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on "The Gift of the Priestly Vocation"



remarks by

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As we know, a *Ratio fundamentalis* seeks to integrate the multiple aspects of the life of the future priest. This version, as stated at the outset, proposes a "serious journey," with the goal of forming seminarians to become missionary disciples as clergy.

What struck me on first reading it was that dominant image, namely, formation as a *road* or way on which seminarians "journey" toward ordination, accompanied by all those who comprise the "formation community" (no. 139).

[When Pope Francis spoke about this *Ratio*](#), he highlighted two alternate attitudes that accompany anyone on a journey: enthusiasm and anxiety. The prospect of becoming a future priest generates both excitement, about the possibilities of what lies ahead, and concern, over the many demands that reaching the destination entails.

For the sake of brevity, I'd like to present just two features specific to making a journey, especially these days: (1) the need for a map to provide direction, and (2) the type of terrain on which one travels. Conveniently, they correspond to the two elements of my new position as the full-time Cardinal Foley Chair, namely homiletics and social communications!

First, the MAP ... It fascinates me how drivers demonstrate a blind trust in their global positioning system. It's mind-boggling, really, to think of how much detail a GPS includes, and how that polite and gentle voice can magically guide our way, even around traffic and detours. Sadly, there are people place too much trust in the system, like those who have driven onto the stairways in a public park or straight into a roadside lake. (Sadly, [this really does happen.](#))

The *Ratio*, we might say, highlights the need to have and use a PPS ... a Personal positioning system, if you will. What gives the best guidance and surest direction in the formation of future priests is Sacred Scripture. In the Word of God seminarians should place their trust. Whatever other maps they may like to use, in terms of their favorite spiritual readings or personal devotions, no means of guidance is as beneficial as reading the Bible.

The *Ratio* is rather forthright in its recommendation to download this biblical PPS when it points out that “a relationship with the Word of God holds a *preeminent place* in the process of spiritual growth” (no. 103, emphasis added). It references the wisdom of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and his insight that God’s word offers the “light and strength” in which a priest’s vocation “can be discerned and appreciated, loved and followed” and his “proper mission (be) carried out” (note 156).

Preaching is a primary work in that mission. But to become good preachers, future priests (and current ones, too) need to develop good habits of reading, especially of reading and appropriating the Sacred Scriptures. Why? Because, as the *Ratio* expresses, only after the Word of God is “welcomed in the depth of the heart” (no. 103), where it has the power to unite one intimately to Christ (cf. no. 40), can one learn to give good homilies (no. 103).

That intimate familiarity with God’s Word is essential to preaching, to which the *Ratio* says formation is to give “special attention” (no. 177). I, for one, am grateful for this call to attention, since it should help to keep me employed! But all of us need to keep our focus there, whether in priestly formation or in priestly ministry. Interestingly, a recent [article in L’Osservatore Romano](#) critically, but correctly, chides priests for their lack of attention to the inspiring Word of God, in favor of the words and deeds of human beings.

Nevertheless, as the *Ratio* notes in quoting Pope Francis, the future preacher has not only “to contemplate the word, but he also has to contemplate his people” (no. 177, with note 269). And that second contemplation leads to my second point ... that the TERRAIN for the future priest’s formation is quite new. For we now live in, are formed by, and are called to carry out our priestly mission in a world shaped by new media and social communications.

The *Ratio* concedes as much; in fact, it devotes half of its section on human formation to the realm of new media (nn. 97-100). But the way the document treats this phenomenon could benefit from further explication.

First, it acknowledges that the arena in which we are to proclaim the Good News has “expanded through the mass media and social networks.” Consequently, it notes, “the pastors of the future cannot remain aloof (from it), either during their formation or their future ministry” (no. 97) – as if being aloof from the Web were actually possible for a generation of digital natives!

Then, in standard fashion, the *Ratio* emphasizes both looking “confidently at the possibilities offered by the digital world” (no. 98) and paying “prudent attention to the inevitable risks that come from frequenting the digital world” (no. 99). Later, in the chapter that specifies the organization of studies, the document mentions the need for “ministerial” education in that digital world,¹ stipulating that the seminary must develop a “specific awareness” in seminarians so that they will “understand not only (the) technical ideas and instruments, but above all ... their balanced and mature use” (no. 182).

Fair enough! But I think there's more to consider. So, let me conclude by sharing three areas for further reflection² that may help with developing a more specific plan for priestly formation in our land.³

First, a seminary's approach to social communications should go beyond seeing new media as merely instruments, as the *Ratio* seems to do. The Internet is not just a tool. It's much bigger; indeed, it's a "world wide web." It has been likened to the environment itself, where we are able to exist, or to the body's connective tissue, which allows us to function as we do.

This world wide web is our everyday reality. Metaphorically, the image of the web suggests two key dimensions to that reality. On the one hand, a spider's work intricately and beautifully connects a multiplicity of points. On the digital web, we can now link to anything and anyone with just a point and a click. That's a good thing, for it allows us to reach out, to learn more, and to encounter many.

But the sheer number of possible connections on the web requires a more-focused awareness, lest we become ensnared by it. After all, the other truth about a spider's web is that it's purpose is to capture and kill. Similarly, though unwittingly, the world of new media can entangle and entrap us in its snares. Its applications are designed to keep you connected, even when you have more important things to do! And its capabilities can get risky; for example, anyone today can snap a photo of you, whether you know it or not, and once it's posted online, the 'Net never forgets!

That's why, in the second place, seminary formation should emphasize the public character of the priesthood in the digital realm. Rightly does the *Ratio* call for developing in seminarians a maturity that cultivates an appropriate and measured use of the Internet. But the bigger concern is to develop in them the understanding of who they are in that space and in this particular vocation, namely a public personage. In the digital world, what seems private, or what one might hope would remain private, is not. And in our culture, still today, being and becoming a priest has a symbolic dimension; when people see any one of us, they see all of us and the entire Church. So, the reactions, comments, images, and anything else that one posts online always go beyond any of our own personal interests or viewpoints, whether we intend them to or not.

But that's not to suggest that we should abandon the digital world. On the contrary – and in keeping with our [Archbishop's sage advice](#) to engage the world rather than retreat from it – my third and final thought on the *Ratio* is that priestly formation actually should expand its engagement with social communications.

A seminary today ought to adopt and promote the use of new media as a way to encounter and to accompany others – and hopefully, as a means of fostering even more vocations. But beyond that pragmatism, a strong program of seminary formation should explore the potentially rich Theology of social communications. Given technology's impact on how we understand ourselves and how we interact with others, the digital dimension also impacts

how we understand what the Church is and how we live and work in it. Consequently, we need to update our theological maps and make use of them at every step along this new terrain.

Fortunately, *this* seminary has taken the lead in developing such a map. And with such a not-so-subtle commercial plug, I'll leave it at that!

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¹ The term “ministerial studies” is intended to distinguish areas like languages, the arts, finance, or a liturgical practicum from the broader “philosophical” and “theological” studies that constitute the bulk of a seminarian’s intellectual formation. In some cases, the “ministerial” studies are treated as elective, instead of required, courses in a seminary’s curriculum.

² Cf. G. Cucci and H. Zollner, “Il nuovo documento sulla formazione sacerdotale,” in [La Civiltà Cattolica](#) no. 4003 (2017), pp. 61-75.

³ As explained in the document (note 6), this *Ratio fundamentalis* is a “general executive decree” which replaces the 1970 version and its subsequent revision in 1985. It is “fundamental” inasmuch as it is to serve as the basis for the program of priestly formation (a *ratio nationalis*) that each country’s conference of bishops is now required to prepare (no. 3).