



Ongoing Formation for Young Priests

(Module 01)

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Introduction

The first years of ordained ministry are very important. They set a pace for the years that stretch ahead. They also lay a foundation for the future and provide a point of reference across a lifetime of priestly ministry.

Many events mark the first years of priesthood. All of them fit into a single frame of transition, the transition of newly ordained priests from the scholasticate into their first assignment. In an initial and decisive way, newly ordained priests embark on a formational journey of integration as they seek to link who they are and what they do to their priestly identity and service.

The following presentation will consider the ongoing formation of young priests in five steps: (1) a description of the event of transition for the newly ordained; (2) an identification of the principal tasks and challenges that the young priests face; (3) a naming of their spiritual concerns viewed through the themes of testing/temptation, grace, and discernment; (4) a list of persons involved in the ongoing formation of young priests; (5) a brief description of a concrete experience in the Italian Province.

1. Event

The general frame of transition from the scholasticate to the first assignment contains many events and experiences. Some have to do with departure, others with arrival, and still others with inner movements.

Departure from the formation house is usually a highly anticipated moment and a greatly welcomed one when it finally arrives. It does, however, signal a significant leave-taking. Newly ordained leave the seminary and, at the same time, leave behind a familiar setting and important relationships that have been the context of their lives for about seven years.

Priestly ordination signals another departure from student status, the state of being “in preparation for”, to the status of a recognized and activated worker or minister of the Gospel. At this point, newly ordained are also conscious of leaving a way of living their Christian vocation among Christ's faithful people to assume a new position and responsibility among and for the community of believers.

Arrivals also become important. The newly ordained arrive in a new community and settle into new living arrangements. They arrive in the midst of a new set of established co-workers. They arrive in a new community with a new position or role as priests. They arrive into a new set of daily tasks.

Finally, the event of transition into priestly ministry contains *inner experiences*. Ordination establishes priests in a new way of being in and for the Church, by configuring them to Jesus Christ, Head and Shepherd. And even though this new identity is conferred in ordination, it may not be fully and consciously appropriated for some time. Another inner experience is a significant shift of focus from the development and formation of oneself during the years of preparation to a centering in service and mission to others as an ordained priest.

These are some of the pieces that form the event of transition for newly ordained. They leave, they arrive, they sense inner movements. It is no small matter. Were one to compare this transition into priestly ministry to other kinds of human experience, it might be like leaving home, graduating from school, beginning a career, getting married, and starting a family – but all at once.

How do young priests, in your entity, experience the event of transition from the stage of formation to the apostolate? Departure, arrival, new identity?

2. Tasks and Challenges

The above description of the transition into priestly ministry and life hints at the multiple tasks and challenges that face the young priests. Some tasks are of a directly practical nature. They are important because they have to do with basic functioning as a priest. Other tasks and challenges concerning the appropriation of priestly identity are less visible and less susceptible to empirical verification but are critical and urgent because they are so foundational.

Practical Tasks and Challenges

An initial practical task is to bring closure to the seminary experience. As happy as most are to leave a seminary program to begin direct service as a priest, they may also sense a loss that causes some grieving. If, as part of that process, the newly ordained can summon gratitude by identifying the graces of the years of preparation, that can anchor hope as they begin to navigate through unknown or, at least, unfamiliar waters.

Another practical task is to get to know the new community – something of its history, its current make-up, and its graces and struggles.

Newly ordained also need to begin to work, that is, to apply the knowledge and skills they have acquired in the seminary. A good seminary program will have launched them into the process of linking theory and practice, but now they need to do so more intensively. Translating theory into practice is never a simple matter. The challenge is especially true in priestly ministry. It entails learning from and in the experience of ministry in order to grow in a prudential wisdom that can apply book knowledge in practical and effective ways.

Some things can only be learned on-site: the special procedures of a given community, parish and rectory, collaboration with other staff members, the art of teaching in a classroom and working with the youth, care of the sick and grieving parishioners at a time of tragedy, management of conflict, the ability to work with difficult people, and elements of community and/or parish administration.

As young priests confront these myriad practical tasks and challenges, they are also challenged to learn how to stay centered in what really matters, the heart of their mission as priests. That means, for example, holding fast to a rhythm and pattern of prayer in daily life.

Tasks and Challenges Concerning Identity

In addition to the practical tasks and challenges of beginning priestly ministry in a specific context, newly ordained face the challenge of growing into a new identity as priests. The process of appropriating a new identity as a priest unfolds both in the interior life of priests as well as in their external and visible ministry and life.

Interior Identity. Because of their ordination, priests are different. *Pasto-res Dabo Vobis* offers the following synthesis: “The priest, by virtue of the Sacrament of Orders, is configured to Jesus Christ in a special way as Head and Shepherd of his people, in order to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit in service of the Church and for the salvation of the world” (PDV, no. 12 [*Propositio* 7]).

This is how priests *are* because of their ordination. Such new way of being, however, does not automatically translate into a new sense of self, a new psychological and spiritual identity. In fact, the internalization and appropriation of what has happened through ordination is a task that lies ahead of young priests.

Also linked to priestly identity is conformity to Christ in doing what he did, so that priests show their “loving concern to the point of a total gift of self for the flock ...” (PDV, no. 15).

Exterior Identity. Newly ordained priests also have the task of appropriating and living the more external dimensions of their priestly identity that stem from their unique relationships with their superiors, their community and the Church. In fact, the ordained ministry has a radical “communitarian form” and can only be carried out as a “collective work”.

Young priests also claim their priestly identity in a more exterior way as they serve the Church at large and their specific apostolate in particular. They are “sacramental” signs of Christ and live a sacramental existence, which, as such, is exterior and public, identifiable through the new roles and functions of preachers, presiders, confessors, counselors, teachers, and administrators.

At the same time, young priests do not function independently nor in isolation. Generally, they serve with a community and rarely with only one other priest. Their task and challenge is to claim and understand their priestly identity in a way that stays true to their sacramental existence and also enables them to serve collaboratively with others, both ordained and non-ordained, for the good of the whole Church. There is a shared task and challenge for the

community and the young priests: to listen, to learn, to dialogue, and to stay faithful to the God-given mission and life of the Church.

Celibate Identity. Newly ordained have been prepared for consecrated celibacy in the seminary, have made a public commitment at their religious profession, and have lived celibately prior to ordination. There is a difference, however, between preparing for celibacy in a seminary context and living out the commitment in the midst of serving the Church as priest. The young priests find themselves in the challenging role of being a public person. It is a difficult task to learn how to be a loving and caring priest for significant numbers of people while maintaining appropriate pastoral and interpersonal boundaries. Such challenges are best faced under the supervision of an accompanist and a mentor on the site.

The purity, detachment, direction of one's sexuality and generosity, that ministerial love requires, are learned by the newly ordained as they serve the people of God in practice.

What are the principal tasks and challenges that the young priests face in your entity? Concerning practice? Concerning identity?

3. Spiritual Concerns: Temptation, Grace, Discernment

The transition into priestly ministry and life is not simply a transition into professional life, that is, the beginning of a new job. It marks a special place on the journey of spiritual transformation. As other spiritual moments of importance, this too has its particular temptations, its offers of grace, and its need for discernment.

Testing/Temptation

Temptation as testing – and vice versa – seems to be a common experience for young priests. The test comes in the form of disillusionment, struggle, or even crisis. It may occur from three to eighteen months after an assignment has begun. Sometimes, it represents a brief moment, other times it is more protracted.

The shape of temptation varies. It may take the form of doubts about one's abilities to meet the kind and quantity of human and spiritual need that is manifest in the assignment and/or ministry. It may have to do with community living conditions, such as a lack of privacy, a difficult or idiosyncratic superior, or the “foreignness” of the local cultural environment. The shape of testing may be related to the difficulty of finding one's role on a parish/community staff. It may be connected to a sense of separation and distance from peers and important friends. It can strike at the very heart of priestly ministry and life, as one comes to a deepening awareness of the extraordinary mission given to priests. Grasping the idea that one's mission is not one's own but Christ's can stir up a deep sense of inadequacy and discouragement, if not panic.

Another temptation presents itself in the form of superficial enthusiasm. The first flush of priestly ministry can engender a “high”, an ego-stroking sense that one can “take on the

world”. It is a bent toward self-sufficiency in ministry based on the initial positive responses evoked from people. It leads priests to let go of learning in the course of ministry and to rely altogether too much on their own abilities and ingenuity. In short, it is the temptation to deny grace in the practical order.

Another temptation is a kind of inflexible legalism that stems from the understandable insecurity of those recently ordained. Faced with new multiple demands and often unrealistic expectations, young priests can be tempted to lock into controllable frameworks, familiar routines, and predictable patterns of ordering reality.

A final form of temptation is connected to the multiple and complex set of demands that rush upon young priests. Because of the complexity and intensity that they experience in their ministry and lives, they may be tempted to assume a reactive stance toward life and people. Their reactions can be disproportionate to the objective pastoral realities of their situation.

More personal forms of temptation may arise now (or later) as the young priests face inclinations in themselves toward destructive behavior, such as the violation of sexual boundaries, substance abuse, gambling, and the like. Awareness of such experiences or inclinations may be jarring for the young priests and will require particular attention and support.

The experience of testing/temptation is a critical moment in the ongoing formation of young priests. Just as the temptations of Jesus, at the beginning of his public ministry, were the occasion to anchor his identity as the obedient Son of the Father who was fully willing to carry out the mission entrusted to him, so the experience of temptations for the young priests can be an occasion to deepen and consolidate their already-made commitment.

Grace

The transition into priesthood is an occasion of grace, a time when particular gifts of God are manifest and take hold of the life and heart of priests who journey with their people to God. These particular graces need to be named, received with gratitude, and returned to God through service to the people.

The particular graces of priestly ministry and life, even as it begins, are numerous. Here, we identify only three, but they seem especially important: (1) the grace of new beginnings and growth, (2) the grace of vulnerability, and (3) the grace of community.

The transition into priesthood certainly marks a new personal, professional, and spiritual beginning. Accompanying the new beginning is an infusion of new life and prospects of growth. Humanly and personally, the new beginning fills priests with an expanded sense of life and a deep interpersonal engagement. Professionally, the beginning of priestly ministry ushers a season of remarkable growth in embracing a role, in participating in activities, in translating theory into action, in developing skills, and in growing in practical wisdom. Spiritually, the new beginning draws the young priests more closely to Christ in whose name and person they serve. The grace of beginnings is really the gift of possibilities for growth.

It is neither easy nor pleasant to feel vulnerable. Still, the time of vulnerability can be a holy season of grace. Young priests are surely vulnerable in notable ways. Their inexperience, the many new unknowns, and their unproven abilities to cope, respond and succeed, all make them especially vulnerable. The particular grace of their vulnerability rests in a renewed sense of dependence on God. Just as confidence in one's own abilities recedes, a greater openness to the action of God is possible. The grace of vulnerability is, in effect, a gift of greater reliance on him in whom all things are possible.

The grace of community is a deepened re-connection with the body of Christ which the young priests belong to and serve. In these relationships to the local and church community, young priests discover the source of their edification and inspiration by means of mutual affirmation, fraternal correction and encouragement.

Discernment

Discernment or the testing of the spirits means sifting through the experiences of ministry and life to determine what is of God and what is not of God. Young priests will inevitably feel the tug and pull of various spirits or inclinations leading them in different directions. What is genuine, authentic, and holy? What is not so helpful in the spiritual and ministerial journey? What, in fact, tends toward a dangerous derailment of the journey?

An initial movement is to identify resistances on the journey. For example, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* indicates that the very idea of ongoing formation may be a point of resistance for the newly ordained. They may have “a certain sense of ‘having had enough’”(PDV, no. 76) in their seminary experience. Other points of resistance might include a false sense of independence, a fear of uncovering inadequacies, and an unwillingness to rely on a larger wisdom.

The process of discernment or maintaining a discerning heart assumes that one is engaged in and faithful to a life of prayer. If, at the beginning of one's priestly ministry, the sudden surge of pastoral demands obliterates the regularity of personal prayer or if the positive response of people to one's initial efforts seems to diminish prayer's necessity, then discernment cannot happen.

Discernment for young priests and for everyone occurs in an ecclesial context, in which we rely on the Holy Spirit at work in the community of faith and among particular believers in the community. So, discernment will also assume a willingness to share with others and to rely on them. It is not simply a solitary process. It needs spiritual direction, holy friendship, and the fraternity of other priests. Discernment requires a humble willingness to be self-disclosing; it is not simply about psychological facts or states but about the movements of grace and the inclinations to sin.

In your entity, how do young priests experience and manifest their “new grace”?

In what forms does temptation present itself in their life and apostolate?

How do they practice discernment in their personal, communal and apostolic life?

4. Persons involved

The list of people involved in ongoing formation includes the young priests themselves, both as individuals and as a group, the major superior of their religious entity, the formator in charge or accompanist, the local community and, when applicable, the parish staff and the parishioners at large.

Individual Young Priests

Pastores Dabo Vobis, no. 79, locates primary responsibility for ongoing formation in priests themselves: “The priest himself ... is the person primarily responsible in the Church for ongoing formation. Truly each priest has the duty, rooted in the Sacrament of Holy Orders, to be faithful to the gift God has given him and to respond to the call for daily conversion which comes with the gift itself”.

The responsibility of individual priests is manifested above all in their deliberate commitment to grow personally, intellectually, pastorally, and spiritually. That commitment is real and operative on a personal level, if priests are, in fact, praying daily, cultivating a reflective approach to ministry by retrieving important experiences and scrutinizing them, and by the practice of personal study of theological, pastoral, and spiritual issues.

When young priests take hold of their own ongoing formation, good things happen. Their special gifts to the Church emerge. They offer a fresh perspective, an encouragement extended to young men to consider a vocation to priestly ministry, and a general renewal of energy and enthusiasm in the local church community.

Peers

The young priests form a distinct cohort. They share a common formational history and common experiences in entering priestly ministry. The occasional or annual gatherings of the young priests can have powerful formational significance.

The young priests can share their experiences and so break out of the isolation they may feel at the beginning of their ministry. The sharing of experiences in a proper spiritual and theological context can also tap a Spirit-prompted wisdom that leads to deeper understanding and an enriched return to priestly ministry.

When the young priests come together to pray over their experiences of priestly ministry, they make themselves more available to grace at work in their lives and more open to the conversion of heart to which their service calls them. In addition, the gathering of the young priests provides a mutual support that is spiritual, moral, and authentically human. Such support is the necessary and encouraging context of ongoing formation.

Provincial, Superior, Mentor, Spiritual Director, and Others

The Provincial Superior plays a decisive role in the ongoing formation of young priests when he meets with them both individually and in groups. He is a directly encouraging and challenging presence in their formational journey. When he reminds the communities to welcome their new brothers and to help them in their continuing initiation into priestly ministry and life, he creates a climate that enables ongoing formation to take place.

The superior of the local community plays an essential role too in the ongoing formation of the young priests. He welcomes them into the community, guides them in the functions of priestly service and provides a connection to the larger community of confreres.

Very important is the role of the priest responsible for the ongoing formation of young priests. He is a mentor who can help the young priests sort out their experiences and see them with greater objectivity. He brings a wisdom born of experience and engages the young priests in conversation about their ministry, their sense of priestly and religious identity, and other important issues. He is available to answer questions from the young priests and/or to help them process unfamiliar and perhaps difficult situations. He arranges for them particular programs of ongoing formation.

A spiritual director, ordinarily a priest, contributes significantly to the ongoing formation of young priests. He provides a focus and a reminder of the primacy of the spiritual life: the necessity of constant prayer; the value of particular practices such as retreats, days of renewal; the integration of all ministry and life in the Lord's paschal mystery; the centrality of the word of God found in the Sacred Scriptures; and the invitation to an ever fuller and deeper participation in the sacramental life of the Church, especially in the Eucharist and the sacrament of reconciliation.

Parishioners

Where applicable, parishioners, who generally take great pride in having a young priest among them, can also provide immense formational support through their words and prayers. They can also provide considerable practical assistance through the feedback they give, for example, concerning clarity of communication, availability, sensitivity to needs, and skills in organization. If this feedback is organized and systematic, it can be especially useful to one who is beginning priestly ministry.

Accountability

Accountability is a very important word in the consideration of the ongoing formation of priests at every age, and specifically for young priests. Without accountability, eloquent words about ongoing formation and elaborate programs amount to nothing. With accountability there is a real possibility for growth and change, indeed, for a conversion of heart.

The purpose of the accountability is to guarantee the central meaning of ongoing formation, as Pope John Paul II describes it in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 73: "Ongoing formation has

as its aim that *the priest grows in understanding of who he truly is, seeing things with the eyes of Christ*".

*In your entity, who is directly involved in the ongoing formation of young priests?
What are their specific responsibilities?*

5. Experience in the Italian Province

Annual gathering

The Italian Province, in the past decade, has been quite consistent in gathering the confreres, from 1 to 20 years in religious life and priesthood, for an annual 3-day-live-in experience of ongoing formation. Generally, the venue is chosen together with the participants and privileges retreat houses or spirituality centres situated in areas of historical and cultural significance. Along with the confreres directly involved there participate the Provincial Superior, one Provincial Counsellor, the Accompanist in charge of ongoing formation, the Vocation Director.

Topics

The input on the basic topic of the gathering is offered at times by an inside resource person from the Province, and at times by an outsider, depending on the subject matter. In the past three years we have been focusing on "fraternal life", "affective life and ministry", "youth ministry", "new evangelization".

There is a felt need to discuss topics on "Montfortian spirituality and the new evangelization", "professional conduct", "pastoral and interpersonal boundaries", "empowering leadership", "evangelizing by means of digital mass media", "coping with stress and processing negative emotions", "management of conflict", "the art of working with the youth", "how to care for the sick and grieving parishioners at a time of tragedy", "the ability to work with difficult people". Above all, the participants seem to appreciate more and more the opportunity for communal sharing of personal and apostolic experiences and for mutual affirmation.

Method

The method adopted at the gathering of our young priests privileges an inductive or evocative approach, which consists in sharing one's experience and in welcoming group feedback that aims at affirming and/or offering constructive suggestions.

Flow of activities

The activities that pave the 3-day-live-in can be articulated as follows:

- Prayer: Morning prayer and Eucharist, Marian prayer/hour, Evening prayer.

- Sharing of personal experiences and affirmation exercise (one full day).
- Input from a resource person on a topic related to ongoing formation for young priests, followed by discussion and integration (half day).
- A guided cultural visit to a site of the hosting province or region (half day).
- Opportunity for personal encounters/colloquies with the Provincial.
- Briefing from the Provincial on the new developments within the Province and feedback from the young priests in view of gathering new ideas in response to the signs of the times.
- Updates on the vocation promotion apostolate around the Province.

Benefits

- The young priests who participate in our live-ins agree that their staying together for ongoing formation strengthens mutual knowledge and fraternal spirit.
- It helps them to learn from one another and to confirm each other in their vocation by growing in friendship of character and virtue – which is more than friendship of usefulness and pleasure.
- Friendship of character and virtue teaches young priests how to care for and be genuinely interested in other people for their own sake. Moreover, this kind of friendship keeps them from becoming disenchanted and disillusioned with their vocation. In fact, in order to maintain their dreams and aspirations alive, they need other people who share the same dreams and aspirations, who care for what they care, who encourage each other and even correct one other, who experience similar achievements and difficulties, who agree with each other about the richness of their chosen way of life and whose mutual presence reminds them of the value of their commitment. All these things make their coming together a school of virtue and character.
- The input and the sharing of personal achievements and challenges stimulates solidarity and mutual encouragement in the young priests and generates in them new ideas for the benefit of their apostolate.

Difficult issues

Some of the most difficult issues emerging in young priests are:

- The negative impact that young priests often experience as they enter communities deeply rooted in traditional, rigid and non-negotiable ways of being and doing.
- The young priests' identity crisis following their realization that they have to put aside their uniqueness and originality in order to comply with the expectations of the new community, parish, etc.
- The excessive reliance on one's capabilities and resources, risking to disregard the need for new deepening in all aspects of formation, for mentorship, for spiritual direction and overall renewal.
- The messiah's complex that brings young priests to easily brush aside the need to participate in assemblies, gatherings, exercises at local and/or provincial level.

Aspects requiring particular attention

We recommend that particular attention be given to the following points:

- That, for their first assignment, the young priests be directed to such venues and apostolates as to make them be in their best element.
- That they regularly dialogue and be accountable to their major superiors and the one responsible for ongoing formation.
- That they share and discuss issues faced in the area of affective life and celibacy both within the community and in relationship with parishioners, co-workers, friends, family of origin, etc.
- That they grow in the knowledge of Montfortian spirituality.
- That they grow in the art of “working together”.
- That they be transparent in their accountability in all areas, including finances.

What more could be done

- Regular colloquies via zoom or skype between individual young priests and their mentor.
- Whatsapp-group to share life events with photos and/or videos.
- Online group gathering every 3-4 four months with their Mentor and/or Provincial.
- Exchanging information concerning ongoing formation courses.
- Spending summer vacations together for a week or so.

How do you concretely implement the process of ongoing formation of young priests in your entity?

Based on the input given above, what more do you recommend for your own entity and the whole congregation?