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Forming Priests for Tomorrow's Church: The Coming Synod

By THOMAS P. RAUSCH

THE MOST RECENT SYNOD of bishops met at Rome in 1987, and it focused on the laity. The next synod will convene on Sept. 30, 1990, to discuss the formation of priests. The topic is surely important. In a number of respects, the priesthood today is in trouble. A document on the morale of priests, published in 1989 by the U.S. Bishops' Committee on Priestly Life and Ministry, acknowledged that there is "a serious and substantial morale problem among priests."

One cause of the problem is the growing shortage of priests. Despite the increases in vocations in India, Vietnam, Korea and certain parts of Latin America, the gap between priests and Catholic peoples both in the United States and throughout the world continues to increase. Particularly in third-world countries, the number of Catholics continues to grow faster than the number of priests.

The shortage is increasingly felt in countries with a relatively large number of priests like the United States. Consider the decline in the number of diocesan seminarians over the last 30 years. In 1968 there were 22,334 preparing for the priesthood. In 1978 the number had dropped to 9,560. In 1988, the total number was 4,981. In November 1989 the U.S. bishops approved "The Order for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest," a rite for a lay-led Communion service for Catholic congregations lacking a priest for the Sunday worship.

Many good priests today are overworked. Two years ago on retreat I met a young priest from the Philippines who had left his country in a state of near collapse. Each weekend he had to celebrate at least eight Masses in the rural communities surrounding Manila. Such a schedule is beyond the capabilities of even the best celebrants. Priests in U.S. parish ministry find that the demands on their time are constantly increasing. They are expected to be present for innumerable groups and committees. Many of these men feel that the official church is unwilling to face the problem of the shortage of priests realistically. As the document on the morale of priests pointed out, the fact that "some solutions to the clergy shortage are precluded from discussion and that not all pastoral solutions and options can be explored" is a source of discouragement for some.

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Another problem is that too often priests find themselves caught between a considerable number of lay people anxious for change and an official church more concerned with restoring discipline and centralizing authority. Priests are the point men in the contemporary church. They often find themselves the targets of the resentment of women who are alienated from the church because of their own exclusion from its decision-making processes and official ministry. Because they are seen as representing the church's clerical structure, they often sense that their ministry is resented and sometimes rejected. As the document on the morale of priests states, they are "caught in the middle."

Other problems mentioned by the document include unclear role expectations, loneliness, the need for affirmation and issues related to sexuality—among them, psychosexual development, feminism, married clergy, optional celibacy and the role and place of homosexuality in ministry. The intense focus in recent years on such sexual problems as pedophilia has contributed to a diminishing respect for the priesthood.

With so many pressures on the church's priests today, the question of how priests are formed is crucial. Priestly formation must be before all else realistic. It must help candidates prepare for the real world in which they will have to serve. They must be able to articulate the experience of their communities. They must be able to work collaboratively with others, including women. And they must be able to challenge those in their communities with the Gospel they are missioned to proclaim.

The Preparatory Document.

As part of the preparation for the synod, the Vatican Synod Secretariat has published a preparatory document entitled "Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day." This preparatory document or *lineamenta* has been circulated for comments to "bishops, diocesan and religious priests, women religious, lay women and men, seminaries and faculties of theology, priests and pastoral councils, Catholic movements and organizations, parishes and all those forces at work in the church." From responses to the document, the secretariat will draw up a working paper, called the *instrumentum laboris*, to be sent to the episcopal conferences and others who will participate in the synod itself.

There is much that is positive in the document. The first section, entitled "Certain Elements in an Analysis of the Present Situation," attempts to describe concretely the world in which candidates for the priesthood will carry out their ministry. The document addresses the special needs of both young priests and older priests as well as those involved in formation work.

The document acknowledges the fragile psychological state of many contemporary candidates in the West. It emphasizes the importance of spiritual direction, states that lay men and women have a role to play in both minor

and major seminaries and stresses that ecumenical endeavors should be part of the program. It recognizes that some seminarians study at universities and that courses taken in universities should be integrated into the general program of formation. It stresses that formation does not end with ordination, but must continue.

But in a number of ways the document is disappointing. First of all, its *analysis* of the contemporary situation is weak and fails to address adequately the most significant issues that tomorrow's priests will have to face. Second, it approaches the question of priestly formation from the perspective of a Roman, magisterial theology of priesthood, rather than from that of a critical theology based on a biblical and historical understanding of ordained ministry. Third, the image of the priest is a clerical one, rather than one more in tune with the expectations of Catholic people today. Finally, its theology of vocation is deficient.

The Context of the Document. The preparatory document notes the differences that exist among particular churches, the dramatic decrease in candidates for the priesthood and the different sociocultural environments of first- and third-world countries.

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While generally positive to the values it sees as present in third-world countries, the document seems more pessimistic, if not actually hostile, toward Western culture, which it characterizes as individualist, subjectivist, secularist and overly technological. Where a return to religion appears in the West, it seems to the document's authors to produce at times "an irrationalism and an elementary fundamentalism." Positive developments in Western countries such as the explosion of new lay ministries and the emergence of a highly educated laity are not mentioned.

Most discouraging is the document's failure to address concretely the questions priests today must deal with, such as celibacy, a realistic appraisal of the shortage of priests, relations with women, sexuality and affectivity, problems with authority, a restless laity and the morale problems faced by priests.

Theology of Priesthood. The preparatory document fails to articulate a contemporary theology of the priesthood. Part II, entitled "Some Fundamental Presup-

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positions," states that "the doctrine of the ministerial priesthood is the basis of all priestly formation." But the document does not say what this doctrine is.

The text points out that the ministerial priesthood is not the object of the coming synod, since that was dealt with by the synod of 1971. It states that the pastoral purpose of formation must be understood in light of what Vatican II said about the priesthood in its decrees on priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) and priestly formation (*Optatam Totius*), as well as in the "Constitution on the Church" (*Lumen Gentium*). But this magisterial doctrine of the priesthood, presupposed by the document, needs to be updated.

Part of the problem is that Vatican II said a great deal about the theology of the episcopate and about the place of the laity in the church. But, as Martin Marty observed years ago, the council failed to address adequately the theology of the priesthood and religious life. The council boosted the morale of the episcopacy by its treatment of the episcopal office. But according to Dr. Marty, "No fresh rationales for being a priest or a religious emerged, while the old ones were effectively undercut by the advances in understanding of bishop and lay person."

Vatican II may not have done much to develop the theology of the priesthood, but in recent years, critical, historical studies have brought about a shift in the way priesthood is understood. The sacral model of priesthood, presupposed in church teaching from the time of the Council of Florence (1439), has given way to a new understanding of priesthood as a particular kind of ministry and leadership, constituting the church's pastoral office.

The sacral model understands the priest as a sacred person, equipped with sacramental power to "confect" the Eucharist. It developed out of the sacralizing and clericalizing of the ordained ministry that took place in the church between the 4th and the 10th centuries, and out of the distinction between the power of ordination and the power of jurisdiction that emerged in the canon law of the 11th and 12th centuries.

Building on the distinction, medieval theology emphasized the sacramental power of the priest in the celebration of the Eucharist rather than the priest's role in relation to a community. This theology was confirmed by the Council of Trent. But the sacral model of priesthood can be easily misunderstood; it stresses the priest's cultic role at the expense of the concept of ministry and can

lead to an exaggerated view of the priest as a person possessed of special powers.

A more critical, contemporary theology understands ordained priesthood as a particular ministry among many. The ministry of the one called "priest" in the Catholic tradition consists of leadership in forming and nurturing the faith community, especially through a ministry of word and sacrament. For most diocesan priests, that is expressed through local faith communities. Because they are in communion with the bishop and function as his assistants, they make the universal church present on the local level.

Most religious priests exercise a more kerygmatic or evangelical priesthood. Though their ministry includes the liturgy and the service of unity, it is focused on the ministry of the word in all its many dimensions—preaching, teaching, carrying out the guiding ministries of spiritual direction and the prophetic ministries of social justice.

The preparatory document's emphasis on the priest as one likened to Christ through ordination and as the "dispenser of the mysteries" suggests a sacral model of priesthood and the image of the priest as a sacred person. The document stresses the priest's relation to the hierarchical church and to the bishop but does not adequately develop the priest's ministry within the local community.

Clerical Approach. The preparatory document is overly clerical. This approach is most evident in its strong reaffirmation of the seminary system. Appealing to the council, the document underlines the importance of major seminaries and repeats the argument for the continuing usefulness of minor seminaries.

Seminary life is described in monastic terms. The document stresses common life, discipline and a rule, rather than community. The document speaks frequently of collaboration, but it does not mention accountability and the sharing of authority. The emphases on the priest as witness to mystery, likened to Christ through ordination, and on priestly formation as education to a sense of mystery reflect more the "church as mystery" theology Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger stressed at the 1985 Extraordinary Synod than a theology of the "people of God."

Surprisingly, the document does not consider the experience of theological centers or ecumenical theological unions in which a considerable number of religious priests have been trained in the years since the end of Vat-

ican II. It should at least ask if the closed seminary system, without the presence of other lay men and women preparing for church ministry, is the best way to train those who will serve as priests in tomorrow's church.

Recently the Vatican ordered the closing of two non-traditional seminaries in Recife, Brazil. In the case of one of them, the Recife Institute of Theology, the decision was based at least in part on formation issues. The Vatican objected to the seminarians living in small groups scattered throughout the city rather than together in a single center of formation.

Theological centers and unions have their own tensions and problems. Candidates for the priesthood study with Catholic women also preparing for church ministry, but excluded from the ranks of the ordained, as well as with men and women preparing for ordination in other churches. They may take some courses from Protestant professors. They must come to terms with a number of issues—among them, feminist hermeneutics, inclusive language, diverse understandings of sexuality, liberation theology and theological pluralism.

The politicization of issues in such centers is not always helpful. For example, in many of them the word "priesthood" is seldom used. The accepted term is "ministry," lest any who cannot be ordained feel slighted or excluded. This is unfortunate. The word priest is deeply rooted in the tradition of the church. There is no reason to exclude it, or to suggest that there is nothing unique or specific to the ministry of the ordained. But the tensions present in the life of the contemporary church cannot be excluded from the formation of those who will be its priests. They have to face these issues.

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In traditional or free-standing seminaries, there is more support for those preparing for ordination and a greater focus on the identity of a priest. They can also be effective centers for priestly formation, but only if they have a clear vision of what is expected of tomorrow's priests. They should be open institutions, not closed sanctuaries. If indeed "the entire Christian community is an important place for formation," that community should be well represented on the seminary staff.

Theology of Vocation. The document has an inadequate theology of vocation. A careful theology of voca-

tion is crucial in a period in the life of the church when the lack of vocations may lead to less critical admission standards. Faculty interviewed by Katarina Schuth in her study of 24 U.S. seminaries and theologates noted an increasing tendency toward "neoconservatism" among seminarians today. She describes these seminarians as conservative in their attitudes towards liturgy and authority, more interested in habits, vestments and church paraphernalia, and inclined toward "the more hieratic dimensions of office and priestly roles." Such candidates may be fragile psychologically, in need of a highly structured way of life. They may be drawn to the priesthood precisely because it offers both status and security.

Other candidates today are reluctant to think of themselves as representing the church. They are convinced that the priesthood as it has existed in the church is in a process of transition, and they do not want to be too identified with the institution. Their view of priesthood is a highly individualistic one that risks privatizing the church's ministry of leadership.

The document uses the traditional language of "awakening" and "fostering" vocations in young men who are then "formed" in seminaries. A vocation is recognized by "a will to make a definite commitment and a capacity of being faithful to this commitment, and, even more, an aptitude to fulfill the pastoral ministry and to bear the responsibilities entailed."

This is good enough, but perhaps more than passing references to "maturity in judgment" and "the complexity and the burden of both the priestly ministry and the conditions in which that ministry is lived" are needed to specify what constitutes a vocation to priestly ministry today. The "will to make a definite commitment" is important, but so are the human qualities that make a person both a minister and a leader. The document should make this clear by stressing the importance of a formation program that enables candidates to become more fully human.

What one misses particularly in the document is a discussion of the crucial necessity of discerning in the candidate for ordination a charism for leadership and service in communities of faith. Ordination cannot "liken" one to Christ if a charism for ministry and service is not present in the one to be ordained. The document does not suggest what the presence of this charism requires on a personal or interpersonal level. Nor does it raise the question of whether this charism might be found among those not presently eligible for ordination.

The 1990 Synod of Bishops could be the ideal place for a crucial discussion of these issues, for the synod represents a unique forum that brings together bishops, theologians and representatives of religious and laity from around the world to make recommendations to the Pope. The preparatory document for the upcoming synod has just begun to address the issue of the formation of priests. It has a long way to go. ■