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**A NEW DIMENSION OF PRIESTLY FORMATION  
AND OF INSTITUTES OF PRIESTLY  
FORMATION: THE PROPAEDEUTICUM**

**Dissertatio ad Doctoratum**

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Our Holy Mother Church - acknowledging the reality of the specific challenges of our time - promulgated her renewed document entitled “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis” (The Gift of the Priestly Vocation) on 8 December 2016. This document - which was originally prepared in 1970, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council -, was published earlier, in 1985, after the renewal of the Code of Canon Law.

In this way, the Church sought to provide guidance through this document regarding the training program for those young men, who are committed to take the path leading to become a Catholic priest. It was timely to update this document also due to the accelerated changes in our society.

The document, which was published by the Congregation for the Clergy, is a milestone in the process of priestly formation, that is continuously taken into consideration by the community of the Church. The new Ratio aims to redefine the priestly formation program. Based on this interpretation, one can differentiate four stages of priestly formation from entry into the seminary: the preliminary (preparatory) phase, i.e., the propaedeutic stage; the discipleship stage; the configuration stage; and the pastoral synthesis stage, which basically covers the whole priestly life, according to the document’s intention.<sup>1</sup> The Holy See tries to strengthen the (public) image, identity of the clergy in a direction that we as priests shall look at our priesthood realizing that we are disciples on a journey, which discipleship will accompany us throughout our earthly career. Highlighting this aspect shall encourage us to somewhat reconsider, reshape our view of formation of priestly vocation. If we consider priesthood as a pilgrim community constantly being on a journey, being responsible for oneself and for the community, in the life of which the priestly ordination is an important milestone, but not the final station, then obviously in the first step can the pilgrim’s path be well-founded, and then can he be released on his journey in a proper way. According to the teachings of the document, in this case, this phase is the propaedeutic stage; which my thesis also aims to address.

The propaedeuticum is not necessarily a new, foreign institution. In 1769, Ádám Patachich, Archbishop of Kalocsa emphasized that a one-year period would be needed before the formation of priests, which would be similar to the stage of novitiate, in which

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *RFIS*, Introduction.

period the students would prepare for the seminary.<sup>2</sup> The Second Vatican Council's document *Optatam Totius* (Decree on Priestly Training) had already outlined a sort of blueprint for the preparatory year of studies, which was implemented in several countries in the years after the Second Vatican Council.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently, in 1992, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation entitled "Pastores Dabo Vobis" also presented the priestly formation this training enriching step as an opportunity. These trainings can be divided into three groups: autonomous, integrated in the seminary curriculum, or bound to the pastoral care (of students).

Since the current *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* requires such a period, as the first substantial step (out of four) of priestly formation, hence the previously thus acquired observations, and the existing experiences can have a significant impact on the training of priests, if we consider those specificities, contemporary challenges and realities, which we experience in our society, and among our clergy.

If we explore the situation of our time, the current state of the clergy, and the pivots of priestly formation, with particular emphasis on acting responsibly, then we can reflect on this preliminary/preparatory period better.

The key questions posed by the dissertation are as follows: What is the purpose of priestly formation? Shaping personality according to priestly identity to enable the pastor to carry out a fruitful pastoral work at the actual place of service. What is the actual problem to be solved? Based on the observations relating to priestly formation and chief pastoral experiences, for some reason, the priestly training program does not accomplish its aims, that is to say, it cannot adequately establish and consolidate priestly identity. What is the specific task to be accomplished? The possible causes are needed to be explored and remedial measures initiated, that is, the program of priestly formation (to be observed in seminaries for the formation of priests) must be rendered more effective. The propaedeuticum may serve as one of the guarantees of this effectiveness. Therefore, our

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. TÓTH T, *Patachich Ádám papnevelési reformtervezete*, in *Vigilia* 2006, Budapest, Vol. 71, No. 1, p. 4

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Cf. *Decree on the Training of Priests (Optatam Totius)*, V. n. 14.

thesis is that the propaedeuticum has to be integrated into the existing institutional system of priestly formation.

In view of this, in the first part of my dissertation I examine basically the times we live in, in which the call to priesthood is received, and its specific characteristics, which affect the person. In particular, I deal with the situation of the families, the external relations, and the parish community, as well as the call/vocation to become a priest, and its aspects, respectively. In addition to the network of relationships, it is also important to focus on the intellectual trends, which strongly influence the man of our time. This part of my study cannot ignore the interconnectedness with the technical world of our time, which creates a uniquely new situation in several respects.

The second chapter deals with the goal of priestly formation, which goal, in this case, is concretized as bringing up a responsible person. Actually basic principles are formulated, which are essential reference points before beginning any education, training, or related activities, because these show in which direction should the process develop. Questions also arise about identity, maturity, and celibacy issues, in addition to maturity examinations concerning the person involved in the training of priests. Emphasis is placed on the development of a responsible spirituality, which is based on the grace of God, however to be a mature, healthy person, ready for development is also a *sine qua non* condition for such spirituality, as well as to feel the desire to live a fully dedicated life, respectively.

The third chapter of my Ph.D. thesis addresses the propaedeuticum - in the light of the above mentioned factual considerations -, as a possible platform of priestly formation. This requires that we see the real picture of our country's religious peculiarities, including the specialties of the sense of vocation. It is also necessary to take into consideration the life of the Greek Catholic communities living in Hungary. Due to the population movements within the country, the previously more isolated community was torn from the eastern region of Hungary, and nowadays, Greek Catholic scattered chaplaincies can be found in many parts of the country. The close connection with them, on the basis of being tightly bound to Rome, may also require that the candidates/aspirants of the two rites enter the initial stage of (priestly) formation together and attend the courses of this

preliminary period jointly. Since taking a common path can bring us together in unity through human relationships, therefore certainly, we may see beneficial points in it for further consideration. I present the utterances of the competent Church authorities regarding the preparatory year, and the specificities, which show the characteristics of the period.

The fourth chapter addresses two emphatic elements of priestly formation, namely, discernment and priestly spirituality. Both areas are such realities, which accompany the path of life of those who have received the call, from the initial moments till the end of their priestly ministry.

Regarding discernment, I explore the necessity and the process of the method by basically following the heritage of Jesuit spirituality, with a particular emphasis on vocation discernment.

The priestly identity does not belong to the achievable repository of knowledge and results. It manifests itself in different ways in each stage of life, thus, it is a dynamic reality in the person's life. These challenges are accompanied by the fact that after the Second Vatican Council, misunderstandings have led to blind alleys in this field. Joseph Ratzinger dealt with the subject, first as a theologian, later as Saint Peter's successor, who highlighted the question of priestly identity effectively. However, it is necessary to gain insight also on the issues of the related crises, which may be of great help in the early detection and effective treatment of the arising problems.

The final chapter of the thesis presents the experiences acquired from the propaedeuticum. At the international level, a preparatory year was organized by the Episcopal Conferences, or optionally, also by a diocese, in several countries as well. Via raising questions and obtaining answers, we may inspect those systems, which have stood the test of time or those that later have ceased to exist due to immaturity. It is also important to examine the preparatory training system, previously operating in Hungary, whose participants, either as superiors or as novices, have shared valuable lessons that they have learned from it.

In the light of all these, our viewpoint can crystallize concerning the new gift of the Church, that is, the propaedeutic year, which is specifically intended to help the (priestly) formation - recognizing the reality of today's world and the situation of young people living in it -, to become as efficient as possible, where the individual's personality can start to develop along the road to becoming a priest, living a responsible priestly life.