the stage of discipleship, future priests are called to be well-trained in the intelligence of the Word so as to become a “missionary of the Gospel” (RFIS 61). Daily contact with the Word of God and reflecting on it individually and with the community through *lectio divina* provide a life-giving encounter. Only when there is a personal encounter with the Word-made-flesh can a missionary disciple truly be an instrument for our brothers and sisters to encounter Him.

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In the faithful celebration of the Eucharist, one can experience the Lord who invites us to communion with God and one another. In every Eucharistic banquet, the Church comes alive as truly the “home and school of communion” (RFIS 52). The priest, after all, must be a “man of communion.”

The Church, as a people gathered by and in Christ, led by a pastor, is called to live a strong experience of community life. The accompaniment provided by a formative community helps a candidate to be a man of communion. Vocations mature when in a seminary community there is a “peaceful climate of trust and mutual confidence” nurtured by healthy interpersonal relationships, moments of personal sharing and “coherent witness of life” (RFIS 47-50).

Living in and with a formative community, seminarians develop bonds with fellow formands themselves and formators. These relationships marked by a sense of fatherhood and fraternity form seminarians to make a generous response to the invitation to “go out of himself” (RFIS 29).

Closeness to Humanity. The missionary disciple, in order to be able to go out of himself, must submit “to develop his personality, having Christ, the perfect man as his model and source” (RFIS 93). The *Ratio* repeats what *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (94) asserts that human formation is the “foundation of all priestly formation.”

Through human formation, the missionary disciple and future servant-leader becomes “capable of self-determination” and responsible through ever deepening knowledge of his personal history and greater awareness of his strengths and weaknesses. The authenticity, transparency and honesty that a seminarian accords in this dimension of formation will benefit him much in becoming “at home with himself” and will find effective translation in his mission.

Karl Valentin notes: “Today, I will pay myself a visit; I do hope that I am home” (see: *The Last Testament* 81). Human formation enables one to be “at home” and to be intimate with one’s own humanity, a necessity if one is to give himself to a community in mission. To be truly “at home” with oneself cannot but help one to go out and not to stay home, locked in his comfort zone.

The missionary disciple who has encountered Christ in a long journey towards himself, of discipleship and configuration to the Master, is empowered and strengthened by grace to “love Jesus, to win souls for Him so that he may be loved” as Saint Therese of Lisieux aptly puts it (see: *Letter to Her Sister Celine* vi). She who did not even leave the convent has been hailed by the Church as Patroness of Mission.

Bishop Gerardo A. Alminaza serves with the CBCP Episcopal Commission on Seminaries.