

MAKING DISCIPLES BY WALKING TOGETHER: SEMINARY FORMATION TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH

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Abstract

The much wanted pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church, as exhorted by Pope Francis, shall prove itself impossible unless priests and bishops become more synodal in their life and ministry. Towards that larger goal this paper proposes a few suggestions to make priestly formation more synodal in spirit and content. First, true to the spirit of synodality, seminarians need to be trained to walk together with all others in the faith community. In the current format of formation, seminarians often are trained to walk ahead of others in leadership roles. Second, make seminarians aware of the risks of clericalism. Clericalism refers to the priests' relatively unbridled administrative power in the Church as if it is a personal entitlement. Third, form Seminarians towards servant leadership. Over against, many unbiblical models of leadership prevailing in the Church, servant leadership will help priests exercise their ministry in a participatory way. Fourth, promote spirituality based on imitation of Jesus Christ. Spiritual life devoid of personal relationship with Christ will breed careerism and opportunism. Fifth, formators have to walk on the synodal path. Formators need to prove that formation is essentially accompaniment, not just monitoring. Sixth, train seminarians in synodal soft skills. They need practice in sharing of powers, consensus building, differing from others in respectful ways, working under lay leadership when required, negotiation competence, flexibility, higher emotional intelligence, etc.

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Seventh, theological formation must be appropriate to synodality. Finally, seminarians have to learn to deal with the internal forum in synodal spirit. This paper concludes affirming that synodality is an essential virtue of priests.

Keywords: Clericalism; Discernment; Internal Forum; Servant Leadership; Synodality

Introduction

The universal Church is hopefully heading towards a “pastoral and missionary conversion,” as Pope Francis urged in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (no 25). The synodal way strongly promoted by Pope Francis is the *modus operandi* for the pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church. As part of that long endeavour, progressive stages of the Synod on synodality are under way. However, the much expected pastoral and missionary conversion of the Church shall prove itself impossible unless priests and bishops become more synodal in their life and ministry. Towards that larger goal, in what follows, I propose a few suggestions to make priestly formation more synodal in spirit and content. Most of them are close to the message and ministry of Pope Francis, as we are going to see. None of the proposals is totally alien to the life of the existing Church. But each of them calls for a fresh impetus or an extra step towards forming gospel-inspired ministers of the Church.

Proposals

Formation to Walk Together

True to the spirit of synodality, seminarians need to be trained to walk together with all others in the faith community. In the current format of formation, seminarians often are trained to walk ahead of others in leadership roles. Spiritually they easily tend to identify themselves with the apostles rather than the disciples. But apostles are primarily disciples. St Paul qualifies himself primarily as the “servant of Jesus Christ” and then he adds “called to be an apostle....” (Rom 1:1). The title ‘shepherd’ attributed to priests often becomes one of hegemony and power exercised over the sheep who are supposed to follow shepherds. The presumption is that those who follow priests are spiritually vulnerable, theologically less knowledgeable and morally easily corruptible. The real problem is not with the biblical imagery of the shepherd and sheep (Jn 10:10–13). The biblical shepherd walks ahead of the sheep ready to lay down his life for the sheep. If priests are not trained to walk together with the faithful, they shall be driven by clerical sense of spiritual superiority, theological supremacy

and moral elitisms. They thus shall claim for themselves greater holiness than lay persons, simply because of their ministerial office. They shall glorify the priesthood at the expense of the dignity of the baptized. Seminarians not trained to walk together with the faithful shall place themselves always on the giving end. They shall posit themselves as the exclusive dispensers of grace, spiritual wisdom, pathways to God and also caretakers of material goods of the Church. They may assume that they are the centre of Christian community. Ultimately priestly formation as a process has to make seminarians accept that they are vulnerable like any other Christian, standing in need of God's endless grace. In the synodal church priestly ministry is with the faithful, not just for the faithful. Seminary formation is to help seminarians discern areas and ways in which they can walk together – accompany – with the faithful as a fellow traveller and co-pilgrim but not as a master who always leads the way or as a teacher who claims to have all answers. It is to be discussed seriously whether the seminary system creates a parallel insulated world, distinct from that of ordinary men and women, which prevents the priests from walking together with all sorts of people.

Make Seminarians Aware of Clericalism

The opposite of synodality in priestly life boils down to clericalism. Clericalism takes a variety of expressions in the Church. Clericalism refers to the priests' relatively unbridled administrative power in the Church as if it is a personal entitlement. Administrative powers covers areas such as finances, property, ministry, personnel, liturgy and legislation. Clericalism is manifested in ecclesiastical structures but far more strongly as a way of thinking. Clericalism will make reference to truth as a tool for power.¹ Pope Francis regularly denounces clericalism. He calls it a perversion of the priesthood. Unfortunately, many seminarians are unaware of clericalist tendencies in priesthood as condemnable ways of life, instead they take them as legitimate part of priestly life. Such seminarians will reduce the Church to the priests and bishops. Clericalism forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the People of God (LG 9–14). For clericalist seminarian, *sentire cum ecclesia* (think and feel with the church) would mean thinking with the priests and bishops. Clericalism allows no space for criticism. Widespread clericalism would make seminarians

¹How 'truth' can serve as the touchstone for totalizing tendencies in politics and religion is a provocative theme. For such an analysis see, Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, trans., Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1965).

believe that they have a right to system generated deference.² They forget that reverence or respect is to be hard earned. Unless seminarians are not warned against clericalism, they would assume that priests on their own have every right to take decisions in the Church. The clerical mindset shall push the lay faithful to 'the edges of ecclesial life' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 102), away from decision making process.

Form Seminarians towards Servant Leadership

There are unbiblical models of leadership prevailing in the Church in several formats. But servant leadership will help priests exercise their ministry in a participatory way. Pope Francis said, "only authority is the authority of service."³ Priests dissociated from the foot washing model of leadership shall look down upon the religious and lay people. They need to cultivate appropriate virtues and skills for becoming a servant leader such as the ability to listen to others without being judgmental, to understand with empathy, etc. They need to know how to persuade others to a common goal, by convincing others without being coercive. Seminarians thus are to foster principles, style, functions, character and competencies appropriate to servant leadership.⁴ It is not easy. It may even look 'dangerous,' if I am to use Robert Greenleaf, the progenitor of the idea of servant leadership. He wrote: "And, as I ponder the fusing of servant and leader, it seems a dangerous creation: dangerous for the natural servant to become a leader, dangerous for the leader to be servant first, and dangerous for the follower to insist on being led by a servant."⁵

²How the culture of deference, believing that someone inherently deserves respect, developed in the Church is a matter of historical inquiry. It seems that from the time of Synod of Elvira (AD 306) Christian ministers began to claim for themselves titles and privileges that Roman culture granted the pagan priests (*sacerdotia*). Obviously this culture is more imperial than Christian.

³Francis, "Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," 17 October 2015. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html

⁴Amanda L. Du Plessis & Carol M. Nkambule, "Servant Leadership as Part of Spiritual Formation of Theological Students in Contextualisation of 21st Century Theological Training," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, 2, a5959 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i2.5959> (accessed on 15 February, 2023).

⁵Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Legitimate Nature of Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 26.

Spirituality Based on Imitation of Jesus Christ

Synodal style of ministry cannot be imposed on priests from above or simply by any legal mechanism or formative strategy. It spontaneously evolves in priests if they are honest enough to imitate Jesus Christ. Spiritual life devoid of personal relationship with Christ will breed careerism and opportunism. It will also mark the end of prophetism in their lives. For, such priests have little to do with gospel values. The daunting task in formation in a synodal way is to motivate students to focus their priestly existence and ministry on the person of Jesus Christ in a personal way. Spirituality practiced away from Jesus Christ but anchored on ritual practices or one's own fetish desires shall contradict the demands of synodality.

Formators Walking on the Synodal Path

In order that seminarians get a taste of synodality, formators need to live it in manifested ways. Formators need to prove that formation is essentially accompaniment, not just monitoring. The logic of seminary life shall not be limited to command and control, but consensus building. Formators are supposed to act as a community in a meaningful way in the spirit of dialogue, open discussion, respectful dissent, etc. In case seminarians happen to experience authoritarian, legalistic, despotic approaches from the formators, at least some seminarians might take it normative behaviour also for their pastoral ministry.

Training in Synodal Soft Skills

Seminarians are trained in many pastoral skills. Such training is needed. Appropriate to synodality, seminarians need to be trained in synodal skills. For example, they are usually trained in public speaking, they also need training in public listening. Similarly, they need practice in sharing of powers, consensus building, differing from others in respectful ways, working under lay leadership when required, negotiation competence, flexibility, higher emotional intelligence, etc. Can these skills be taught in seminaries? Perhaps, almost impossible. But seminarians can be motivated to capture these skills. Only those priests with synodal soft skills shall be able to convert synodal vision of the church into reality in a smooth manner.

Theological Formation Appropriate to Synodality

Theological knowledge can be exercised as a tool against theologically illiterate people. Seminary formation has to take care that theology and other disciplines help priests serve others, rather than dominating the faithful. Integration of various disciplines is

mandatory to make theology liberating. Different disciplines such as systematic theology, biblical theology, moral theology, and pastoral theology have to operate always in mutual conversation.⁶ Theology shall not remain isolated from the lived context of people. The words of Walter Kasper are instructive: "My question is, and was always, how to translate the Christian tradition in the present context and the present context in the Christian tradition."⁷ Synodal path requires promotion of indigenous theology and also fruitful attempts to do theology in vernacular. In many of the Indian vernaculars theological vocabulary has not adequately been developed. Synodality will be easily realized when theology is kept as a field equally accessible to laypeople as well, rather than an exclusive domain of the clerics. Theology and ordinary lives shall come closer to each other. It will keep open new perspectives on being a Christian. As Jeremiah 22:16 implies knowing God means defending the right of the poor and the miserable. Knowing God means attaining justice. Perceptive persons shall realize that Pope Francis regularly makes a rereading of theology in view of synodality.⁸ It is possible while it is also challenging.

Synodal Spirit in Dealing with the Internal Forum

Seminarians get adequate formation in dealing with matters pertaining to the internal forum. Often it follows one-sided deductive hermeneutic which subsumes concrete situations under general principles and norms. Seminary formation has to pay special attention to practice 'discernment' in dealing with moral questions.⁹ In fact, "exercising discernment is at the heart of synodal processes and events."¹⁰ The process of discernment has got personal and communal

⁶How to lead the pastoral and dogmatic aspects of theology into mutual engagement, see Mathew Illathuparampil, "Teacher and Shepherd in Conversation: The Creative Interface between Systematic Theology and Pastoral Concerns," in *Ongoing Renewal in the Church: Reflections from Patristic Tradition, Vatican II, and Pastoral Practice*, ed. Paul Pulikkan, Mathai Kadavil & Peter De Mey (Leuven: Peeters, 2021), 195–208.

⁷As cited in Kristin M. Colberg, "The Task of Theology," in *The Theology of Cardinal Walter Kasper: Speaking Truth in Love*, ed. Kristin M. Colberg & Robert A. Krieg (Collegeville, MN.: Liturgical Press, 2014), 3.

⁸Rafael Luciani, "The Centrality of the People in Pope Francis' Socio-cultural Theology," *Concilium* (2018/3) 55–68.

⁹Paul Flaman, "Moral Discernment and Culpability," *The Linacre Quarterly*, 71/1, 2004, 34–46.

¹⁰International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 113. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_synodalita_en.html

scope.¹¹ It is a matter of discovering God's will in a given situation. This process requires seminarians to recognize the dignity and role of individual conscience in decision making. The duty of the priest is not to dictate the conscience of others but to help them form their conscience in an informed and responsible way. Though *Veritatis Splendor* placed strong emphasis on the objective truth as a binding objective criterion for judgments of conscience, it recognizes that,

the judgment of conscience also has an imperative character: man must act in accordance with it. If man acts against this judgment or, in a case where he lacks certainty about the rightness and goodness of a determined act, still performs that act, he stands condemned by his own conscience, the proximate norm of personal morality.¹²

Focused on the value of conscience formation, future priests are to know that making laws for everything is not the best approach. They need to learn from Thomas Aquinas who wrote that nothing should be forbidden by law that can be performed in a fair way: "*nihil debet lege prohiberi quod licite fieri potest.*"¹³ If not trained well in this area, priests shall tend to violate the conscience of others, though presumably in good faith.

Synodality: A Virtue of Priests

Seminarians are assessed individually on various grounds during their formation. Their intellectual, moral, psychological and human traits will be subjected to evaluation. That process would consider the presence or absence of a good number of virtues in seminarians. Along with other virtues, it is to be evaluated how far the seminarian is willing or disposed to live his priestly life in a synodal way. Perhaps, a rather comprehensive list of synodal virtues need to be identified. It has to include virtues such as transparency, listening to others, attitude of dialogue, participatory style, and stress on gospel values. Synodal virtues are likely to contradict one sided emphasis on managerial skills and efficiency, the quest to prove oneself always successful, etc.

Open the Scope for Storytelling

Seminary formation is conducted mostly in cerebral terms. It is ruthlessly rational, guided by logic, moving in deductive or inductive ways. Such an approach positively shall ensure clarity in approach and

¹¹Caleb Bernacchio, "Pope Francis on Conscience, Gradualness, and Discernment: Adapting *Amoris Laetitia* for Business Ethics," *Business Ethics Quarterly* 29, 4 (October 2019) 437–460.

¹²John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 60.

¹³Thomas Aquinas, In *III Sent.*, dist. 40, q. 1, a. 1, 3.

surety in judgments. But in order to prepare seminarians to act in a synodal way, they must be trained to respond to the questions of people also in telling stories, not merely in abstract terms. Sometimes stories can effectively answer questions. To the question who is my neighbour, Jesus had no answer but the parable of the Good Samaritan. The summit of Christian dogmas, the Creed, keeps also a key to historical narratives in the expression “under Pontius Pilate.” We live by stories. Indian culture transmitted ethos, religiosity, and ideologies mostly through stories. Attention to stories does signify a sort of “theopoetics”¹⁴ which tries to understand the theological in a participative and aesthetic way rather than in abstruse and abstract terms. A synodal church that walks with people needs to foster storytelling in its formation houses. Stories allow plurality, scope for different interpretations, perceptive force and richness in content. It opens the way for inclusivity, encounter between different narratives and accommodation of human experience in theological response to pastoral questions. Above all, stories will forbid our faith eventually becoming an ideology. “Whatever maintains an order, hierarchy, and tradition, whatever strives towards perfection and implies the idea of totality (i.e. ‘ideology’), must be corrected and balanced by something new, open, alternative, and containing hope for a change (i.e. ‘utopia’).”¹⁵ Rather than discursive theology, poetic and aesthetic approach to the divine will reveal God’s transcendence better. Hopefully, it will facilitate synodal way of being the church allowing plurality in understanding, diversity in approaches and mutual acceptance of the faithful. In such a church, ‘differently other people’ will not be construed as enemies but as co-pilgrims in the same journey but with different pace of footsteps. How salvaging it would be if priests are able to read every person as a story with a spectrum of meanings rather than every person simply as well-fit or misfit into a strictly defined structure in a given context.

Conclusion

Formation programs, in seminaries or elsewhere, very much reflect the pulse and atmosphere of the entire Church. In other words, seminaries are likely to remain a microcosm of the church in terms of its general attitude and stances. But as the seedbed of future priests,

¹⁴For this expression I owe to Amos N. Wilder, *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1976).

¹⁵ Pavol Bargár, *Narrative, Myth, Transformation: Reflecting Theologically on Contemporary Culture* (Jihlava: Mlýn, 2016, 173).

seminaries need to move a step ahead of the usual pace of the church in pastoral and missionary conversion. That means, seminaries cannot patiently wait until the whole Church becomes synodal in its approach. Naturally the formators need to take lead in making formation houses effectively synodal in spirit, content and style across all places and activities from its parlour to pulpit, from liturgical celebrations to kitchen work.