

# Accompanying and discerning the priestly vocation in the context of the Catholic Church

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Received: 10 March 2025

Available Online: 1 April 2025

Revised: 19 March 2025

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2025.25037

Accepted: 25 March 2025

ISSN: 2243-7703

Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS



## **Abstract**

The Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis (RFIS) presents a compelling vision for priestly formation, centered on the indispensable pillars of accompaniment (accompagnement) and discernment (discernement). These concepts, far from being mere pedagogical tools, are understood as vital components in the pursuit of an integral and holistic development of future priests. This article undertakes a rigorous analysis of these foundational principles, elucidating their profound significance within the RFIS's comprehensive framework for priestly formation. It posits that the effective realization of accompaniment—a nuanced process of sustained guidance and empathetic support—and discernment—a profound and prayerful exploration of God's will—necessitates the cultivation of a specific and conducive “formation atmosphere” within the seminary environment. This atmosphere, characterized by a pervasive spirit of prayer, a foundation of unwavering mutual trust, a culture of transparent and open communication, and an unwavering commitment to the transformative values of the Gospel, is deemed essential for the nurturing and fostering of authentic priestly vocations within the diverse and multifaceted contexts of the contemporary Catholic Church. The article further argues that this formation atmosphere serves as the fertile ground where the seeds of vocation can take root, flourish, and ultimately bear fruit, enabling seminarians to fully embrace their calling and to serve the Church with unwavering fidelity and zeal. It is within this carefully cultivated environment that the interplay between accompaniment and discernment allows for the deepest personal growth and the most authentic response to the Lord's invitation.

**Keywords:** accompaniment, discernment, priestly formation, formation atmosphere, vocation

## Accompanying and discerning the priestly vocation in the context of the Catholic Church

### 1. Introduction

Accompanying and discerning the priestly vocation are central to the integral formation of priests within the Catholic Church. As articulated in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, these concepts - accompaniment and discernment - are not merely procedural elements but integral to the holistic growth of candidates. Their frequent use in the *Ratio* (appearing 32 and 37 times respectively) underscores their significance, highlighting their connection to the document's vision of fostering authentic priestly ministry. This vision takes on particular importance when considering the diverse contexts in which the Church operates, including the complex historical, cultural, and socio-political realities of specific regions. Integral formation, viewed through an educational lens, encompasses the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions, recognizing that authentic ministry stems from a well-integrated personality. Accompaniment, therefore, is not mere supervision but a process of walking alongside the candidate, offering guidance and support during vocational discernment. Similarly, discernment is not simply assessment but a deeper process of prayerful reflection and dialogue, a form of formative evaluation, to understand God's will for the individual and the Church. The *Ratio* calls for a serious re-evaluation of seminary formation programs, acknowledging the need for ongoing adaptation. While challenging for those invested in existing structures, this re-evaluation is crucial for serving the Church in the modern world. Of the many elements contributing to effective formation, accompaniment and discernment are paramount, but their effective implementation requires a conducive "formation atmosphere", a supportive learning environment, characterized by prayer, mutual trust, open communication, and a genuine commitment to Gospel values. Without such an atmosphere, even the best-intentioned efforts may fall short.

This article argues that the effective implementation of accompaniment and discernment, as outlined in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, within various contexts of the Catholic Church hinges on the creation of a nurturing formation atmosphere that fosters authentic priestly vocations, effectively transforming the seminary into a true school of discipleship.

### 2. Research Content

***Building a Formation Environment*** - The formation environment is the atmosphere that everyone in the seminary lives and breathes every day. This environment is created by the members of the seminary themselves. The seminary is not primarily an inn or a dormitory, but a miniature Church family, a formation environment, "a home and school of communion" (John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, January 6, 2001). From an educational perspective, this highlights the seminary as a learning community where seminarians are actively engaged in constructing their understanding of vocation and ministry.

At the heart of this transformative process lies the "formation environment," a concept that transcends the physical boundaries of the seminary to encompass the living, breathing atmosphere created by its members. This environment, as described, is not simply a passive backdrop but an active force, a "home and school of communion" where seminarians are shaped into ministers of the Church. To truly grasp the significance of the formation environment, we must move beyond the superficial understanding of the seminary as a dormitory or inn. It is, in essence, a miniature Church family, a microcosm of the larger ecclesial community. This implies a profound interconnectedness among seminarians, where individual actions and attitudes ripple through the entire community, shaping the prevailing atmosphere. The formation environment is thus not imposed from above but organically generated by the collective lives of those within its walls.

This understanding carries significant implications. Firstly, it underscores the profound responsibility each seminarian bears in contributing to the overall well-being of the community. Every conversation, every interaction, and every act of service or indifference plays a role in shaping the atmosphere. A culture of mutual respect, support, and genuine charity is not merely desirable but essential for the effective formation of future priests. Conversely, negative behaviors, such as gossip, rivalry, or apathy, can poison the atmosphere, hindering the spiritual and personal growth of all. Secondly, the concept of the seminary as a “home and school of communion” emphasizes the dual nature of its mission. It is a place of dwelling, where seminarians find a sense of belonging and shared purpose, and a place of learning, where they are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for ministry. “Communion,” in this context, refers to a deep unity with God and with one another, a unity that forms the bedrock of Christian life. The seminary should therefore foster an environment where this communion is not merely taught but experienced, where seminarians learn to live in authentic relationship with God and their brothers.

The practical implications of this understanding are manifold. Seminary leaders must be acutely aware of the formation environment, recognizing its dynamic and influential nature. They must actively cultivate a culture of support, accountability, and spiritual growth, addressing negative behaviors and promoting positive interactions. This may involve fostering opportunities for communal prayer, shared meals, and pastoral outreach, as well as providing guidance and support for seminarians facing personal challenges. Furthermore, the formation environment serves as a crucial training ground for future ministry, a form of experiential learning. Seminarians learn to build relationships, resolve conflicts, and practice pastoral care within the context of their own community. The skills they develop in this environment will directly impact their effectiveness as priests, enabling them to build healthy and vibrant parish communities.

Therefore, formators and those being formed live the experience as a family, experiencing ecclesiology and sacramental fraternity with one another. Each person knows how to cooperate with each other to build the seminary into a community of love, unity, and mission. In order to create such a formation environment, we need to build the following elements:

***Sequela Christi, Disciple of Christ*** - The foundational elements for the function of the seminary are theological, ecclesiological, and human: starting from the bishop, the rector, the formators, the seminarians, and finally the aspirants, all are on a journey, called to follow Christ. All constitute a concrete, miniature Church community, in which each person has a distinct role and responsibility towards themselves and others. Each person fulfills their responsibility in the spirit of the Church. Each person has different charisms, roles, and abilities, but all share one common Spirit, which is the Spirit of Christ, who works constantly in the Church (1 Cor 12). Thus, the distinction between the stages (propaedeutic and ongoing formation), between the different agents (bishop, rector, formators, even the laity, etc.), and the dimensions of formation (human, intellectual, spiritual, pastoral) – as well as the methods of formation mentioned in the Ratio, all, in a certain sense, become means and mediating factors that God uses in the process of integral formation, because, ultimately, formation is primarily the work of the Triune God.

This is not to underestimate or disregard the human factors directly involved in the formation environment, but to deeply acknowledge and exalt this ecclesiological reality. Because this vision primarily helps us focus not on the roles of the formators, but on the Holy Spirit, who is working within us. For the seminary is the school of the Holy Spirit; He is the principal agent of the priestly formation journey. On this basis, all formation roles, even the smallest, can potentially contain an inspiration of the Holy Spirit and become His instruments. Only in the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit can we become “people capable of good discernment in all things” (RFIS no. 43), become “people of communion” (RFIS no. 43), and be companions to one another. Moreover, we find ourselves always covered by the “veil of unknowing,” because we do not know among ourselves who is already holy and who is not yet holy; only God alone knows the truth. In such an environment, the Ratio states: “The priest (including the seminarian) is the first and principal person responsible for his own ongoing formation” (cf. nos. 53, 82, 130). We all have a responsibility towards one another to become true disciples of Christ in the

priestly vocation. This emphasis on personal responsibility aligns with principles of adult learning, where learners are encouraged to be self-directed and take ownership of their development.

This “veil of unknowing” highlights the essential humility required in spiritual formation. Since we cannot see into the depths of another’s heart, we must focus on our own journey, recognizing that true holiness is a gift from God, not a human achievement. The emphasis on personal responsibility for ongoing formation underscores the active role each individual must take in their spiritual growth. It is not a passive waiting for divine intervention, but a diligent cultivation of virtue, a constant seeking of God’s will, and a continuous learning and growing in faith. While we are each primarily responsible for our own growth, the call to mutual responsibility reminds us that we are not isolated individuals. We are a community, walking together on the path to Christ, supporting and encouraging one another along the way. This mutual support helps create an environment where each member can grow in their priestly vocation.

***Empathy and Mutual Trust*** - To become a Church family and to better help one another, empathy is necessary. Empathy means putting oneself in “another’s shoes,” or placing oneself in the other’s position, in their circumstances, to listen to and understand them. This means not only thinking but also feeling their world as they think and feel it; it is an act of going outside of oneself. This is a capacity that requires transcendence not only on the human level but also on the spiritual level. Only when we can put ourselves in another’s situation can we fully understand their problems and perform accurate discernment. The capacity for empathy frees us from all forms of prejudice, subjectivity, bias, abuse, or abuse of power that can always occur in unequal or hierarchical situations. In other words, empathy is loving others more than oneself. Empathy is the practice of self-transcendence, that is, needing to go outside of oneself to reach out to others.

While the Ratio uses this concept only once (no. 47), it largely focuses on explaining the necessity of mutual trust in accompaniment:

*“First of all, it is necessary to create conditions for a serene atmosphere conducive to complete trust and mutual confidence: closeness in fraternal love, empathy, understanding, the ability to listen and share, and especially a consistent witness of life.”* (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis, Congregation for the Clergy, The Gift of the Priestly Vocation, Religious Publishing House, 2017)

Indeed, a deeper understanding between formators and those being formed will emerge if we constantly seek, understand, welcome, and passionately listen to each other’s opinions. Here, we are not only speaking of the formator’s empathy towards those being formed, but also encompassing the empathy of those being formed towards the formators. This is not something automatically present among all seminarians. For, in reality, seminarians often tend to make demands of the formators rather than empathize with and understand them as they should.

Therefore, the Ratio requires:

*“If we wish to accompany others in a correct and balanced way, with respect for their freedom and conscience, as well as to help their human and spiritual development, then each formator must possess suitable qualities and adequate human, spiritual, pastoral, and professional capacities. Furthermore, anyone entrusted with the weighty responsibility of formation must be specifically prepared and possess generous dedication. Formators must also be present full-time, and above all, they must be witnesses through their love and service to God’s people, by selflessly devoting themselves to the Church without calculation.”* (Congregation for the Clergy, The Gift of the Priestly Vocation, no. 49, 48-49)

More than anyone else, formators must be people capable of “empathy and trust” towards those being formed; they must be “people of relationship and communion” to effectively manage interpersonal relationships,

to discern difficult relationships and conflicts, as well as to help them grow and mature in all aspects of their personality according to the example of Christ.

***Docibilitas (Teachableness/Openness to Learning)*** - Furthermore, formation experience allows us to affirm that both formators and those being formed always need another capacity, which Father Cencini calls “docibilitas.” This is a capacity that has recently been highly valued and frequently mentioned in the field of formation, although it is very difficult to translate into modern languages (“docibilitas” is tentatively translated as “always learning to learn”). The Ratio uses this word once but in a very significant context: Because it aims at docibilitas towards the Holy Spirit, individual accompaniment is an essential means of formation. (Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, no 45).

For Father Cencini, the author of this concept, docibilitas expresses the “great secret” for formation today. This concept describes the formation process in which the subject plays an active role and places themselves in a state of “knowing how to learn,” or in other words, constantly living in the formation process. Accordingly, docibilitas means “being willing throughout life to learn how to live from life itself” and means allowing oneself to fall into crises and challenges, to be touched and transformed, or to be loved and even chastised, to be instructed and formed by life, through whatever means that the Father’s constant providence uses throughout one’s life. (Sequela Christi 2, 2015)) This aligns with the concept of lifelong learning and the development of adaptability, key principles in contemporary education. I deeply appreciate Father Cencini’s idea because it encompasses the entire complex and dynamic reality of formation in a single concept; docibilitas is the attitude of transforming reality!

Experience shows us that some candidates have gone through the stages of the formation process while remaining unchanged, skillfully maneuvering when faced with challenges and proposals; not only do they not allow themselves to be affected by any small intervention of the formator, but they also display a seemingly serene and mature life. But in reality, they are wearing armor of defense to conceal a rigid, closed, and fearful self, afraid to open their hearts to others and even to God.

For formation to be fruitful, it is necessary to cultivate docibilitas towards the Holy Spirit, so that we may become sensitive to His action in the formation process. We must not imprison the Holy Spirit as if keeping a canary in a cage. The Holy Spirit “blows where he wills” (Jn 3:8). In moments when we cannot find a way out, He sees far more clearly than we do. Therefore, we are called to become sensitive and to allow the Holy Spirit to act and guide us towards new horizons. Thus, docibilitas – docility to the Holy Spirit – must be the apex of formation.

One point that needs to be emphasized here regarding the pedagogy of formation is this: in order to face the challenges posed by the Ratio, we must be willing to delve deeply into ourselves, to abandon the territory of security and enter into new and unfamiliar lands. On this matter, Pope Francis speaks very eloquently:

*“In education, there is a balance that needs to be kept, balancing the steps very well: one firm step on safe ground, but the other step will go into risky territory. And when that risk becomes safe, the next step is to look for another risky area. One cannot educate only in the safe zone: no! This is to prevent personality from developing. But neither can one educate only in the risky zone: this is too dangerous. Let us remember to keep the balance between those steps very well.”*  
(Francis, Address to the students of Jesuit schools in Italy and Albania, June 7, 2013).

Most of us only like to stay in the comfort zone, satisfied with what is on the surface, content with what we already have. Few dare to go further, deeper, and especially dare to explore the depths containing inconsistencies and problems. Training is only carried out “in a general way”, with little specificity and detail, so training yields few results. Therefore, what we are referring to is the need for risk-taking from both the trainers and the trainees. This is not a requirement from those in charge of the system, but from God himself. The Holy Spirit is present through us and inspires us to be courageous to go out to sea to cast our nets in deeper waters and catch more fish

(cf. Lk 5:4). With joy and creativity, including suffering and sacrifice, along with the passion of a fisherman, let us be bold and fearless because that is the path that God invites us to be transformed to be like Him.

### 2.1 *Accompanying Vocations*

Fundamental elements for vocational accompaniment and outlining the portrait of a formator:

**Concept, Purpose and Fundamental Dialectic** - There are many ways to define accompaniment, we will choose one of the more readily accepted definitions:

*“Accompaniment is a temporary (temporaneo) and instrumental (strumentale) assistance that one person provides to another so that they can recognize God’s action within themselves and respond to this action by gradually living in union with God through the imitation of Christ.”* (A. Manenti, *Comprendere e accompagnare la persona umana*, EDB, 2016).

Here, we will not go into detail, but only emphasize some aspects of the concept of accompaniment. First of all, this word places the accompanier and the accompanied on the same scope of the vocation itself; accompaniment speaks of the differences found in experience (regarding God, the process, time, etc.), which are differences not only in quantity but also in quality.

The term “accompaniment” probably originates from *cum-panio* in Medieval Latin. It means “one who shares bread.” Thus, accompaniment refers to sharing, sharing something from life such as “provisions for the journey,” that is, faith, memories of God, experiences of spiritual struggle, of searching, and also love for Him. (A. Cencini, *I sentimenti del Figlio. Il cammino formativo della vita consacrata*, Bologna 1998). Therefore, the formator must first of all be someone who has experience of what they have “learned to learn” from their own life. They must reach the necessary level of maturity, be someone who possesses the necessary qualities that the Ratio in many places refers to, in order to accompany the one being formed/trained. In essence, the formator acts as a mentor or coach, facilitating the seminarian’s learning and growth.

Among these requirements, the formator must be a person who possesses integrity in two aspects of personality that intertwine and integrate with each other: “The first aspect is shaped by grace and endowed with talents and rich traits; the second aspect bears the mark of limitations and fragile traits.” (Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, no. 28). Regarding the mystery of the human person that the formator bears, in the Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, it is expressed in a broader form according to an anthropological perspective:

*“Within the human person himself, there are many conflicting elements. For on the one hand, as a creature, man finds himself limited in many respects; but on the other hand, he feels within himself boundless aspirations and also feels called to a higher life. Drawn by many allurements, man is always compelled to choose some and reject others.”* (Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes*).

Achieving integrity in these conflicting aspects is only possible through a serene and creative acceptance of the fundamental and continuous dialectic of the heart: the dialectic between the ideal of vocation (self-transcendence) and the reality of human nature (often limitations and brokenness due to sin), between what must be achieved (the ideal self – *io ideale*) and what has been achieved (the actual self – *io attuale*). This is a paradoxical reality, because it requires a constant tension between these two worlds. In short, it requires docility, as mentioned above.

We can use Jesus’ attitude toward the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22) as a model for such accompaniment. Jesus understood the anxiety in his heart, but He did not resolve everything as the young man wished. On the contrary, He posed a challenging question that caused him to fall into crisis: on the one hand, He helped him discover that the lofty ideal he longed for was to follow Christ (*sequela Christi*), but on the other hand, He also

helped him return to the depths of his heart to confront the limitations and obstacles that opposed that ideal, namely, an excessive attachment to material possessions. Jesus invited him: “Go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Hearing this, the young man went away sad, because he had great wealth” (Mt 19:21-22). He had done everything, he had a sincere desire, but he lacked one thing: the definitive detachment from what he wanted to choose what God wanted. This is the greatest obstacle to holiness. One only attains holiness by clinging to and following Christ. Fr. Imoda explains this story in terms of formation: “This interaction is built on the interpretation of questions as well as the subject’s present and immediate responses, and also on deeper interpretations as much as possible.” (F. Imoda, *Sviluppo Umano. Psicologia e Mistero*, Bologna, 2005). The journey of formation is a journey of self-transcendence that never ends, but lasts a lifetime. The more one is formed, the deeper and further one must go in order to seek out and eliminate the obstacles hidden in the deepest part of the heart. Indeed, the answer to a present problem always gives rise to a new problem, often even more important and sometimes overturning the entire present horizon, as we see in the case of the rich man. We understand conversion as the overturning of the horizon, so it is a fundamental reality for the journey of formation. This process of ongoing conversion and growth can be understood through the lens of transformative learning, where individuals undergo deep shifts in their perspectives and values.

In this way, accompaniment is always linked to discernment, and discernment always takes place in a broader scope, in new circumstances and new environments. The wise formator is one who not only knows what to say, but also knows why and when to say it. Discernment can be seen as an ongoing process of assessment and evaluation, providing valuable feedback for the seminarian’s development. It allows the formator to track progress, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that the seminarian is on the right path toward fulfilling their vocation. This is perhaps impossible without the difficult element we will discuss here.

***Relationships/Interrelations*** - Another very important element that helps accompaniment achieve results is the issue of the relationship between the formator and the one being formed/trained. Relationship is a very rich concept from philosophical, theological, and human science perspectives. The Ratio emphasizes many times that: a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is necessary as the foundation of the priestly vocation. One cannot be transformed in Christ without a close relationship with Him. And one cannot be in relationship with Christ without being in relationship with His Mystical Body, that is, the Church and humanity, as Saint John says: “For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (1 Jn 4:20).<sup>1</sup> Therefore, we can say, echoing the words of Martin Buber, that: “In the beginning is the relationship.” First of all, there is the relationship between the formator and the one being formed, but on a deeper level, there is the relationship between the one being formed and God, between the one being formed and others, and creation.

Interpersonal relationships are a central issue in many research studies in the fields of human sciences, psychology, and psychotherapy. Thanks to these research findings, we see more clearly its importance in personality development, especially in the field of priestly formation. Accordingly, the priest is first and foremost a person of relationships, of community. Relationship is not only an unconscious capacity, but also the fruit of conscious activity, learning, and formation. Interpersonal skills begin in the womb, then gradually grow and mature, and people become distinct and complete. When a candidate lives in the seminary, he already carries within him a long history and forms of relationships, formed a long time ago. Therefore, the formator must first of all be aware of the importance of this inner world and must know how to discern them well.

For those being formed/trained, it is very necessary for them to examine themselves in order to become aware of their ability to build relationships. They are called to build relationships in a correct, stable, and healthy way, but at the same time, they must have flexibility, freedom, and openness in the training environment. They need to be trained to know how to establish good relationships, avoiding the phenomenon of “transference,” or the re-enactment of past relationships in a new form in a new context.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* places great emphasis on the human formation of priests, with particular emphasis on interpersonal skills:

*“Following the example of Jesus Christ, who “knew what was in everyone” (Jn 2:25; cf. 8:3-11), the priest needs to have the ability to deeply understand the human heart and mind, to intuitively perceive difficulties and problems, to facilitate encounters and dialogue, to gain trust and cooperation, and to express sound and objective judgments.” (Pastores Dabo Vobis).*

More than 25 years since its publication, this Apostolic Exhortation continues to demand that candidates, priests, and formators alike develop this quality within themselves. They must be thoroughly prepared in aspects ranging from psychological understanding, pastoral experience, and priestly life, to be able to become masters capable of “deeply understanding the human heart and mind.” They need long and solid preparation to become “people of good relationships” while serving in a diverse environment. In this area, grace supports nature according to its demands. This preparation should include pedagogical training, enabling them to effectively facilitate learning and growth. Formators must be equipped with the skills to design and implement effective learning experiences, provide constructive feedback, and create a supportive learning environment.

**Agents and Means/Resources** - The Ratio in Chapter VI lists all the agents of formation (starting from the Trinity, to the Bishop, and finally the lay faithful), but for the purposes of this topic, we will only discuss the key figures, namely the director, the spiritual director, and the formators in the seminary. The Ratio clearly distinguishes these roles as well as defines the duties specific to them (RFIS, no. 43). However, within each role, the Ratio emphasizes the personalization of accompaniment. Therefore, accompaniment is personalized when one knows how to build a friendly and close relationship with each individual, thoroughly understanding each person's history, because a relationship is established when there is reciprocity. One cannot expect openness and trust from the one being formed if the formator lacks transparency and trust towards the one being formed.

Within the formation team structure, each role naturally has its own distinct characteristics, but fundamentally, they all strive to care for the vocation of those being formed/trained; they all share one purpose: *“To help recognize God's action within themselves and respond to this action by gradually living in union with God through the imitation of Christ.”*

For effective accompaniment, personal dialogue (*colloquio personale*) needs to be integrated into the formation program as a primary means of formation (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, no. 66). This is an interpersonal dialogue between the formator and the one being formed, through which the formator gains a deeper understanding of the one being formed through the exchange and sharing of their vocational history. At the same time, the formator can share their own experience, guiding the formation of the candidate's personality and priestly identity. The formator is present as someone who listens attentively and intelligently, with the ability to make sound judgments; he does everything with sincere love—these are essential qualities of the accompanier. These dialogues can be viewed as personalized learning sessions, where the formator provides guidance and support tailored to the seminarian's individual needs.

The nature of the experience may vary, but the difference is made by the one who knows how to listen and ask the right questions at the right time. This will help generate a new horizon in which the one being formed is invited to move forward. The experience can be pastoral, intellectual, moral, and spiritual... to be shared. Through the accompaniment meeting, the one being formed grows in the ability to “learn to learn,” as expressed by the term *docibilitas*. The Ratio emphasizes that the formator must work within their scope of competence, but the human person is a holistic reality: each person has a complementary scope and close coordination within the overall formation program. The team of formators must first of all be a fraternal community and help one another. If the formators are united with each other on the level of formation, then the work of formation is already 50% successful. Therefore, division and contradiction among them regarding the formation program should be avoided. But all are on “one page” or on the same path of formation.

Regarding those being formed/trained, the formator must know the depths of the one being formed as well as their personal history (cf. RFIS 94), including their inner feelings. In accompaniment, each person strives to understand themselves, accept themselves, in order to be transformed according to the Father's plan in the Son. This cannot be achieved if personal meetings are not a regular, continuous element, with a clear purpose and method (cf. VC, 66). To achieve this, we must dedicate much time, patience, and moderation. A specific schedule and training topics are needed for such personal meetings. This understanding of the seminarian's personal history is essential for providing personalized and effective educational support. It allows the formator to tailor their approach, address individual needs, and guide the seminarian's growth in a way that is relevant and meaningful. In particular, the pedagogy of accompaniment needs to be studied.

It is important for everyone to be aware that accompaniment meetings are a useful, dynamic, and vital part of the formation process, and not something to be done merely for appearances. Therefore, we need to end the formalistic style of formation of the past, where the director only met with seminarians once on very solemn occasions, or the spiritual director limited meetings to a few times a year. Consequently, they knew very little about those being formed. To be an accompanier means to be present very intimately and fraternally with one another regularly—at meals, in classrooms, in the chapel, and even on the playground... They live openly with each other in a friendly and transparent way. Seminarians also need to avoid attitudes of fear, avoidance, and timidity when meeting with formators. These are signs of immaturity. A healthy, friendly, and transparent relationship is truly necessary for both the formator and the one being formed. Each person is invited to develop the “ability to be close to others and also the ability to allow others to be close to oneself.”

## *2.2 Discernment*

In concluding this reflection, I turn to a foundational principle articulated in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (RFIS, no. 43), drawing upon the wisdom of Saint Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*. The *Ratio* cites the first annotation, a concise yet profound guide for navigating the spiritual life and the intricate process of discernment. This annotation invites us to engage in spiritual exercises, in their diverse forms, with the express purpose of “preparing our souls to free ourselves from all disordered attachments and, having avoided them, to seek and find God's will in the ordering of our lives for the benefit of our souls.” (Ignatius Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*).

This perspective on the spiritual life, as illuminated by Saint Ignatius, reveals a two-fold movement, echoing a classical understanding of spiritual progression. Firstly, we encounter the negative and ascetic phase, the path of purification or purgation. This phase necessitates a rigorous self-examination and a deliberate detachment from those inclinations and attachments that impede our communion with God. Secondly, we are called to the positive and mystical phase, the path of illumination and union. This is the culmination of our purification, where we experience a deeper intimacy with God and a clearer understanding of His will.

The entirety of the vocational journey, particularly within the context of priestly formation, can be effectively understood through these two phases. The initial stages of formation often involve a significant emphasis on self-awareness, personal growth, and the cultivation of virtues. This mirrors the purgative phase, where seminarians are challenged to confront their weaknesses and to develop the discipline necessary for a life of service. As they progress, they are gradually drawn into a deeper understanding of their calling, experiencing a growing sense of union with Christ and a clearer vision of their future ministry. This corresponds to the illuminative and unitive phases, where they are empowered by grace and guided by the Holy Spirit.

However, before delving into the specific aspects of these phases within the context of contemporary seminary formation, it is imperative to address the renewed profile of the formator. The formator, in this context, is not merely an educator or administrator; they must, first and foremost, be a “master of discernment.” This designation underscores the critical role of the formator in guiding seminarians through the complexities of their vocational journey. They must possess the wisdom and sensitivity to discern the movements of the Spirit within

each individual, providing guidance and support as they navigate the challenges of purification and union.

The formator, as a master of discernment, is tasked with helping seminarians identify and address their disordered attachments, fostering an environment conducive to spiritual growth and self-discovery. They must be able to recognize the signs of spiritual progress and to provide appropriate guidance as seminarians move towards a deeper union with God. This requires a profound understanding of the spiritual life, a commitment to personal holiness, and a genuine love for those entrusted to their care.

In essence, the vocational journey, as articulated through the lens of Ignatian spirituality, is a dynamic process of purification and union. The formator, as a master of discernment, plays a pivotal role in guiding seminarians along this path, ensuring that they are adequately prepared to embrace their calling and to serve the Church with fidelity and zeal.

*The Master of Discernment/The Guide of Discernment* - The first and, of course, the “standard” of discernment is the person of the formator. The healthier and holier their personality, the more free they are from their own immaturity, the more suitable they are for the purpose of discernment. Here, we can recall Lonergan’s famous saying: “Objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity,” (B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, Rome, Città Nuova, 2001) meaning a subjectivity that is constantly being transformed according to reason, morality, and ethics; or a subject who observes, understands, evaluates, and acts in a new way according to an ever-new level, learning from their mistakes in order to have new observations, new understandings, new judgments, more responsible behavior, learning from both the logical and the illogical, as well as what pertains to reason and reality. Thus, the focus of discernment is the person, not rules, regulations, or standards. The liturgy of ordination clarifies this, when the bishop asks the rector about the candidate regarding the candidate's suitability for the priesthood. Here, the Church asks about the suitability or worthiness of the candidate, that is, in the person of the candidate, and does not ask about diplomas or other achievements.

How do we attain authentic subjectivity? There is no other way than to explore one’s own experience attentively, rationally, critically, and passionately. The Ratio in many places emphasizes the necessity of understanding the personal history of the one being formed. If this is important for the one being formed, it is even more important for the formator. The formator must first of all be someone who knows their own life well and can only become so if they embrace their own personal history and live that history in the light of the Holy Spirit in order to be transformed.

To illustrate the goal of this process, I take the liberty of using a somewhat shocking example. In an interview, Cardinal Stella reached a very interesting conclusion regarding the internal study conducted by the Congregation for the Clergy on the applications related to the dispensation from the obligations of sacred ordination. One of the results that this study yielded is: “There are quite a few cases in which the formation journey was not carried out seriously, or there were latent signs of future crises; it is not easy for a person to suddenly become “relaxed” or become corrupt unexpectedly without anything having existed before.” (Osservatore Romano, December 7, 2016). These words are true. It is also true when understood conversely regarding those who live their vocation well; they will bear good fruit. For one does not suddenly become a devil, nor does one suddenly become a saint; everything is the result of a process.

There are many cases in which difficulties and crises do not appear during the formation journey. However, at some point, they do emerge in life. Crisis is a part of every vocational history, and in every vocational history there are moments of facing both danger and opportunity. What makes the difference is the ability to transform those moments into opportunities for growth. This is the ability we call discernment, or the ability to recognize God's action and respond to it. This often requires the help of others. Not infrequently, we recognize this double paradox: it is through crises that a vocational history becomes a history of salvation and becomes a new page of the Gospel. We can find many such testimonies in charismatic movements. But as formators, we have certainly encountered and helped many those being formed who had problems, but thanks to God’s grace and their efforts, they became good and useful priests for the Church.

Each person's life is marked by the very dynamism they experience not only in times of peace and tranquility but also in times of storms and trials. All of these can be opportunities for us to grow. Even the figures in the Gospel show imperfections in themselves, such as Saint Peter. But they were transformed by God's grace and through their own good will. The first path that the Church must take is the human person. The human person "is the primary and fundamental way for the Church, a way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption" (John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, 14). Growth always occurs through these two phases of the spiritual life: the ascetic phase, which is freeing oneself from sin or disordered attachments, accepting limitations, etc., and the mystical phase, which is discovering God's will in a new situation and following Him.

***Freedom from Erroneous Attachments/Distorted Affections*** - For those familiar with the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, it is clear that the one called to the priesthood is a person "of the Second Week," that is, a person who is seeking the good, who has felt the call of the Eternal King, and who has already discovered their priestly vocation. This presupposes that they have overcome serious sins, that is, they have an ordered and free life, without entanglement in mortal sin. If this is valid for the one being formed, it is equally valid for the formator, lest disorder and deep instability exist within them.

The purification of this phase consists in freeing oneself from disordered attachments. This is a very delicate topic, because these disordered attachments are often not recognized by those directly involved. We have seen this in the case of the rich young man: his disordered attachment appeared not only on the level of his attachment to worldly possessions; this was only the external aspect of the problem. Through Jesus' interventions, he discovered that he had a very subtle attachment: attachment to his own process and his own vision of perfection. He showed sadness because he had discovered his own self-centeredness—he only wanted to be the author of his own perfection ("What must I do...?" cf. Mt 19:26). Therefore, he could not follow Christ. This is the temptation for all of us and it is also the dangerous enemy of perfection. All disordered attachments share this characteristic: we want to be masters of our own lives, and when we discover the radical demand to follow Christ, we feel shocked and saddened. These disordered attachments, which psychologists call fundamental unconscious inconsistencies, are forms of self-deception for those who follow Christ. They are people who consciously proclaim the values of Jesus, but unconsciously they seek and satisfy needs for power, prestige, and possession. This formalism is often not sinful, because it belongs to the unconscious, but it constantly influences the meaning of our service to the Kingdom. Moreover, it creates a zone that formation often neglects, where classical formation methods do not produce results for the person in this area. It is the "devil" hiding under holy forms and motivations. Therefore, it is necessary to shed light on this and be transformed on the journey of following Christ.

***Mysticism in Action/Mystical Action*** - Who can claim to be free from such disordered attachments in order to be free to discover and carry out God's will? We can speak of the mysticism of the will, that is, wanting what God wants. This is the meaning of the concept mysticism in action. This "mysticism of the will" is not about achieving ecstatic visions or extraordinary spiritual experiences, but rather about a radical alignment of our desires with God's. It's a practical, everyday mysticism, played out in the choices we make, the priorities we set, and the way we interact with the world. It requires a constant process of discernment, a willingness to surrender our own agendas, and a deep trust that God's will is ultimately for our good. This active mysticism is a journey of ongoing conversion, where we continually seek to purify our intentions and conform our hearts to the heart of God.

*"If we are truly united with God by our will alone. Will, ultimately, is freedom, and freedom is the foundation of existence. This does not mean that we think about God occasionally, when we are preparing a meal. But every action of ours is God's will. And then everything is God's will, God is in it, we do what God wants."* (E. Varillon, *Traversate di un credente*, Milan 2008).

Who is free with themselves to be able to be completely attached to Jesus: their actions will be true love;

they will forget themselves; they will not be envious of others; their self-giving will not be for praise; they no longer require recognition and priority, or encouragement from others. Their heart—as the Ratio says—will be transformed according to the image of the heart of Christ (Ratio, no. 89).

Being transformed by the Father in the Holy Spirit according to the image of Christ (the path of illumination and union) means following Him in His hidden and public life (the Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises), His passion and death (the Third Week), and finally, His resurrection (the Fourth Week). There is no other way than the path described by the Gospel: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). Transformation, or transfiguration (the Ratio prefers the term: conformation), means dying and rising, for death is one form and resurrection is another. This journey is our Passover.

This process of conformation is not merely a passive acceptance of suffering, but an active engagement with the very life of Christ. It involves a stripping away of our self-centered desires and illusions, allowing the divine life to permeate our being. This “death” is not annihilation, but a purging, a refining fire that burns away the dross, revealing the gold of our true selves, hidden in Christ. The 'resurrection' is then the blossoming of this purified self, a life lived in the fullness of God’s grace, marked by love, service, and a profound communion with the Trinity. It is a continual movement, a rhythm of dying and rising, mirroring the Paschal Mystery, that leads us toward the ultimate goal: complete union with God.

### **3. Implications for Seminarians (Seminarians/Students of Priestly Formation)**

For seminarians in priestly formation, this study reveals crucial implications that necessitate a proactive approach to both personal and communal development. Specifically, their active participation in cultivating a conducive “formation atmosphere” will significantly enhance their vocational journey. Firstly, seminarians must cultivate a robust sense of personal responsibility for their ongoing formation, embracing the concept of *docibilitas* as a lifelong commitment to learning and transformation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This necessitates a willingness to transcend the comfort zone and engage with the complexities of self-discovery.

Secondly, the creation of a conducive “formation atmosphere” is a collective endeavor, requiring each seminarian to actively contribute to a culture of mutual respect, empathy, and transparent communication. Recognizing the seminary as a microcosm of the Church, learners must foster authentic communion through their daily interactions. Thirdly, discernment, as a prayerful and reflective process, demands engagement with both personal strengths and limitations, facilitated by open dialogue with formators and spiritual directors. The value of accompaniment, as a personalized journey of guidance and support, should be recognized and embraced, fostering a relationship of trust and mutual understanding.

Fourthly, given the relational nature of priestly ministry, the development of robust interpersonal skills, including active listening and empathetic understanding, is paramount. Furthermore, the cultivation of a profound personal relationship with Jesus Christ, through prayer, sacramental participation, and spiritual reading, serves as the cornerstone of priestly formation. Finally, an acknowledgment of the “veil of unknowing” necessitates an attitude of humility, recognizing the divine mystery inherent in each individual’s vocational journey. In addition, seminarians must be aware of the current cultural crisis the church is facing, and be prepared to minister within that context. By internalizing these implications, seminarians can effectively navigate their formation, preparing to serve the Church with unwavering fidelity and pastoral efficacy.

### **4. Conclusion**

We stand before a mission of profound significance and considerable challenge. Much like the disciples of Jesus, as depicted in Matthew 13:52, we are called to attentively listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit. This divine communication manifests through the evolving signs of the times, as well as through the enduring pillars of Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium. The contemporary formator, therefore, must embody a spirit of

constant vigilance and renewal, ensuring that their own life experience remains a dynamic and evolving source of wisdom and guidance. This experience, encompassing an intimate encounter with God, a deep understanding of humanity, and a discerning awareness of the world, fuels a renewed understanding and an intensified love for the ministry of service.

The Ratio Fundamental<sup>is</sup> Institutionis Sacerdotalis extends a compelling invitation: to fully immerse ourselves in the formation experience and to allow ourselves to be transformed by it. This call to transformation necessitates a willingness to relinquish outdated paradigms and embrace new methodologies. The time has come to discard the “old wineskins,” the antiquated approaches to formation that no longer adequately serve the needs of the Church. In their place, we must adopt “new wineskins,” innovative formation methods that equip us to become skilled instruments, or adept potters, in the formation ministry.

This metaphor of the potter underscores the delicate and transformative nature of the formator’s role. We are called to shape and mold individuals, guiding them towards a deeper relationship with God. However, we must always remain mindful of our own limitations, recognizing that we are merely “unworthy servants” in this sacred endeavor. Our ultimate goal is to facilitate the work of the Holy Spirit, enabling others to discover and embrace their God-given vocations.

The challenge before us demands a profound humility and a steadfast commitment to ongoing formation. We must be willing to learn, to adapt, and to grow, ensuring that our methods remain relevant and effective in a rapidly changing world. When we have exerted our utmost effort, striving to serve with fidelity and dedication, we can, with a sense of peace and humility, echo the words of Luke 17:10: “We have done what we were obliged to do.” This recognition of our duty, coupled with a reliance on God’s grace, forms the foundation of effective and transformative formation ministry.

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