
Priests: Fr Dianich (theologian), 'Without ongoing formation, priests risk becoming discouraged'.

"In the absence of a serious commitment to ongoing formation, priests run the risk of becoming discouraged". This is the conviction of Monsignor **Severino Dianich**, a long-time theologian and one of the speakers at the International Conference for the Ongoing Formation of Priests, which took place in the Vatican in the last few days with the participation of more than a thousand priests from 60 countries. We interviewed him for an assessment of the conference, promoted by the Dicastery for the Clergy in collaboration with the Dicastery for Evangelisation and the Dicastery for the Oriental Churches. **What is the identity of priests in a synodal and missionary Church?** With regard to priestly identity, the great older tradition places the proclamation of the Gospel at the centre of the priest's ministry, while there is another great medieval tradition, later confirmed by the Council of Trent, which places the Eucharist at the centre of priestly identity. In my opinion, this dialectic is fruitful, then and now, because the Eucharist is undoubtedly the highest and most sublime point of the essence of the priestly ministry, but the proclamation of the Gospel is the primary point: without the proclamation of the Gospel there is no Eucharist. Four decades ago there was great fervour about the theology of the ordained ministry, then after the Council the debate faded away. Today I feel that this dialectic between the proclamation of the Gospel and the Eucharist is relevant at a time when, even in countries with an ancient Catholic tradition, there is a new challenge, not in the proclamation of the Gospel in the Church, but in the proclamation of the Gospel to non-believers, who have become numerous even in these countries. It is therefore important to understand the identity of the priest in an increasingly missionary and synodal sense. **One of the issues that perhaps needs to be addressed is the gap between the formation of priests in the seminary and ongoing formation.** Cardinal Tagle, in his introduction to the conference, was very firm and provocative on this point. We must not forget that in an age like ours, which is increasingly characterised by hectic schedules, the same is true of other professions: very often personal formation stops at university level. In the case of priests, however, the gap between seminary training and ongoing formation is quite common, partly because the pressure of the many activities to be carried out is so great that a priest hardly finds time to read a book. If, on the one hand, the permanent formation of priests must be centred on theological and pastoral formation, also in order to deepen the theories and knowledge that characterise the contemporary world and that are constantly evolving, on the other hand, the human and sentimental side must be taken into account, which is part of the very hard and difficult task of the priest, which is very often doomed to frustration.

In the absence of a serious commitment to ongoing formation, priests run the risk of becoming discouraged, of folding their arms and finding themselves in a morally and spiritually deplorable situation, thus losing the impetus that had led them to embrace the priestly life.

An important part of priestly formation, besides the pastoral, spiritual and theological aspects - as the Pope stressed in his audience with the participants of the conference - is the "integral human formation", which is important in the prevention of the most serious tendencies of abuse. How should this delicate issue be approached? In my opinion, even among young priests, this ingrained habit of seeing the priest as a "different" person, possessing something unattainable, because he is a holy person, has had and still has a great impact. This does enormous damage, as I saw in my working group during the conference. Two African priests, for example, told me that in their country no one dares to criticise a priest. Here, priests are criticised a lot in the media, but they are rarely criticised face to face: In our parish communities there is rarely a relationship of equality, where a priest could also be the object of very fruitful reproaches and criticisms. In this sense, the recent

experience of the Synod was remarkable, because there was a spirit of equality between priests, lay people, religious people, bishops and cardinals: titles disappeared and it was easy to switch to informal addresses. A priest's self-confidence is very much formed in the parish, and the seminary is the place of theological, spiritual, but also human formation: it is here that one must act above all. If, beginning in the seminary, the emphasis is placed on the proclamation of the Gospel before the celebration of the sacred rites, the balance of priestly identity is immediately shifted in a fruitful way.

In his address, Pope Francis also spoke of the need for a "generative pastoral", linked to one's own people. What would be your snapshot of the Italian Church in this respect?

Undoubtedly a positive one. I have travelled in many countries in my very long life, and I must say that the Italian Church - and we have Don Bosco to thank for this - has, since the 19th century, created an image of the priest that is much more in touch with the people, much more familiar. Don Bosco also ended up in an asylum because he played football with his boys, and this profile of priestly identity has persisted to this day. Compared to other northern European countries, for example, where the figure of the priest has been reduced almost to that of a clerk, with fixed office hours, the Italian tradition is very healthy. The risk is that it will be lost in pastoral units where priests have four or five parishes and have to rush from one to another to celebrate Mass, leaving no time to be with the people. We must avoid this risk at all costs, for example by selecting the most important tasks among the priest's activities and by decentralising responsibilities: in Italy we have very well prepared lay people. This is why, once again, synodality is important, so that the identity of priests can be defined and regulated also through a reform of the Code of Canon Law, which the Synod is calling for.

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