

# **The Formation of Future Priests: Three Fundamental Frameworks of Formation**

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## **Abstract**

The mystery of Incarnation — the image of Jesus Christ — illustrates the advocacy and urgency of formation- which is the backdrop of communication and communion. The article talks about the importance of formation in the context of liturgy and their role in the Church. It emphasizes that priests should be like Jesus Christ, attracting people through their appearance and demeanor. The article calls for an ongoing and humble approach to liturgical formation, recognizing that the mystery celebrated in the liturgy surpasses human understanding and requires a lifelong commitment to learning and wonder. In summary, the text emphasizes the significance of liturgical formation, the beauty of the liturgy, the role of wonder, and the importance of joy in the life of priests and their ministry.

*Keywords:* Incarnation, Communion, Communication, Liturgy

## **Introduction**

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,  
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.  
Let each of you look not to your own interests  
but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus (Phil 2:3-5)

The above text paints the image of a future priest who puts on Jesus Christ. It is a question of clothing Christ's image, embracing Christ's mindset and following his pathway.

Image matters. Not only does form count, but it also attracts as well. In a world of increasing visual learning, appearance appeals. An augmented following is noticeable depending on the figure of someone or something. Advertisements regulate and rule people's senses and minds, boosting commerce. This phenomenon is all the truer today in business transactions on internet sales and purchases. The presentation of items and models captures the buyer's attention in a big way. Naturally, the form sends a signal and makes an appeal or repulsion. Nothing is in the mind unless perceived by senses — picture — feeds the latter. Life and activities follow images of what one likes and loves.

The form is the backdrop of communication and communion. Different forms come to human assistance in capturing attention, orientation, and direction. Human communication or conversation occurs in the light of a verbal or/and visual form as situations demand. Such mediation through imagery is paramount, and no sharing happens without an image, written or spoken. Divine and human communication is no exception; theophanies can be seen in the light of divine presence, power, and performance. The mystery of Incarnation — the image of Jesus Christ — illustrates the advocacy and urgency of formation, in this context, the human condition, as a sign of relation to humanity and reflection of the true identity of the original and ideal of humans. The human form is most conducive to human attraction, appreciation, and assimilation.

The person and mission of Jesus Christ is the point of departure and arrival as far as the Christian form is concerned, for Christians are the followers of Christ, his missionary disciples to go forth in sharing the joy of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit accompanies the candidate for priesthood and perfects this joy in him as the situation demands. John Paul II points to the work of the Holy Spirit, the agent par excellence, in the formation of priests:

And so, the future priest also, and in the first place, must grow in his awareness that the agent par excellence of his formation is the Holy Spirit, who by the gift of a new heart configures and conforms him to Jesus Christ the good shepherd. In this way, the candidate to the priesthood will affirm in the most radical way possible his freedom to welcome the moulding action of the Spirit (*PDV* § 69).

Despite their varied dispositions and intentions, Jesus Christ attracted people from all walks of life. Jesus explicitly invited a few to 'come

and see', and follow him. Following Jesus is the essence of the Christian life in the context of one's life and activities. Following necessitates seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling the leader or the master. Distinct features — exterior patterns and interior dispositions — help distinguish the leader. This dynamic is true in the case of following Jesus. The disciples recognised Jesus as their master on different occasions, observing his stature, nature, and gestures.

A typical example is Jesus' walking along and talking with the disciples on their way to Emmaus and, finally, recognising the master when breaking bread (Lk 24:13-35). Different aspects relevant to following the master are discernible in the pericope: seeing, walking, talking, discussing, discerning, eating, and drinking. Seeing, hearing, touching, etc., create a conducive ambience to identify the image of the master and to follow him intimately, as we notice in the above passage, "They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem" (Lk 24:33).

Small is beautiful. Once again, this idea of beauty gets a wider currency as we think of the formation of ministers in the Church. As evidenced on many occasions, Jesus' approach is an excellent example of an adequate formation. Speaking from heart to heart is the quintessence of formation and transformation. It is not the number but the hunger for truth, goodness, and beauty that matters. If there is hunger and thirst for the ministry of Jesus for our times, the appropriate measures will be in place for the fulfilment. This perennial idea of formation, to which the Eastern and the Indian traditions lay importance, would be brushed aside today. Personal encounter with the Lord is the touchstone of priestly or ministerial formation. All doctrinal and dogmatic training and expertise need not necessarily make one influential minister of Christ in the Church.

Moreover, formation occurs only through encounter or confrontation — facing one on one. Jesus reiterated this aspect of the formation when he asked the disciples of John the Baptist to "come and see" (Jn 1:39). The transforming experience of the disciples is for us to witness that they, on the following day, went about inviting to the attractive presence of the master. A small band of disciples was in formation under his supervision, which, at the acceptable time, bore witness to the joy of the Gospel to the ends of the earth, braving all odds. Despite all such personal animation and accompaniments, there were cases of dropouts.

India's ancient Gurukula education system may be a fitting model in the right direction, which might ensure integral development with personal accompaniment emphasising the encounter with the Lord. The Malpanate system practised by the Thomas Christians of India till the nineteenth century is another alternative to recon with, with necessary modifications suited to our times. Big size is no more attractive; in fact, the contrary is.

With these preliminary remarks on the formation of the future ministers in the Church, I would like to highlight three essential areas in a formation programme, both for the candidates and animators: 1) Conscience Formation, 2) Liturgical Formation, and 3) Joyful Formation.

### **Conscience Formation**

Conscience is the inner voice or the law written on our hearts by God, which we must discover for every circumstance. It is the practical judgment on goodness or sinfulness of an action. Right conscience is the alignment between subjective assessment and objective moral law. To nurture and foster a tender conscience, an openness and obedience required to search for and commit to the truth of knowledge are the best dispositions in forming one's conscience.

Indeed, the core of Christian life and morality is conscience, which is considered the subjective norm of morality, and a certain conscience is obeyed always and everywhere. Conscience is the sanctuary of human beings, where they are alone with God and judge their thoughts, words, and actions according to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the dignity and character of human beings depend on their response to the voice that echoes in the abyss of one's heart and the law written in the heart by God, which performs as the immediate norm of morality.

As one grows in age and wisdom, the conscience undergoes a formation. It is a lifelong process, keeping up-to-date with the latest scientific developments and socio-cultural input. Conscience is always dynamic and presupposes movement, for from the beginning, we do not know everything but gather information in the long run. To search for the truth, goodness, and beauty is our lifelong endeavour; there is no vacation for conscience, for in a wakeful state, we are constantly being invited to explore the will of God in the changing and changed circumstances of life. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* clearly emphasises the formation of conscience, "Intimately connected with formation to

responsible freedom is the education of the moral conscience” (*PDV* § 44). John Paul II observes the maturity of a future priest should include the formation of his conscience:

In order that the candidate may faithfully meet his obligations with regard to God and the Church and wisely guide the consciences of the faithful, he should become accustomed to listening to the voice of God, who speaks to him in his heart, and to adhere with love and constancy to his will.” (*PDV* § 44)

A responsive and responsible conscience is the need of the time; it is not a heart of stone but a heart of flesh that bears witness to God’s written law in the heart and beat with the changes and challenges of the contemporary story of the human predicament. Conscience — in communion and dialogical with the triadic realities of God, creation, and fellow beings — reveals the identity and dignity of human beings, created in the image and likeness of God.

In the changing scenario of our age, Pope Francis’s reinvigorated reiteration and discussion on the formation of conscience get added attention and urgency. In his apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis advocates the formation of conscience:

We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them (*AL* § 37).

The context of the discussion of Francis is in the backdrop of the changing marriage institution and the difficulties thereof. He calls on the formation of conscience to address the issues emerging in marital relationships. The challenge is to form one’s conscience without replacing it. Towards this formation, Francis reiterates the attitude of Jesus, “The Church makes her own the attitude of the Lord Jesus, who offers his boundless love to each person without exception” (*AL* § 250). In this regard, Pope Francis urges, “Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one’s pastor, and to encourage ever greater trust in God’s grace” (*AL* § 303). God’s mercy or grace should dominate in our discernment. Nothing can substitute the mercy of God, and charity should be the hallmark in shaping our conscience, and, of course, not legalistic rigidity:

This is not sheer romanticism or a lukewarm response to God's love, which always seeks what is best for us, for "mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness which she shows to believers; nothing in her preaching and her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy". It is true that, at times, "we act as arbiters of grace rather than its facilitators. But the Church is not a tollhouse; it is the house of the Father, where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems" (*AL* § 310).

The formation of conscience is central to the training of the ministers in the Church. All the ministers in the Church are to be imbued with the mercy of God manifested by Jesus Christ in his person and throughout his mission. Undoubtedly, pastors have to be facilitators of the grace of Jesus Christ. They have the mantle of divine mercy and the robe of glory, exemplifying the ministry of Jesus, our Master and Saviour. Arrogance and aggressiveness have no place in the priest's life; instead, they should reveal tenderness, gentleness, kindness, hospitality, openness, freedom, firmness, and friendliness.

In the company of Jesus, future priests and ministers should undergo training. Seeing the face, hearing the voice, and experiencing the touch, a candidate must grow into the stature of Christ, always manifesting the nature of Christ in which we are created. Jesus invites everyone to his close following, signing up for his discipleship in the reign of God. "Come and follow me" is the oft-repeated invitation of Jesus in the Gospel. In response to the vocation, one must follow Christ. By following Christ, we form our conscience. Having developed our conscience in following Christ, we must follow our conscience. Such following is dynamic and endless.

As the following, so is the forming of our conscience. The closer we follow Christ, the purer our conscience. Such following of Christ and concurrent following of our conscience set the formation of priests or ministers faithful and fruitful. This movement is a measure of faith in Christ and discovering the will of God. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2).

Unfortunately, this aspect of formation is being eclipsed by numerous other intellectual and informative input sessions. In communion with Christ, the candidate should undergo a thorough conformation into

the person of Christ, which is a lifelong process. The formation of a person is endless, and so too, is the formation of one's conscience. Being open and humble before the truth, goodness, and beauty — God — one can shape one's conscience, an eternal discovery of the inner voice that echoes and the divine law written in the heart. Therefore, the formation of conscience challenges and changes the minister's person through an ever-going discernment concurrent with the commitment. This discovery process keeps the priest's heart young, energetic and enthusiastic about the ministry of Christ in the ever-evolving context. At the end of the day, with Saint Paul, people undergoing the formation programme can say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20).

### **Liturgical Formation**

Another area of urgent attention is the liturgical formation of ministers. There was a time when liturgical formation was paramount when candidates underwent training and development. Generally speaking, the present generation of priests pays utmost care in celebrating the Liturgy, often as showbiz. Rituals and rubrics get disproportionate weightage. The soul of the Liturgy is often ignored or neglected. In a formation programme, the prospective candidates must get adequate knowledge and the Spirit of the Liturgy.

The apostolic letter *Desiderio Desideravi*, On the Liturgical Formation of the People of God of Pope Francis, is addressed to the Bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated men and women and the lay faithful, an urgent appeal to reclaim the beauty, wonder, silence, symbol, the art of celebrating, etc. Before we delve into the richness of the document, may I make a few preliminary remarks concerning growing trends in the Liturgy?

I limit my observations to two critical trends in the celebration of the Liturgy. The first is about the experiential dimension of the celebration of the Liturgy. People come to the Church for a *darshan* (encounter) of the Lord in the worship. In place of *darshan*, the Liturgical celebration has become a place of *pradarshan* (exhibition, showbiz). Most words, hymns, gestures, postures, sermons, etc., add to this exhibitionism, often devoid of the divine encounter. The liturgical congregation is a mute spectator, without worshipping people's participation and involvement. At times it assumes the size and shape of a theatre

show, leaving the people for a spectacle. The sacred Liturgy may be described as the participation and involvement of the people of today in the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Many preparations and rehearsals occur to make the programme successful, but little preparation for the worshipping community. Hence, they are not in the picture of the Liturgy. Many of the participatory elements in the Liturgy are scraped for the convenience of the organisers, and some items are twisted to subside the role of the assembly in worship. The one who presides over the Liturgy and the celebrating community should be offered an opportunity to have a darshan of the Lord in and through the Liturgy. Second is a sweeping change in the pattern of offering. People bring flowers to the Church to symbolise their arpana (offering, devotion). In the changing scenario, flowers are no more signs of their offering; they assume the items of alankaram (decoration, ornament). There is no dispute that the Church should be a place of attraction and beauty, revealing the glory of God. Instead, today seeing the decorations spending huge money and often with a sense of conquering mentality, cover the unfolding mystery of the Liturgy. Knowingly or unknowingly, the worshipping community is devoid of devotion at the cost of extravagant decorations, often on competitive Spirit belittling other persons, families, or associations.

In what follows in this section are some of the serious concerns of Pope Francis on the Liturgical celebrations articulated in *Desiderio Desideravi* (On the Liturgical Formation of the People of God), published on 29 June 2022. Reflecting on the Liturgy, a dimension fundamental for the Church's life, the Pontiff's expressed desire is "to offer some prompts or cues for reflections that can aid in the contemplation of the beauty and truth of Christian celebration" (*DD* § 1).

Focusing on the significance of the Liturgy, Francis acknowledges, "Christian faith is either an encounter with Him alive, or it does not exist" (*DD* § 10). In the present time, he sees the role of the Liturgy in offering the much sought-after encounter of the Lord in the life of the people of God, and the meeting will continue after the Liturgy. The Vatican II teaches unambiguously:

For the Liturgy, "through which the work of our redemption is accomplished," most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church (*SC* 2).



Through this reflection on the Liturgical formation, the whole attempt of the Pope is to rediscover, reiterate, and revive the celebration of the Liturgy, the source, centre, and summit of Christian life. He delves into the following points: The Liturgy: the “today” of salvation history; The Liturgy: the place of encounter with Christ; The Church: Sacrament of the Body of Christ; The theological sense of the Liturgy; The Liturgy: antidote for the poison of spiritual worldliness; Rediscovering daily the beauty of the truth of the Christian celebration; Amazement before the Paschal Mystery: an essential part of the liturgical act; The need for a serious and vital liturgical formation; The art of celebrating; and The dynamics of symbolic language.

Explaining the title and intent of the document, Pope Francis emphasises a fundamental reason for the Liturgy of the Eucharist: “Before our response to his invitation — well before! — there is his desire for us” (*DD* § 6). And from our part, the possible response is “surrender to this love, that letting ourselves be drawn by him” (*DD* § 6). This response is the inherent desire of Jesus in the Last Supper, writes Francis. The desire to encounter the Lord is active in our hearts as it is in the heart of Jesus. Meeting the Lord is paramount for a Christian. The stage is set by the Lord and is actualised by the celebration of it. “We would have had no other possibility of a true encounter with him other than that of the community that celebrates” (*DD* § 8). To keep this mutual desire for encounter going, the Church celebrates the command of the Lord, “Do this in memory of me” (*DD* § 8). The future minister has to keep this fire burning in his heart before, during, and after the Eucharistic celebration. The celebration of the sacraments is the *sitz im Leben* of the encounter with Jesus Christ:

From the very beginning, the Church had grasped, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, that that which was visible in Jesus, that which could be seen with the eyes and touched with the hands, his words and his gestures, the concreteness of the incarnate word — everything of Him had passed into the celebration of the sacraments (*DD* § 9).

The sacraments, in general, and the Eucharist are privileged events of encounter with the risen Lord. “Here lies all the powerful beauty of the liturgy” (*DD* § 10). In his exhortation, Pope rightly points out the foundation of the Christian life, “Christian faith is either an encounter with Him alive, or it does not exist” (*DD* § 10). Without an encounter

with the Lord, the Christian life is unimaginable, and the Liturgy guarantees the possibility of the same:

In the Eucharist and all the sacraments, we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus and having the power of his Paschal Mystery reach us. The salvific power of the sacrifice of Jesus, his every word, his every gesture, glance, and feeling reaches us through the celebration of the sacraments (*DD* § 11).

The minister of the Liturgy must be thoroughly conscious of the epiphany of the Lord through the liturgical words, gestures, glances, feeling symbols, images, acts, etc., celebrated in the assembly of the people of God. Everything in the Liturgy is to reveal the Lord: his word and deed to make the people whole and holy. And the minister has a unique ministry in creating an ambience conducive to the Lord's encounter. Accordingly, the future priests equip themselves during the formation, primarily to grow into the stature of Jesus Christ to confer the encounter with God. It is an experiential knowledge, and it is not a mental activity for the faithful. Pope says:

It is a being plunged into his passion, death, resurrection, and ascension, a being plunged into his paschal deed. It is not magic. Magic is the opposite of the logic of the sacraments because magic pretends to have power over God, and for this reason, it comes from the Tempter (*DD* § 12)

Encounter the Lord is the engagement in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, the centrality of the Liturgical celebration. The formation of the future priest must be on the process of exodus experience in his life and ministry. He has to confront the complex and harsh realities of the life of the people and emerge as a servant leader in the Church who washes the feet of his people and breaks the bread, symbolising the sacrifice of Jesus' death on the Cross.

This call is to be understood against the cultic or ritualistic priesthood background, which is unfortunately on the increase. So too, this is an attack on those who take the Liturgical celebration without proper disposition and preparation and eventually consider it a casual and routine perpetuation without any encounter with the Lord. Francis writes, "In perfect continuity with the Incarnation, there is given to us, in virtue of the presence and action of the Spirit, the possibility of dying and rising in Christ" (*DD* § 12). The minister of the Eucharist is prepared to undergo the Passover experience in his community

witnessing. A future priest in the Church has to encounter the Lord throughout his way to the Cross. There is no shortcut to becoming what we are. It is indeed a process, which Pope reiterates, “In fact, there is only one act of worship, perfect and pleasing to the Father; namely, the obedience of the Son, the measure of which is his death on the Cross” (*DD* § 15).

Influenced by worldliness, ministers in the Church might distort and deviate from the source of its fecundity. Gnosticism and Neo-Pelagianism plague our Liturgical celebrations, often by the myopic mindset of priests. Liturgy, Pope writes, is an antidote to the poison of spiritual worldliness. He says, “If Gnosticism intoxicates us with the poison of subjectivism, the liturgical celebration frees us from the prison of a self-referencing nourished by one’s own reasoning and one’s own feeling” (*DD* §19). So too, Francis opines, “If neo-Pelagianism intoxicates us with the presumption of a salvation earned through our own efforts, the liturgical celebration purifies us, proclaiming the gratuity of the gift of salvation received in faith” (*DD* §20). There is nothing to boast about; everything is a gratuitous gift of God. Pope cites a passage to substantiate it, “We have no other boast but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal 6:14). He rightly argues, “The Liturgy has nothing to do with an ascetical moralism. It is the gift of the Paschal Mystery of the Lord which, received with docility, makes our life new. The cenacle is not entered except through the power of attraction of his desire to eat the Passover with us” (*DD* §20). The fountain of grace and mercy is at the disposal of all who come to it with genuine conversion to God with the power of the Holy Spirit. The priest who celebrates the Mysteries should put on Christ and the merciful face to help all drink from the wellspring of God’s compassion and mercy.

**Rediscovery of the Beauty of Liturgy:** The formation programme of priests must include the space and time to discover the beauty of the Liturgy to make it more effective. The attraction of beauty is a school of learning, loving, and living. And Liturgy is the attraction of beauty, the beauty of the Paschal Mystery, enabling the participants to “transform every dimension of our life, conforming us more and more to Christ” (*DD* § 21). All parts make the whole; every aspect, therefore, is essential and constituent to the beauty of the Liturgy. Pope notes, “Every aspect of the celebration must be carefully tended to (space, time, gestures, words, objects, vestments, song, music...), and every rubric must be observed” (*DD* § 23).

As a corollary to the beauty, amazement before the Paschal Mystery is an essential aspect of the liturgical act, contents Pope Francis (*DD* § 24). He writes, “Beauty, just like truth, always engenders wonder, and when these are referred to as the mystery of God, they lead to adoration” (*DD* § 25). Wonderment or amazement is essential for human beings to enjoy and be enthusiastic about life and activity. The Liturgical celebration offers the attraction, inspiration, imagination, and motivation to conform to the Mystery of Christ. It is with a sense of wonder we must approach the Mysteries of our salvation, celebrated in the Eucharist, “Wonder is an essential part of the liturgical act because it is the way that those who know they are engaged in the particularity of symbolic gestures look at things” (*DD* § 26). The more you wonder, the greater you work for the realisation. If we approach the Paschal Mysteries unfolded in the Liturgical celebration with awe and reverence, they will lead us to be conformed to the Mystery of Christ.

The need for a serious and vital liturgical formation (*DD* § 27). Pope calls for a liturgical formation, for modern people “have lost the capacity to engage with symbolic action, which is an essential trait of the liturgical act” (*DD* § 27). Liturgy is the school of the Christian life. In connection with the formation of future priests, John Paul II says, “The Liturgy is a living experience of God’s gift and a great school for learning how to respond to his call” (*PDV* § 38). Playfully and joyfully, we have to learn the lessons of Christian life from the Liturgy, the Kindergarten of our life. Pope restates, “The Liturgy is the first source of divine communion in which God shares his own life with us. It is also the first school of the spiritual life. The Liturgy is the first gift we must make to the Christian people united to us by faith and the fervour of their prayers” (*DD* § 30). In this context, it is opportune to remember that the Liturgy is the locus theologicus, the place of theology.

Regarding the formation of future priests, the twofold formation in the Liturgy is urgent, “formation for the Liturgy and formation by the Liturgy. The first depends upon the second, which is essential” (*DD* § 34). The document repeatedly draws our attention to the fundamental truth of the Liturgy, “Let us always remember that it is the Church, the Body of Christ, that is the celebrating subject and not just the priest” (*DD* § 36). Often we notice priest assumes a role much more than he is endowed with and acts as if he is the master of the Liturgy and does not care what the Church offers. A priest is a minister who serves the people by administering them on behalf of the Church. The ecclesial

nature of the ministry of a priest is decisive in carrying out the mission of Christ entrusted to the Church. In this connection, Pope reminds the ministers of what transpires on the day of ordination, “On the day of his ordination, every priest hears the bishop say to him: “Understand what you will do, imitate what you will celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s Cross.” (DD § 36). The instruction of the ordaining Bishop reveals the code of conduct of priests in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Delving on the ecclesial nature of the Liturgy, the document observes, “There is no aspect of ecclesial life that does not find its summit and its source in the Liturgy” (DD § 37).

The Liturgical formation is an ongoing one, and it is for all people of God, including the priests and prospective ministers in the Church:

For ministers as well as for all the baptised, liturgical formation in this first sense is not something that can be acquired once and for all. Since the gift of the mystery celebrated surpasses our capacity to know it, this effort certainly must accompany the permanent formation of everyone, with the humility of little ones, the attitude that opens up into wonder (DD § 38)

It is a permanent formation programme that all must undergo, built on experiential knowledge or a relationship with God, covering all areas of life and activities. However, this is very true regarding the ministers of the Liturgy. Humility and openness are the hallmarks of ministers in this regard. The arrogance and aggressiveness of a priest are unwarranted, for they preclude the person and mission of Christ, which each minister contemplates and celebrates. Pope clarifies what he means by liturgical formation, “I refer to our being formed, each one according to his or her vocation, from participation in the liturgical celebration” (DD § 40). As you celebrate, so you become. The permanent formation of a minister should promote him to celebrate life in Christ. By celebrating the Mystery of Christ in the Liturgy, celebrants must become members of the Mystical Body of Christ, proclaiming the Good News of salvation to all.

Pope Francis teaches, “Liturgy is about praise, about rendering thanks for the Passover of the Son whose power reaches our lives” (DD § 41). The Liturgy is eucharistic — thanksgiving, worshipping, adoring, and honouring the Lord for the gratuitous gift towards creation and humanity. The whole creation is present in the Liturgical celebration, and therefore, attention should be given to the details as part of the totality of the Liturgy:

The Liturgy is done with things that are the exact opposite of spiritual abstractions: bread, wine, oil, water, fragrances, fire, ashes, rock, fabrics, colours, body, words, sounds, silences, gestures, space, movement, action, order, time, light. The whole of creation is a manifestation of the love of God, and from when that same love was manifested in its fullness in the Cross of Jesus, all of creation was drawn toward it (*DD* § 42).

All are valuable in the Liturgy. Nothing is alien to Christian worship; the whole creation joins the celebration. The Cross of Jesus — the Tree of Life — is a beautiful symbol of salvation, reaching out to the triadic realities of God, creation, and human beings.

**Symbols:** Symbols are fundamental to celebrating the Mysteries of Christ and salvation history. Liturgical formation presupposes the acquaintance with the symbolic language of the celebration, and the ignorance of the language deprives our understanding of God and ourselves:

The task is not easy because modern man has become illiterate, no longer able to read symbols; it is almost as if their existence is not even suspected. This happens also with the symbol of our body. Our body is a symbol because it is an intimate union of soul and body; it is the visibility of the spiritual soul in the corporeal order; and in this consists of human uniqueness, the specificity of the person irreducible to any other form of living being. Our openness to the transcendent, to God, is constitutive of us. Not to recognise this leads us inevitably not only to a not knowing of God but also to not knowing ourselves (*DD* § 44).

The sacramental nature of creation and everything in it make our lives wonderful and joyful. Abstraction strips off the attraction; it is devoid of beauty. Pope gives a clue to the regaining of the symbolic reading. A symbolic reading, Francis says, “is not a mental knowledge, not the acquisition of concepts, but rather a living experience” (*DD* § 45). This symbolic reading presupposes our confidence in creation, which comes from God and is oriented to God. The sacramental approach to the world is the first step to being capable of symbolic reading, and it will facilitate the appreciation of the Liturgical celebration. In other words, we must be to be open-eyed mystics, seeing God in everything and everything in God. The document observes, “From the very beginning, created things contain the seed of the sanctifying grace of the sacraments” (*DD* § 46). Such an approach to creation will nurture and foster friendship and stewardship of everything on earth,

our common home, responding to the Lord, Land, and people of the covenant community.

**The art of celebrating:** The formation programme of the future ministers pays attention to the art of celebrating the Liturgy. Pope suggests, “The rite is in itself a norm, and the norm is never an end in itself, but it is always at the service of a higher reality that it means to protect” (*DD* § 48). As far as the mastery of the art of celebrating the Liturgy is concerned, the document outlines three essential points: (1) an understanding of the dynamism that unfolds through the Liturgy; (2) in harmony with the action of the Spirit; and (3) to understand the dynamics of symbolic language, its particular nature, its efficacy (*DD* § 49). Pope Francis makes a vital insight concerning art and artist:

For an artisan, technique is enough. But for an artist, in addition to technical knowledge, there has also to be inspiration, which is a positive form of possession. The true artist does not possess an art but rather is possessed by it (*DD* § 50).

It means the Mystery of Christ possesses the minister. Though training and discipline, the minister is possessed by the Master Jesus Christ. “The way to achieve this, though, is through discipline, through giving up weak sentimentality; through serious work, carried out in obedience to the Church, on our religious being and acting” (*DD* § 51). We must become what we are and what we celebrate. The Eucharistic Liturgy is the celebration of what we are, our existence.

**Silence:** “Liturgical silence is something much grander: it is a symbol of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit who animates the entire action of the celebration” (*DD* § 52). The document lists a few possible inadequate models for our scrutiny: “rigid austerity or an exasperating creativity, a spiritualising mysticism or a practical functionalism, a rushed briskness or an overemphasised slowness, a sloppy carelessness or an excessive finickiness, a superabundant friendliness or priestly impassibility” (*DD* § 54).

The key to the future formation of priests is an encounter with the Lord in the Liturgical celebration. As you celebrate, so you become. “To preside at Eucharist is to be plunged into the furnace of God’s love” (*DD* § 57), and “the action of the celebration continually forms the priest” (*DD* § 60). As the celebration, so the transformation. Pope Francis summarises the essentials of the document:

I would like this letter to help us to rekindle our wonder for the beauty of the truth of the Christian celebration, to remind us of the necessity of an authentic liturgical formation, and to recognise the importance of an art of celebrating that is at the service of the truth of the Paschal Mystery and of the participation of all of the baptised in it, each one according to his or her vocation”  
(*DD* § 62)

In essence, the formation programme of ministers should consist of a double-edged liturgical formation for the Liturgy and formation by the Liturgy.

### **Joyful Formation**

A future minister in the Church must be joyful. The attraction of joy in the Lord and for the world must shape the priest in the Church. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the good news of happiness. Every follower of Jesus Christ, in general, the priest, in a particular way, must be a follower of Jesus, the source and summit of joy, against all odds. Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people revile you, persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account” (Mt 5:11). He adds, “Rejoice and be glad” (Mt 5:12) when you face trials and persecutions. Jesus sets himself as the true example of happiness through the Beatitudes, an offset of the self-portrait of Jesus. Disciples of Christ have no reason to be unhappy, even when things go unexpectedly and tragically. Despite all ills, the future priest must be an epiphany of joy in the larger frame of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus sums his mind up regarding his teaching, “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (Jn 15:11). Joy is the key to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; the Easter joy is the way of all Christians. Joy is pivotal to the self-understanding and the ecclesial mission of a priest. When a priest is happy in the Lord, for the Lord, and through the Lord, he is a piece of good news to all people. In forming the future priests, the Church must ensure that the servants of the Church are happy in their ministry. Joy in the Lord and joy for the world is the hallmark of a priest, who can attract people to God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Taking a cue from the Pauline appeal, “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice” (Phil 4:4), it is reasonable to conclude that a priest in the Church must be a minister of joy. Following the mindset of Saint Paul, all priests put on the garb of happiness. He writes, “We work with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24). A priest is to work with the community



for its joy. Joy is the characteristic note of a priest. A priest's thought, word, and deed must be to share the joy in the Lord.

Joy is the way of the future priest; the ministry of joy is the vocation of a priest, especially when people are confused by confounded concerns of various kinds and miseries of life encompassing humanity even amid affluence. John Paul II illustrates the dynamics of joyful consciousness in the ministry of salvation:

The consciousness that one is a minister of Jesus Christ the head and shepherd also brings with it a thankful and joyful awareness that one has received a singular grace and treasure from Jesus Christ: the grace of having been freely chosen by the Lord to be a "living instrument" in the work of salvation (*PDV* § 25).

The candidate for priesthood should undergo a formation to generate joy in their life and ministry. To embrace joy, one has to encounter Jesus Christ. The focus of the training programme should be to meet the person of Jesus. This encounter with Jesus should be the touchstone of priestly formation. These days, the formation programme is crowded with several specialised areas, like human, psychological, intellectual, social, pastoral, etc. Undoubtedly, we need all these areas to be part of the formation programme of priests or religious. Our formation programme will be a waste if we fail to impart the ambience and opportunities to encounter the person of Jesus Christ. It is imperative to encounter the Lord to engender joy. As you encounter Jesus, so does your happiness. Pope Francis says, "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew" (*EG* 1). Underlining the significance of the encounter with Jesus to engender joy, Pope appeals:

I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unflinchingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since "no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord" (*EG* 3).

If this is the case with every Christian, how much more should it be with priests and religious leaders in the Church? Jesus is the school where all Christians, priests and religious, in particular, must encounter Jesus, the Master and Saviour, to be filled with joy in their ministry. To succeed in this journey of joy, John Paul II says, Priests should "reduce

their external activities and dedicate themselves to those pastoral contacts and that personal spirituality which can help them keep up their motivation and priestly joy” (*PDV* § 77).

As your joy, so your ministry. The ministry of the priests and religious bear witness to the Lord if they are immersed in the joy of the Lord. Pope rightly remarks, “There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter” (*EG* 6). The minister’s happiness helps the faithful encounter the Lord and lead them to the shore of joy. As a prerequisite, the candidates for the priesthood and religious life must experience the person and mission of Christ, culminating in the resurrection through his death on the Cross. Francis insists, “The Gospel, radiant with the glory of Christ’s cross, constantly invites us to rejoice” (*EG* 5). There is a meeting of joy and glory on the Cross of Christ when we drink from the Lord’s spring of mercy and compassion. The gift of the Lord’s mercy helps people to reconcile with and rejoice in the Lord, channelling the grace of the Lord who knock at the door.

## **Conclusion**

In the changing scenario of priestly and religious vocations and the formation programme of the aspirants in the Church, there are many insights in the offing, considering the psychological insights and socio-religious settings. Reading the writings on the wall is paramount as integrating the insights into the formation programme. Several institutes offer different programmes to update and integrate the invaluable contributions of scientific studies. Such programmes produce desired fruits in the field of formation. We must work towards integral and holistic formation, considering the different aspects and realms of the candidate’s personal and relational development and growth. The search and experiments should go on ceaselessly.

Nevertheless, there should be adequate attention to the fundamental dimensions of formation, which otherwise might be distorted or neglected in the race for modern formation tools. I was trying to point out three essential features of religious and priestly formation — conscience formation, liturgical formation, and joyful formation — which often do not get their deserving attention and treatise. First of all, following Christ, the candidate has to form one’s conscience and follow one’s informed conscience. Conscience formation, therefore, necessitates an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. Secondly, such an encounter is amply available in the Liturgical celebration of the Church. Considering the upheavals in the liturgical arena, Pope

Francis' timely intervention and call for liturgical formation is urgent and invaluable. Thirdly, the encounter with the Lord and the world will engender joy in the future priest, which will be the hallmark of every minister in the Church, attracting to the beauty, joy, and glory of the Mystery of Christ.

John Paul II invites future priests to the unending joy of Christian life. "Only thus will the indispensable foundations be laid, so that every vocation, including the priestly vocation, will be perceived for what it really is, loved in its beauty and lived out with total dedication and deep joy" (*PDV* § 37). The priestly formation is a lifelong process. Christian priestly formation stands and falls with Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit accompanies and challenges the candidates or priests to change the Lord wants them to embrace. Such challenges call for forming one's conscience through an intimate friendship with Jesus Christ, the encounter of which is experiential in the Liturgical celebration and, as a result, witness to a life of joy as the key to evangelisation. I want to conclude this reflection with a passage from John Paul II:

And while I wish for all of you the grace to rekindle daily the gift of God you have received with the laying on of hands (cf. 2 Tm. 1:6), to feel the comfort of the deep friendship which binds you to Jesus and unites you with one another, the comfort of experiencing the joy of seeing the flock of God grow in an ever-greater love for him and for all people, of cultivating the tranquil conviction that the one who began in you the good work will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (*PDV* § 82).

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