

**INTERNATIONAL SEMINAR ON  
“CARING FOR PRIESTS – ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH DIFFICULTIES”**

**FINAL STATEMENT**

*The FABC Office of Clergy organized an International Seminar for the Bishops of Asia from August 27<sup>th</sup> – 31<sup>st</sup>, 2007 at the Redemptorist Centre, Pattaya, Thailand, to discuss their responsibilities in caring for the clergy, especially those with special difficulties. Seventy-four participants, including a Cardinal, sixty-eight Archbishops and Bishops along with five resource persons took part in the seminar. It had three objectives: 1) helping Bishops to reflect on the identity and vision of the priesthood in the Asian context, 2) helping them to identify obstacles which priests face in their life and ministry, 3) helping them further to care for priests in their difficulties with regard to their relationships with their own self, with the faithful and other people, with their bishops, and with God Himself. The seminar was inaugurated by the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Salvatore Pennacchio, who conveyed the Holy Father’s sentiments of closeness to and solidarity with the participants as they deliberated on a very vital topic for the life of the Church.*

*The following is the final statement from the Bishop-participants:-*

We Bishops, being conscious of our shepherding role in the Church, affirmed our responsibility while caring for the whole diocese to show a special love for priests, our closest collaborators in the ministry. During the discussions we grew convinced of the urgent need of continuous ongoing formation of our priests so that they can grow in their vocation and commitment to their mission.

We expressed our deep appreciation for our priest-collaborators, many of whom are working in very difficult and in several stressful circumstances. In the present Asian context, the demands on the priests are many which can lead to exhaustion and burnout. We felt it was our duty to assist the priests to carry out their ministry joyfully and effectively after the model of the Good Shepherd.

**1. The Situation**

Priests in Asia are going through the same anxieties and tensions that our society itself is going through due to rapid cultural changes under the impact of secularising forces and exposure to a hedonistic and consumerist vision of life. They have to face in addition those challenges that arise from changing perceptions about their own identity and mission as priests in the modern world and growing complexities of the pastoral situation. Not a few lead a life of isolation in varied social contexts, often under pressure from excessive work, sometimes in situations of conflict, occasionally with a feeling that their contribution is not appreciated enough.

Reflecting on the problems of our priests, we gave special attention to those who labour under physical/psychological/spiritual strains and ailments, in some cases of more serious

nature. These may have their origin in childhood or early-life experiences, which have not been healed during the years of formation, or in the memories of the hurts they received in the course of their ministry that still remain. Negative habits and addictions that one has allowed to take root in one's life, e.g. to alcoholism, drugs, TV, gadgets-gathering, or unhealthy relationships, can take a toll on one's spiritual energies and apostolic effectiveness. Such problems could also be due to the absence of cordial relationship between the priest and his bishop, no matter whose failure it is.

## **2. Our Convictions**

However, there are very many opportunities for healing and clarifying one's identity and mission at every stage of one's growth as a priest. To begin with, if the selection of young recruits for the seminary has been judicious, there is good reason to believe that the new candidates are psychologically balanced and spiritually motivated to enter into a life of radical commitment in the service of the Lord and His people.

During the years of formation they mature in the right understanding of the priesthood, purifying their motives, growing daily in the spirit of faith and their relationship with Christ. They look to Him as their master and guide, and the sure source of inspiration and strength to confront the challenges of life. They will remember these words of the Letter to the Hebrews, "Our High Priest is not one who cannot feel sympathy for our weaknesses. On the contrary, we have a High Priest, who was tempted in every way that we are, but did not sin" (Heb 4:15). They make it their constant effort to grow more and more like Christ, who was the perfect man, until He becomes the centre of their lives.

Young seminarians allow themselves to be guided by their formators, being transparent with them and seeking earnestly to be educated into ecclesiastical discipline and the spiritual traditions of the Church. They develop intellectual interests and the habit of reading which will stand them in good stead in later years, even in the midst of intense activity and zealous pastoral service to the faithful.

But, most of all, we recognise that Bishops and priests are men of communion. During the period of seminary formation itself, they are introduced into a communitarian manner of living and sharing, and helped to develop relational skills and the ability for dialogue. They take these skills to a later life of intimate relationships within the brotherhood of priests with whom they will have to live and work. For, warm relationships within the Presbyterium and between the priests and their Bishop always have a healing, motivating and energizing power. Within this family of the Presbyterium, priests will find encouragement and assistance, and the brotherly correction that they need in different contexts. But such an atmosphere has to be diligently built up and continuously fostered, and the temptation to fragmentation within that brotherhood and self-isolation consistently resisted.

Priestly ministry today includes intense involvement in a vast variety of the services, validity of each of which is to be judged by the local Church. But it should never be at the risk of distancing oneself from what is spiritual. Asian civilizations have always cherished the values

of the spirit, emphasizing spiritual goals rather than the material, holding in high esteem renunciation and various forms of asceticism, fostering respect for elders and attachment to one's community and its traditions. Young priests take care to avoid crossing the boundaries of human prudence and spiritual discipline, or of overlooking the need for guidance from experienced persons. In fact, they are accompanied during the early years of their ministry, the Bishop himself being close to them and assisting them to mature in their priestly generosity.

As the years pass by, they take greater responsibility for their own maturing in priestly qualities and evangelical witness, being serene, sociable, transparent, accountable and capable of relating with people of all categories with ease and communicating the Gospel message with convincing power. They are encouraged in their apostolic endeavours and helped to evaluate themselves and their activities, and assisted to learn even from negative experiences.

There are times when individual priests will need professional assistance to get over the hurts they have received in trying circumstances, and those that they have invited into their lives with an inadequate sense of responsibility. There is also the fact that certain allegations against the clergy in recent years have shocked the world. And therefore, it has become important to adopt adequate measures to prevent such unhappy incidents from taking place and ensure on-going care for those disposed to similar failures. The insights that behavioural sciences provide are of immense value. However, we make sure that those we choose to be guided by are grounded on a Christian vision of the human person and in keeping with ecclesiastical teachings. We seek to profit also from the practical wisdom based on the vast experience of the Church and spiritual traditions of the Christian community.

### **3. Recommendations**

Here are a few of the suggestions that came up in the course of the Seminar so that all priests, especially those in special difficulties, would be able to receive the encouragement and support they need and grow in a sense of responsibility for their own maturing and fruitfulness in their priestly ministry and life. Hence we, as Bishops, recommend that:

1. The Seminary being the heart of the diocese, the Bishop frequently visits the students, giving them an opportunity to meet him personally whenever he can, encouraging the staff and discussing with them matters of importance for the formation of the seminarians.
2. Priests seek the spiritual strength they need in their prayer-life, especially in the Eucharist; that they be faithful to the Prayer of the Church, and other traditional practices of piety, like meditation, spiritual reading, examination of conscience, Marian devotions, whenever possible done in community. That there be moments of intense personal prayer even in the midst one's pastoral activities; that there be places and periods of silent prayer in the diocese so that priests can grow deeper in their relationship with God. That the laity be encouraged to pray for their priests.

3. Recollections, spiritual gatherings, workshops and retreats be held periodically and adequately prepared animators invited to conduct these events profitably. That documents of the Church like *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, *Pastores Gregis*, The Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests be diligently studied.
4. A well planned course of on-going formation being absolutely necessary for the renewal of the priests in their spiritual life, that such a course be conducted in each diocese/region; and that refresher courses in theology and other disciplines be organized for different groups, based on age or experience or the nature of the ministry, so that the priests can update themselves, acquire additional competence and find new motivation in their ministry. That the Apostolic Union of the Clergy be established where it does not yet exist, and vitalized where it has lost its dynamism.
5. There must be opportunity for the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and experienced confessors invited to help.
6. Spiritual directors and trained Counsellors must be made available in the diocese/ group of dioceses, so that the priests can have easy access to spiritually mature and adequately prepared persons. That an effort be made to train personnel for various needs of the diocese, e.g. in managerial skills, inter-personal relationships, in clinical pastoral experience, or priests who can counsel priests.
7. Pastoral Orientation programmes must be organized for newly ordained priests during the period of their transition to parish life.
8. Priests foster warm relationship among themselves, visiting neighbouring priests, collaborating and encouraging each other in their ministry, and, when necessary, advising and correcting each other; sharing joys and sorrows together in the various situations of life. That the Bishop keeps himself available to his priests, visiting them also from time to time at their posts, giving them the time they require.
9. There must be some diocesan guidelines with regard to serious problems which priests go through in their life and ministry, such as sexual misconduct, mishandling of finances, dependency problems (alcohol, drugs, etc). That such priests must be offered assistance at a suitable place so that they can be rehabilitated.
10. The FABC-OC organizes programmes for priests, for formators and for those who can help priests in their difficulties.

- Resource persons included Archbishop Evarist Pinto from Pakistan, Archbishop Peter Fernando from India, Archbishops Ferdinando Capalla and Orlando Quevedo OMI from the Philippines, Bishop Vianney Fernando from Sri Lanka, and Fr. Vimal Tirimanna CsSR, Fr. Francis Jayapathy SJ, and Fr. Lawrence Pinto MSIJ, the executive secretary of the FABC Office of the Clergy.