

CONSULTATION ON HUMAN FORMATION
OF PRIESTS — CHALLENGES IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT 2006

Final Statement

I. INTRODUCTION

Seventy three rectors / formators from different major seminaries in 14 countries and regions of Asia — Bangladesh, Cambodia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia Malaysia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam — gathered together from May 14 to 19, 2006 at the Salesian Retreat House, Hua Hin, Thailand, for a consultation on the theme “HUMAN FORMATION OF PRIESTS — CHALLENGES IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT”. This consultation is the very first programme conducted by the Office of Clergy of the Federation of the Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC-OC). The meeting enjoyed the effective support of the FABC Secretariat in Hong Kong, and the fraternal and meaningful collaboration of the Office of Consecrated Life, Office of Social Communication, and Office of Education and Student Chaplaincy.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE CONSULTATION

This consultation had the following objectives:

1. To help clarify the identity of the Priest.
2. To enhance ministry and life of priests.
3. To help priests meet the challenges encountered in present-day Asia in keeping with the dignity and demands of priesthood.

III. VISION

The assembly observed many lights and shadows in the ministry and life of the clergy in Asia. The seminarians in formation should be helped to objectively face both these aspects. One key point highlighted was the need to have a clear vision of what a priest should be. The Church in Asia needs to form a priest who is:

A person of God-experience and is driven by pastoral charity; a person of evangelical counsels and moral integrity; a person who is welcoming and compassionate; a person in solidarity with the poor, a person of relationship and is able to live in and form communities; a humble companion—a brother, father, mother, and friend—on the journey to God; a person of dialogue, justice and peace and is a servant-leader in a servant church.

What marked this Consultation was the frank exploration of issues related to human formation of priests especially celibacy and sexuality such as heterosexual and homosexual relationships and behaviors, pedophilia, sexual abuse, masturbation and pornography. The insights from this Consultation hopefully contribute toward healthy, contextualized and integral formation of priests for 21st century Asia.

A reference to the document published by the Congregation for Catholic Education on 4th November, 2005: *Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with Regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in View of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders* was done.

We observe that:

Generally in Asia God has blessed the Church with an embarrassment of riches in regard to vocations to priestly and religious life. Seminaries and religious houses of formation do not lack candidates. Our priests are well educated, above the average population. They have a reasonably adequate spiritual formation. Our seminaries have well qualified professors to teach philosophy and theology. Seminaries have a number of spiritual directors, though not all of them are sufficiently trained.

Current formation programmes in seminaries are not sufficiently holistic. While importance is given to the intellectual formation of seminarians, attention given to human and spiritual formation is inadequate. Lack of formation in handling emotions, loneliness and frustration, and healing from hurts often leads to unhealthy relationships and addictions. Over protective and controlled environment of the seminary prevents seminarians from making responsible choices based on inner convictions.

The onslaughts of secularism, materialism, and relativism, some features of the merging global culture as well as conflicts arising from the plurality of cultures within the formation environment, rise of religious fundamentalism—all these are undermining and confusing the value systems of our seminarians. Lack of contact with people, especially the poor, prevents seminarians from really knowing their situation and growing in solidarity with them. Proper accompaniment of seminarians, especially during conflicts related to close relationships with women is inadequate. There is a growing tendency among some seminarians and priests to opt for a comfortable and easy-going lifestyle.

The life style of some formators as well as some of the priests they encounter during their pastoral ministry and during holidays seem to influence seminarians negatively, often providing a different image of the priesthood than the one they are taught in the seminary. Dysfunctional family backgrounds of some seminarians negatively affect the formation process.

Generally lifestyle of priests is simple, often even austere. In their ministry priests reach out to the margins of society, even to remote and normally inaccessible villages. Priests in general exhibit a particular closeness to and solidarity with the poor. Generally priests get along well with their fellow priests and exhibit, at least with their ordination group, spiritual bonding and solidarity. Priests in general strive toward an ever deeper spirituality through prayer and ongoing formation through occasional seminars, regular retreats and recollections.

In Asian cultures, people usually do not like to reveal incidents and situations that present others in bad light. Hence the prevalence of misconduct, especially sexual, among seminarians and priests is not much known. There are incidents of sexual misconduct by seminarians and clergy. In some cases, legal action has been taken on offenders. Sometimes the mass media sensationalizes and exaggerates incidents of sexual misconduct by members of the clergy. Church in Asia is not effectively addressing the issue of clergy sexual misconduct with regard to both the victims and the offenders.

We are convinced that:

Formation has to be holistic—human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral. It is to be directed toward forming priests whose life and motivations are centred on Jesus Christ. Human formation is fundamental to all other aspects of formation of the priest. The very ministry of the priest calls for human maturity. To be able to minister to God's people in today's multi-religious Asian context, priests have to be emotionally well-balanced persons.

Seminaries need to give more attention to the human formation of the seminarians than they currently do. To be able to form such priests, formators themselves have to be well-integrated human beings. The seminary environment has to be characterized by freedom, serenity, openness and rapport that foster trust, inner convictions and right motivation.

Criteria of human maturity are culturally conditioned. Human formation imparted in seminaries need to respect the diverse cultural criteria and expectations. It is important that simplicity of life is an essential characteristic to the life style of priests in the Asian context.

Sexual misconduct of priests separates them from the people they minister to, diminishes the effectiveness of their ministry and has serious repercussions on the moral authority of the Church. Seminaries need to be adequately equipped to provide adequate human formation with sufficient number of trained counselors and spiritual directors who are comfortable and competent in helping candidates who come to them especially with problems related to sexual and affective maturation and integrity.

We recommend that:

Seminary formation gives priority to forming men of God characterized by deep interiority, human maturity and simplicity of life. A full year between philosophical and theological studies is especially devoted to facilitate this. Seminary training needs to foster a great sense of respect for all people, with a special insistence on gender sensitivity and equality.

Greater attention is given to recruitment of candidates with special attention given to family background. Clear guidelines are formulated, and help of qualified psychologists taken to screen candidates for actual or potential psychological disorders. Greater attention is given to the human, social and pastoral formation of the candidate so that seminary formation becomes more holistic.

There is better accompaniment of seminarians, through mentoring, counseling and spiritual direction. All seminaries have trained counselors and spiritual directors who besides being competent are also deeply spiritual and love their work. There is in the seminary an environment that fosters freedom, openness, trust and inner convictions.

Well balanced and guided exposure programmes that give seminarians real life experiences among people, especially the poor and marginalized, are carefully designed and implemented. Cultural factors are taken

into consideration in doing this. For greater human maturity, study programmes in seminaries are co-educational wherever possible and lay persons and religious women are on the teaching staff of seminaries.

Seminarians who experience problems related to sexuality and human maturity are given the needed help. If they do not show improvement even after that, they are asked to discontinue seminary formation. Seminarians who have engaged in pedophilic activities or with clearly diagnosed pedophilic tendencies, or deep seated sexual disturbances discontinue seminary formation.

Candidates who have been dismissed or persuaded to discontinue at one seminary for problems related to sexuality and human maturity are not admitted to any other seminary.

Careful attention is given to selection and training of formators. Academic qualification and competence are not the sole criteria. They are deeply spiritual and communitarian and have good relational and helping skills. Ecclesiastical provinces/dioceses design a system of ongoing formation for and accompaniment of priests and for formators.

Dioceses or regional bodies formulate *Code of Professional and Ethical Conduct for Clergy* and *Procedures and Policies* to deal with cases of sexual misconduct on the part of seminarians and clergy. Victims of clergy offenders are given needed support, compassion and means for healing and recovery. Priest offenders are treated with empathy and compassion and provided the psychological and spiritual help needed for healing and containment. Disciplinary action is taken where needed. If rehabilitated, they are not entrusted with any ministry where they are vulnerable to relapse. Church should set up, preferably at regional level, specialized treatment centres/ programmes for troubled priests.

V. CONCLUSION

We, the delegates wish to express our deep gratitude to the Office of Clergy of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference for organizing the consultation and to all bishops, religious, priests and lay staff that contributed to the orderly preparation and conducting of the meeting. It has indeed succeeded in letting us know that we are not alone in our mission and has empowered us to move on amidst many challenges entailed in the task of formation. May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Priests whom we constantly invoked during the days of consultation, intercede for all candidates to priesthood and formators.