

Italian Bishop's Conference publishes the fourth edition of the *Guidelines and norms for Italian seminaries*: a program in stages with more pastoral commitment

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After a complex and articulated work, the fourth edition of *The Formation of Priests in the Churches in Italy. Guidelines and norms for seminaries*¹ enters in force. This document implements the general provisions provided for in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*², published in 2016 by the Congregation (now, Dicastery) for the Clergy.

Since the formation of candidates for the priesthood is a fundamental task for the universal Church and for the particular Churches, canon 242 of the Code of Canon Law establishes that the regulation is established in two levels: a general one, decided by the Apostolic See, and a particular one, which is the competence of each Bishop's Conference.

The objective is to encourage the declination of the process according to the needs of the social and cultural environment in which the sacred minister will exercise the ministry; however, to ensure uniformity in the fundamental points of the human and spiritual growth of seminarists, each *ratio nationalis* must receive the confirmation of the Holy See before entering into force³.

With regard to the new norms for seminaries, which came into force last 9th January *ad experimentum* for three years, Italian Bishops wanted to emphasize the progressiveness of the program towards priestly ordination and, therefore, precisely outlined the propaedeutic, discipleship, configuration, and vocational synthesis stages introduced by §§57-79 RF.

In particular, the propaedeutic phase is required as a prerequisite for admission to the major seminary, even for those who come from the minor seminary and from other vocational communities (§26 FP)⁴. It is conducted for a period of between one and two years in a separate community and with different leaders from those of the major seminary⁵. Its purpose is to refine vocational discernment, to bring young people closer to

¹Published on the official website of the Italian Bishops' Conference on January 9, 2025, <https://www.chiesacattolica.it/la-formazione-dei-presbiteri-nelle-chiese-in-italia-orientamenti-e-norme-per-i-seminari/>. From now on it will be referred to by the abbreviation FP.

² Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation. Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 December 2016. It will be referred to below by the abbreviation RF.

³ Cf. C.J. ERRÁZURIZ, *Fundamental Course on Law in the Church*, II, Giuffrè, Milan, 2017, 72-78.

⁴ The previous edition of the *Ratio nationalis* generally exempted those who came from the minor seminary from the preparatory period (§47).

⁵§60 RF merely defines this distinction as appropriate.

full self-knowledge and to the richness of Baptism, to introduce them to prayerful listening to the Word of God, to make them active subjects in the Church and in the world.

The need that the pastors felt is that of addressing the deficiencies, not only spiritual, but also human, of future candidates for the priesthood. It is no coincidence that, in addition to the reading of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and some philosophical and theological texts, a guided approach to literature and the study of classical languages is proposed.

The discipleship phase, is the official enter in the seminary, a place where maturity of faith is presumed, both in terms of the perception of the divine call to the mission of the priest, and in terms of psycho-affective solidity, necessary for the celibate orientation (§40 FP). The phase lasts two years and provides for the completion of philosophical studies (§§51-52 FP).

At this moment any tensions that may arise in the personal sphere, not excluding the sexual sphere, must be fully resolved, as ascertained through sincere dialogue with the formators. In this regard, §44 FP recalls that the Church cannot admit "those who practice homosexuality, have deep-rooted homosexual tendencies or support the so-called gay culture"⁶; nevertheless, discernment must have a global character on the individual person, without proceeding to automatic solutions that disrespect dignity.

It is obvious that this part has attracted the interest of the press. Instead of reading it as an overcoming of ecclesiastical discipline – impossible, since FP is an implementing document of the RF, which has solid foundations in natural law, in the magisterium and in moral theology⁷ – one should consider the formulation chosen by the Italian Bishops as a sign of paternal accompaniment of every seminarist towards the achievement of self-control and chastity, without forgetting the duty of formators for treatment that does not demean the person and his or her psychic integrity.

Admission to Holy Orders opens the phase of configuration, a four-year period that is not limited to theological studies, but must lead the seminarist to an encounter with the community, weaving relationships with the local Church, the presbyterate, families and ecclesial figures (§54 FP). A characterizing moment of the journey is the year of pastoral, charitable and missionary experience, preferably coinciding with the period immediately following the discipleship phase. Among the activities proposed there are service in parishes, work experience, mission abroad, stable inclusion in charitable realities.

⁶ These are the words of §199 RF, which in turn cites THE CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Instruction on the Criteria for Vocational Discernment with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of Their Admission to the Seminary and Holy Orders*, n. 2, AAS 97 (2005), 1009.

⁷ Cf. 2357-2359 CCC.

In order to emphasize the baptismal nature of the ministries of lector and acolyte and to overcome their conception of *cursus honorum*, the rite of institution will involve in the same celebration both those who are on their way to the priesthood and other lay people.

With diaconal ordination, the phase ends, since the cleric is definitively configured as Christ the servant of all.

In the logic of service, the transient deacon must have a missionary dynamism, accentuated in the phase of vocational synthesis, which will no longer have as its center the seminary, but a pastoral context chosen by the diocesan Bishop after consultation with the formators. At the end of the "synthesis" year, the deacon will receive priestly ordination.

FB tries to maintain ties with the seminary community: in fact, the Ordinary should discuss with the Rector before the assignment of the new priests, with the aim of selecting the most suitable environments for the harmonious development of the sacred ministry (§63 FP).

Greater flexibility, tempered by prudence, is granted in the case of adult vocations, that is, subjects who begin formation after the age of forty: the community of origin should testify on the validity of the reasons that push the person to a choice of radical rupture. However, without prejudice to the competence of the Regional Bishop's Conferences on the establishment of special seminaries, the document urges the Bishop to elaborate a personalized program.

Among the novelties, there is a positive emphasis on social networks, which can be used by seminarists as tools of evangelization. However, the seminar trainers have the task of accompanying young people towards an awareness of the potential and risks of these means (§86 FP).

With a view to preventing abuse, it is established that the trainers liaise with the heads of the offices in charge to define specific training itineraries on this subject (§§ 106-107 FP).

Finally, the document desires a profound synodal sensitivity in the decision-making processes: at each step that involves an assessment of the candidate's suitability, the Rector has the obligation to seek the opinion of his collaborators, teachers, and parish priests who have welcomed the seminarist. The plurality of voices is achieved thanks to the contribution of female figures, called upon to give their evaluative contribution (§§67-68 FP).

Finally, the document positively evaluates publicity and transparency on the reasons for acts concerning seminary life, especially those that may have a detrimental impact (§71 FP).

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