

**Alternative Methods for the Formation of the Clergy:
The St. Vincent de Paul Major Seminary
(Cali – Colombia)**

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What is striking about this experience of clerical formation by the CM? It is being done for professionals. How did it begin? Since some of these experiences failed, why continue? Can it respond to new challenges in today's world? Let us look at the origins and characteristics and later we can pass judgment.

1. Origin of the Experience

There are vocations which demand special attention. Archbishop Isaias Duarte Concino, Archbishop of Cali, was aware of this fact and he began to explore the viability of a seminary for this type of vocation.

So, he contacted the Vincentian house in Cali. "Could you, Fathers, receive a group of seminarians whose circumstances of life require a special formation?" It was a call of the local Church that was searching for a response to one of its biggest problems: a shortage of priests.

The province studied the proposal, analyzed the possibility of responding affirmatively and studied the requirements for personnel and the need to fix up the house. The proposal became a reality on 9 August 1998 with the entrance of five aspirants to the priesthood. Three had done studies in other seminaries and were accepted by the Archbishop for the Archdiocese and two came from the Archdiocesan pre-seminary experience. Three Vincentian formators were in charge of the new work.

This is the fourth year of experience in this new work. During that time 20 have enrolled and three have been ordained. At present we have ten seminarians (seven in theology and three in philosophy). Six have left the seminary and one is doing a pastoral experience.

2. Criteria for Formation

In his post-synodal exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis*, Pope John Paul II, taking up the ecclesial tradition, presents criteria for a formation experience like ours, which is with vocations for the priesthood who come at a mature age. The

document calls this fact “a new and hopeful sign which frequently occurs in the present situation.”¹

2.1. For whom is this necessary? For some of those who, after a more or less long experience of life as a layperson with professional commitments, want to be priests. We underline here the lay aspect, understood as a commitment with the local Church, and professional, given the secular job they held.

2.2. “It is not always possible, and frequently inconvenient, to invite adults to follow the educational course at the major seminary.”² Consequently, the experience requires its own route. It is necessary to discover it in each instance.

2.3. “After a careful discernment about the authenticity of these vocations”:³ it is a crucial criterion to discern well why these vocations have arisen. An adequate vocation program is needed for this type of experience.

2.4. “To prepare some specific type of formational accompaniment, to insure, through opportune adjustments, the necessary spiritual and intellectual formation”:⁴ this is a broad criterion that opens up the search for necessary adaptations to new styles of accompaniment. The spiritual and intellectual emphasis stands out.

2.5. A criterion that guarantees “the full insertion of these vocations in the one presbyterate and their intimate and cordial communion with it.”⁵ For this it is necessary to promote “an adequate relationship with the other aspirants to the priesthood and periods of presence in the community of the major seminary.”⁶

Based on these criteria we have elaborated the plan for the seminary and its itinerary.

3. Profile of the Candidate

We have to conform to the criteria of the Church. The first step is to look at the human and vocational profile of the candidates:

3.1. An age between 25 and 35-years old because at that age there is a certain ability to assimilate formation.

¹*PDV*, 64b.

²*Ibid.*

³*Ibid.*

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*PDV*, 64c.

⁶*Ibid.*

3.2. The type of professional or university studies: the kind of degree the candidate has and the occupation at which he has been working. This gives us some guarantees about the personal situation of these candidates (maturity, abilities, etc.).

3.3. A certain Christian and pastoral experience. We know that, ordinarily, vocations originate in adolescence or during one's youth. Probably they could not respond to the call at that stage, but it is possible that a vocation continued to be present in the lives of these men and it brought them to be tied pastorally to the local Church, to life in the environment of parish organizations or prayer groups, where many vocations are preserved or decided.

3.4. One year of pre-seminary. Besides having the criteria of human maturity, freedom and the capacity to choose and make the breaks required for this road, it is necessary that the candidate enter the seminary, assume its rhythm of life, join its community and accept its rules.

This moment of decision is difficult. There is a lot to be left behind: complete independence, a determined style of life and work; there are also new values to assume, for example, a sense of community goods. We have opted for a pre-seminary process; that is, a sufficient contact with the candidates, for almost a year, in which formation is imparted and goals are proposed for vocation, Christian life and parish experience.

Psychological help plays an important role here; helping — excuse the redundancy — to assure the authenticity of the vocation and favoring group integration in the common life of the seminary.

4. Life in the Seminary

The seminary itinerary demands living in community. The present definition of “seminary” tends to accentuate the community dimension, inviting the candidate to follow the process of the disciples around Jesus, emphasizing the centrality of the Kingdom and insisting that the Holy Spirit is the primary formator.

This reality brings us to:

4.1. Maintaining and creating an environment of freedom and responsibility adequate for professionals. Their age and condition merit this, but it is a call to seriousness and transparency of life.

4.2. Growing in communication with the formators and peers. Service, responsibility in the house and constant dialogue are indispensable.

4.3. Orienting their lives around the ideal of Jesus Christ, which has to become a criterion for life, aided by prayer, liturgy and spiritual accompaniment.

4.4. Studying theology, which they do at the archdiocesan major seminary. This experience of formation helps guarantee intellectual seriousness and achieve the criterion of priestly integration.

4.5. Identity with the archdiocesan Church. This is constantly highlighted in the sense of belonging to the local Church. This aspect is fostered by, among other things, frequent visits by the Archbishop (R.I.P.) and his auxiliary bishops. This is one of the pillars of the whole formation program, given the need for ministerial communion with the Shepherd, which facilitates knowledge of the ecclesial reality.

Contact with the archdiocesan Church is also achieved by the experience of the apostolate in different parishes in the city and, in a special way, in a new, suburban parish in a poor area. This activity is directed by a confrere.

4.6. The seminarians can exercise their secular profession during the time of formation in the seminary. This is demanded by the type of vocation that comes to us, ordinarily, from poor areas. The seminarians have to support themselves economically and help their families. At the same time, this means a demanding effort in order to attend to two things: work and study, avoiding compromising one or the other. This experience is difficult, but many of them have managed to achieve this rhythm since they have had to study at night and work during the day.

In the pre-seminary, besides knowing the human and Christian maturity of the candidates, they can be observed in their jobs, family life and secular commitments. In the meetings with the seminarians, we talk constantly about the sense of work.

5. The First Year of Formation

The first year of formation with us merits a special section. Some seminarians are professionals in areas of study of a humanistic type and had contact with studies that our canons call philosophy and humanities. If some come by this route, they enter directly into the cycle of theology. But, for the others, whose degrees are in the area of mathematics or administration and who have had very little study of the humanities (practically the majority), it is necessary to help them come up to a level where they can study theology.

In this preparatory year, they study the mystery of Christ and are given a glance at the integrity of priestly formation.

When the seminarians come home, after a day of work, they take courses in systematic philosophy, the history of philosophy, introduction to biblical science, Old Testament, foundations of Christian life, current teachings of the church and the correspondence course in catechetics given by the archdiocese.

The time of this formation is an intensely demanding one, which prepares the way for big decisions, because, due to the class schedule, they will have to adapt from a secular job and decide about the vocational road.

Through the years of theology we accentuate vocational discernment, with the traditional calls of the Church to ministry and holy orders, so that at the end of the fourth year of theology, they receive the diaconate and live it as an experience of ministry looking toward priesthood and as a time of insertion into the presbyterate.

6. Lessons from the Experience

The experience of these four years has brought us to see that:

6.1. Formation is a demanding process, because of work and study for the priesthood. Special concessions are not made. The seminarians are required to organize their time and to fulfill commitments. Neither the seminary nor the professional work they do can suffer.

6.2. Formation is personal and personalized. It takes into account the process of each one of the seminarians and, therefore, communication and constant contact are required.

6.3. It is very important to live intensely the moments of community foreseen in the order of day. The schedule is flexible, but the times for prayer, Eucharist, meals, formation dialogues and rest are not changeable.

6.4. It is indispensable to maintain the pre-seminary as an opportunity to know the candidates and offer them spiritual formation. Despite the professional experience of the seminarians, it is necessary to be aware of their lack of human and Christian formation today. They are children of their time!

6.5. It is important for them to evangelize by their way of exercising their profession in the places that they work. Why are they allowed to work? For the money? So as not to be dependent on people who earn a salary? It is not just that. It should be a formative moment of Christian and priestly presence in these places. In fact, their workmates note the change in the seminarians when they enter the seminary. There are changes of attitude and behavior. They know more about reality and the world of the economy than traditional candidates, but they

lack the evangelizing dialogue with the world of culture and with society, in what the human and secular experience brings to priestly formation.

There is still some doubt about how they will act when they do not have to work professionally. How will they live their priestly ministry? In fact, after ordination, they will not be able to exercise their profession as they did during formation, since they should be free to develop their ministry according to the needs of the archdiocese. At present, to receive the diaconate, they have to leave their secular occupations.

6.6. And so, there arises one last critical reflection about the sense of this work: Is its reason for existence only because of the shortage of priests or to help a few achieve their goal? Is it positive that this space in the seminary has been opened for some vocations who, as we have been saying, are a sign of hope and of new times, but also negative, given the tendency of young people to postpone decisions and wait longer before leaving home? Is it only a new method of vocation ministry? Maybe we should look at these vocations from a more critical and evangelical position in a dialogue between faith and culture; vocations, which can still offer something and work in their own environment and, from within, exercise their ministry.

To evangelize the professional world. Someone invited me to reflect on this type of experience, but from outside, for example in a poor environment with criteria of insertion, where the candidates work and are formed alongside the poor. Would this not be more significant? Would that not open the experience of priestly formation to the questions that come from social reality (unemployment, violence and the poverty which the city lives on its edges)? How can the experience be made more evangelizing? This is the challenge which remains and which will give us a greater guarantee of success in vocation ministry.

The fundamental question is: where will the newness be, in the external, in a new environment for vocations, or in a mentality which knows how to enter the world (inculturation) and from there discerns the evangelical dynamism of a faith lived in the reality of the cities?

There is much more still to be thought about. This experience is only a little sign, when viewed from the perspective of the classical formation, but there has to be a continual reflection which will open up new roads.

(JOHN PRAGER, C.M., Translator)