

SOUTHERN AFRICAN BISHOPS AIM FOR AFRICANISATION OF CHRISTIANITY (OCTOBER 1990)

Southern African bishops contributed the following observations to the eight ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops that ended in October. The month long “Instrumentum Laboris” discussions were on the formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day.

“The southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference acknowledged the **‘Formation for Interaction with the Laity’**, while it does refer briefly to Pastoral Apprenticeship (no. 47), says very little about the extensive formation needed for working with the laity.

“There is a section which deals with life in community (no. 48, et al) but this only refers to life in community with other priests and does not refer to the development of the ability to relate to the community of believers.

What we need in the seminaries is the specific development of this mentality together with corresponding pastoral abilities such as:

- The ability to mould believers into a faith community;
- The ability to trust the faith and the charisma present in people;
- The ability to inspire and train local leaders;
- The ability to listen with compassion to the opinions and needs of the local community and their leaders;
- The ability and vision to bring about genuine, full reconciliation in a divided community; and
- The ability to avoid clericalism. This means to avoid monopoly and privilege, in themselves and in others, that has historically brought about so much animosity among the faithful.

“In **The Formation of Seminarians in Social Responsibility**, the synod document does not refer to the ability to lead a community to social responsibility and social justice which are now seen as an integral part of evangelisation. The necessary pastoral formation is much more than knowing the social teaching of the Church. Knowledge of social doctrine is a matter of memory and insight. This is certainly needed, but experience has shown us clearly that other abilities must be developed as well. These include, for example:

- The ability to conscientise oppressed people as well as those who are doing the oppressing;
 - The ability to motivate and train people in non-violent action;
 - The ability to lead communities in times of severe conflict. The modern priest will, especially in Third World countries, be ministering in times of trauma and changes. Such pastoral training cannot be optional for priests ministering in societies such as South Africa – or indeed for any part of the world where conflict abounds.
 - It is also deemed necessary for any modern pastor to be able to read the signs of the times so as to lead his people to freedom and justice.
- It has been found, that due to inadequate formation in the past, “most priests in South Africa are overburdened or inadequately equipped to deal with the

multi-faceted demands and stress of the apostolates”. (V. T. Kotze: Stress among Roman Catholic Clergy in South Africa: 1987 Un published MA dissertation. University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.).

“On **Formation of Seminarians in the context of the local Culture**, it is essential, in our situation especially, that student formation be far more contextualised and redesigned to integrate with the indigenous culture. Some examples are:

- Africa has a strong oral tradition with a history of deference for the spoken word. This needs to be borne in mind when asking seminarians to respond to their learnings.
- Celibacy and its Christian motivation is simply not understood and in fact is misunderstood and misinterpreted by our society. The whole idea is often foreign to African culture and is seen as an encouragement for psychosexually immature and fringe people to apply for seminary training.
- A cultural factor that has to be dealt with is that many seminarians base their normal behaviour, not on the traditional basis of personal guilt and personal responsibility for sinful actions, but rather on a sense of shame or public loss of face. Not being found out means in effect not being guilty! Supporting this is the ‘disciplina arcana’ very much in place among students. This in effect leads to an external conformity, but not to an interiorised sense of moral responsibility – and is insufficient as a basis for permanent and authentic priestly living.

“The great challenge facing the Church is how to shed the image of being a borrowed reality which has barely begun to reflect the richness and value of African creativity. In terms of the impetus given by Vatican II we aim at the Africanisation of Christianity.”

Recommendations were that:

1. “Since it is impossible to create a uniform system of formation, equally valid for all situations throughout the world, we recommend that only very broad, general guidelines be given in any document dealing with formation.
2. “We further recommend that in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, it be left to each Episcopal conference to apply these general guidelines in the way it judges most suitable in its particular context.
3. “In view of the type of Church and the kind of priest envisaged for the circumstances today, we recommend that pastoral training for community evangelisation be considered a priority in all seminary training.
4. “In countries such as ours, where there are still large numbers of religious priests we recommend that there be closer and ongoing dialogue about formation between bishops and diocesan priests, between bishops and major superiors of religious priests among themselves, so that together they can work out how best to pool resources of personnel and premises used in formation.”