Introduction

The ongoing formation of priests is first of all a work of God’s Spirit within the life of each priest. Ongoing formation is founded upon the truth that every Christian is called to continual growth into the fullness of life in Christ Jesus. This is a life long process and must confront the different formational tasks at the different ages and special moments of priestly ministry and life. Integrating the call of Christ as foundational to the life of the priest, who he is and what he does, is engendered, fostered and guided by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Any program of formation must have as its basis the promotion of priests united with their bishop as pastors of the people of God, journeying together spiritually in the ministry of the Word of God and the celebration of the Church’s sacraments, especially the Eucharist. As Pope John Paul II expresses in Pastores Dabo Vobis, the response in faith to Christ’s call which each priest articulates at his ordination “must be expressed anew and reaffirmed through the years of his priesthood in countless other responses, all of them rooted in and enlivened by that “yes” of holy orders...Permanent formation is necessary in order to discern and to follow this constant call or will of God. Thus permanent formation is a requirement of the priest’s own faithfulness to his ministry, to his very being. It is love for Jesus Christ and fidelity to oneself. But it is also an act of love for the people of God, at whose service the priest is placed...The priests owes it to God’s people...The heart and form of the priest’s ongoing formation is pastoral charity...Pastoral charity itself impels the priest to an ever deeper knowledge of the hopes, the needs, the problems, the sensibilities of the people to whom he ministers, taken in their specific situations, as individuals, in their families, in society and in history.” (70)

Any program of priestly formation understands priests as human beings, called from among the people of God, disciples of Jesus Christ, and members of the Order of Presbyter. The process of ongoing priestly formation encourages and serves to enable the priest to take responsibility for his physical health, psychological growth, spiritual development, and cultural and social aspects of his life. “The apostle Paul marveled at the work of the Holy Spirit who transforms believers into the very image of Jesus Christ, who himself is the image of God. This grace of the new covenant embraces all who have joined themselves to Jesus Christ in faith and baptism. Indeed, it is a sheer grace, all God’s doing. Moved by that grace, however, we make ourselves available to God’s work of transformation. And that making ready a place for the Lord to dwell in us and transform us we call formation.” (The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests, p. 7)

These documents reflect the realization that the priest is involved from the moment of his ordination in a life-giving and creative formation process that is essential both to him and to the Church.

The aim of on-going formation in not simply a matter of developing professional techniques but to promote an integral process of constant growth, deepening each aspect of formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. The Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests states “thus, it must tend to help each priest achieve the development of a full personality matured in the spirit of service to others...It will permit him to be intellectually prepared in the theological sciences as well as in the human sciences, insofar as they are linked with his ministry...that he have a deep spiritual life, nourished by his intimacy with Jesus Christ and by his love for the Church; and so that he may pursue his pastoral ministry with zeal and dedication.” (74)

Human Formation

Through his daily contact with people the priest “needs to sharpen his human sensitivity so as to understand more clearly their needs, respond to their demands, perceive their invoiced questions and share the hopes and expectations, the joys and burdens which are a part of life” (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 72)

Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation involves the constant effort to integrate our prayer life, liturgy and ministry. “Pastores Dabo Vobis follows Vatican II’s Decree on the Training of Priests (Optatam Totius) in identifying spiritual formation as ‘learning to live holy, familiar and attentive union with the Father, through his Son Jesus Christ in the holy Spirit, (no. 8). Furthermore spiritual formation means drawing close to Jesus Christ as friend in every detail...as spiritual writers have constantly noted, the life of discipleship is a shedding of illusions and the embrace of real or authentic self in Christ.” (The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests p. 30) Pope John Paul II quotes St. Charles Borromeo: “Do not give yourselves to others to such an extent that nothing is left of yourself for yourself. Do not forget that there is nothing so necessary to all priests than the meditation which precedes, accompanies and follows all our actions. (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 72)
Intellectual Formation

Ordained ministry involves evangelization and leadership in the modern world and demands ever greater knowledge, understanding and wisdom. Thus, in addition to the teaching of the Church, the priest of today needs to study those human sciences which help him to understand and lead the people entrusted to his pastoral care. "Intellectual formation has its own characteristics, but it is also deeply connected with, and indeed can be seen as a necessary expression of, both human and spiritual formation: It is a fundamental demand of the human intelligence by which one 'participates in the light of God's mind' and seeks to acquire a wisdom which in turn opens to and is directed toward knowing and adhering to God." (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 51)

Pastoral Formation

The formation of the priest must lead him to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Pastoral formation equips the priest to become better acquainted with the real life situation of the people to whom he is sent and to seek the most suitable methods for responding to their needs. These efforts must be relevant, credible and effective. "Pastoral formation entails the development of skills and competencies that enable priests to serve their people well. Pastoral formation is not divorced from intellectual or theological education. It is, however, the more practical side of theology. 'As pastors of the People of God in America, priests must also be alert to the challenges of the world today and sensitive to the problems and hopes of their people, sharing their experiences and growing, above all, in solidarity with the poor. They should be careful to discern the charisms and strengths of the faithful who might be leaders in the community, listening to them and through dialogue encouraging their participation and co-responsibility.'"

(The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests, p. 28)

The Responsibility of Priests

1. Each priest of the Diocese of Worcester is personally responsible for his ongoing priestly formation. He has the responsibility to determine and carry out his program of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation.

2. Each priest, unless prevented for serious reasons, is expected to make an annual retreat and participate in programs of ongoing priestly formation.
The Responsibility of Parishes and Diocesan Agencies

1. Each priest shall be granted up to two full weeks a year for spiritual and ongoing formation programs.

2. Each priest will be entitled to a yearly allowance of $800 for retreat and ongoing formation programs. A portion of this sum may be used for spiritual, theological and professional journals or periodicals, conferences or seminars. The money shall be budgeted and paid by the parish or diocesan agency to which the priest is assigned.

3. In addition to the $800 allotment for each priest, the parish/agency to which the priest is assigned is financially responsible for fees associated with diocesan sponsored programs of ongoing priestly formation such as the Presbyteral Assembly, Clergy Conferences, workshops and the like.

The Responsibility of the Diocese

1. The Bishop of the Diocese will exercise his responsibility for the spiritual renewal and ongoing formation of the priests of the Diocese. The Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation and the Ongoing Priestly Formation Committee will assist the Bishop in the exercise of his responsibility for the ongoing formation of the priests of the Diocese.

2. The Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation and the Ongoing Priestly Formation Committee will serve:

   • To promote the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral growth of the priests of the Diocese.
   • To co-ordinate and/or implement all diocesan ongoing priestly formation programs.
   • To foster participation in appropriate programs not under the diocesan auspices, especially seminars, institutes and courses which may be offered at nearby institutions of learning as approved by the Bishop.
   • To collaborate with diocesan departments and agencies in planning joint programs of continuing education and formation with deacons, men and women in consecrated life, parish ministers and laity.

3. The Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation will plan retreat possibilities, days of recollection, appropriate study seminars and workshops. Priests are expected to make use of programs offered to them for their personal growth and to enrich their relationship with one another, diocesan personnel, and the people whom they serve.
The Sabbatical Program

Sabbaticals are an important renewal resource for the spiritual, theological and pastoral growth of priests. They are an opportunity for renewed commitment, enrichment and service within the Church.

The sabbatical for priests is an experience of ongoing formation and education for an extended period of time away from a priest’s assignment. It is distinguished from sick leave, vacation, or special graduate studies which are oriented toward specific ministerial needs.

There are many models for sabbaticals and many institutions providing them. The Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation can assist the priest in this planning. The National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Priests publishes a resource which provides basic information of available sabbatical programs dealing with spirituality, theology, personal development, pastoral ministry and culture.

Sabbatical Policy for the Diocese of Worcester

1. Each priest may participate in a sabbatical program which ordinarily lasts from three to five months. To be eligible for a sabbatical, a priest must be ordained seven years, and seven years must have passed since his last sabbatical.

2. The Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation, the priest’s parish or diocesan agency and the priest will share the cost of the sabbatical equally. This includes the cost of tuition, room and board, travel and books directly related to the intent and the goal of the sabbatical.

3. A priest who wants to take advantage of a sabbatical should make his request known to the Bishop and consult with the Director of the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation. Such application, supplied by the Office and submitted at least one year in advance, should include the priest’s intent on pursuing such professional development, expected benefits for himself and the Diocese, the cost of tuition, and the proposed method of payment. Prior to a sabbatical, arrangement for coverage of the priest’s absence from his assignment are to be made in consultation with the Bishop, the Priest’s Personnel Board of the Diocese and the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation. Ordinarily, priests can expect to return to their current assignment following a sabbatical.

4. A priest who wishes to take an extended sabbatical, (longer than three to five months) must make his request directly to the Bishop and must inform the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation. In most cases the cost for an extended sabbatical, that is, anytime extending beyond the usual three to five month sabbatical program, must be supplied by the priest himself.
Part-Time Studies

The priest who wishes to take part time studies should make his request known to the Bishop and the Director of the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation. Part time studies are limited to one course per semester during the academic year, or several weeks during the summer. Application forms are supplied by the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation and are to be submitted to the Office at least one year in advance. The application form will include the priest’s intent on pursuing such professional development, expected benefits for himself and the Diocese, the cost of tuition, and the proposed method of payment. The provision for coverage of his assignment during his absence, if necessary, is to be made in consultation with the Bishop, the Priest’s Personnel Board of the Diocese and the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation. Funding for part time studies is limited. Full funding for a degree is generally unavailable.

Full-Time Graduate Studies

The Bishop may request a priest to undertake a program of graduate study for the sake of preparing for a specific ministry. A priest may also request of the Bishop to undertake a specific full time program of graduate study. Full time graduate studies are separate from the Office of Ongoing Priestly Formation responsibilities.

Conclusion

The spirit and scope of these general policies are intended to guide the priests of the Diocese of Worcester in their ongoing priestly formation.

God is the guide of Wisdom and the director of the wise.
Wisdom is the refulgence of eternal light,
the spotless mirror of the power of God,
the image of God’s goodness.
And she, who is one, can do all things,
and renews everything while herself perduring;
and passing into holy souls from age to age,
she produces friends of God and prophets.

Book of Wisdom 7: 15, 26-27

Revised Holy Thursday, April 5, 2012