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The Gift of the Priestly Vocation

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CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS
INSTITUTIONIS SACERDOTALIS, THE GIFT OF THE PRIESTLY
VOCATION. LONDON: CATHOLIC TRUTH SOCIETY: 2017.
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The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (2016) replaces the previous *ratio*, first issued in 1970 and updated in 1985. It is a compendium of the valued deliberations of Conferences of Bishops, individual particular churches and the papal magisterium since then, particularly St. John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1992).

The introduction begins, "The gift of the priestly vocation, placed by God in the hearts of some men, obliges the church to propose to them a serious journey of formation." This journey proceeds from seminary formation to the continuing formation of the priest. The transfer of responsibility for seminary formation from the Congregation for Catholic Education to that of the Clergy in 2013 underscores the importance of understanding priestly formation as an on-going journey from preparing for ordination to a life-long exercise of priestly ministry.

The document is organized in eight chapters. The first (nos. 1-10) established its jurisdiction and its general normative status for each Conference of Bishops preparing its own regulations (*Ratio nationalis*). Chapter 2 (nos. 11-27) outlines general principles and gives consideration to the nature, promotion, and accompaniment of priestly vocations. Chapter 3 (nos. 28-53) considers the foundations for formation to the ministerial priesthood according to the overarching relationship of service leadership within the church as the People of God and the Body of Christ. The nature and mission of the priest demands a solid formation and interior maturity enabling true communion and dialogue with others. Chapter 4 (nos. 54-88) relates initial and ongoing formation. Initial formation has four major stages. The propaedeutic stage provides **a time for vocational discernment** with an emphasis on growth in the spiritual life and personal maturity. The Stage of Philosophical Studies is **a time of Christian discipleship** when the seminarian achieves maturity sufficient to make a definitive choice for priesthood. The Stage of Theological Studies is **a time of configuration to Christ** through a deepening of a priestly spirituality and commitment to a particular ecclesiastical circumscription. The Pastoral Stage is **a time of vocational synthesis** following diaconate and preceding priestly ordination usually taking place outside the seminary and in service of a local faith community. The priest is in a life-long process of gradual and continuous configuration to Christ sustained by the support of the faith community and the priestly fraternity. Progressing in his ministry, the priest will benefit from a deepening relationship in spiritual direction, bringing the experience of his own weakness into a greater awareness of God's abiding love for him. Growing old, he maintains a joyful witness to his life-long commitment through active participation in the ministry and diocesan life. Chapter 5 (nos. 89-124) enumerates the four dimensions of initial formation. The first is *human formation*. The physical, psychological, and moral development along with the cultivation of an aesthetic sense and skills in social engagement prepare the seminarian for service in the ministerial priesthood. Through an open relationship with formators, he finds encouragement in moments of

crisis, appreciating them as occasions for conversion and renewal. *Spiritual formation* has as its goal the development of a personal union with Christ brought about by participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church and a personal prayer life nourished by God's Word. The seminarian will cultivate a chaste way of life that recognizes celibacy as an evangelically powerful gift from God. The seminarian cultivates virtues specific to priesthood and the pastoral ministry through a simple and prayerful life style attuned to social justice and grounded in the spiritual treasures of the church. *Intellectual formation* provides the means by which the priest can read the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of faith. *Pastoral formation* enables the seminarian to acquire the inner freedom for living well with others in the service leadership the ministry requires. Chapter 6 (nos. 125–152) enumerates the agents of formation. God, the giver of the gift of the priestly vocation, is the principal agent with the local church providing the indispensable context of formation. The seminarians and those who accompany and approve them – bishop, priests, formators, professors, family and parish – are attentive to the many actions of the Holy Spirit at work in the formation journey. Chapter 7 (nos. 153-187) outlines the organization of studies for an integrated program ensuring a rigorous intellectual formation to critically address current trends in society, science and the church. Chapter 8 (nos. 188–210) provides criteria and norms for the seminary as a true community of formation; the admission, dismissal, and departure from the seminary; the particular attention needed for evaluating persons with homosexual tendencies; the protection of minors and the accompaniment of victims; the scrutinies necessary to discern the suitability of candidates. It is for the bishop, on the advice of formators, to admit a candidate to ordination.

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