

Early Ministry Program
for the Ongoing Formation
of Newly Ordained Priests

Archdiocese of Atlanta

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With priests who have just come out of the seminary, a certain sense of ‘having had enough’ is quite understandable when faced with new times of study and meeting. But the idea that priestly formation ends on the day one leaves the seminary is false and dangerous and needs to be totally rejected.

Pastores Dabo Vobis, #76

Introduction

Archbishop Wilton Gregory expressed a strong desire that the Archdiocese do all in our power to welcome, support and encourage our newly ordained priests as they begin their ministry. Mindful of the need to build upon the formation already provided in the seminary, and aware that the new priest needs the assistance of his brother priests if he is to continue to grow as an effective minister, the Archbishop requested that the Committee for Ongoing Formation of Priests (COFP) create a program that would assist our new priests during this critical time. Data has existed for some time now that the first years after ordination can be critical for the priestly identity and formation of these men. Their experience of priesthood during these years is vitally important in laying the foundation for a lifetime of holy, healthy and effective priestly ministry.

It is easy to underestimate the difficulty in transitioning from seminary life to full-time priestly ministry. Research in recent years has shown that the cohort of priests that showed the highest levels of stress and burnout were those in their first five years of priesthood. The complexity of this transition can be described as:

A system change: seminary system to parish life

An identity change: seminarian to priest

A change in needed skills: student skills to ministry skills

A human, personal change: from one place to live to another

A relational change: leaving seminary community to joining a local presbyterate

A spiritual change: praying as a seminarian to praying as a priest

Were one to compare this transition from seminary into priestly ministry to other kinds of human experience, it might be like leaving home, graduating from school, beginning a career, getting married, and starting a family—but all at once. The Early Ministry Program aims to offer support and encouragement while also providing supervision during this time of transition.

Beyond the transition from seminary to parish ministry, today's newly ordained priest also encounters challenges that are far more complex than those experienced by priests of previous generations. The communities they serve are increasingly multi-cultural with a diversity of languages. With the decline in vocations, many are feeling overburdened as they must put in longer hours. They must wear many hats, navigate through conflict, competing priorities and demands, and do so in a culture that is increasingly hostile or indifferent to the Gospel. They must also attempt to live celibate lives in a hypersexualized world. In this complex and challenging setting, the priest is called to fulfill the vision, mission and directives set forth in the apostolic exhortation of Pope John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds (Pastores Dabo Vobis)*, and the call for ongoing formation outlined by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests. (2001)*

Another principal objective of the Early Ministry Program is to foster priestly connections, to build a fraternity of brothers. The Church emerged from the Second Vatican Council with a clear understanding that priests are not priests simply one by one, but they are priests and serve the mission of the Church in a presbyterate in union with the bishop. This fraternal communion is an essential aspect of diocesan priestly life.

Several factors were taken into consideration in the development of the Early Ministry Program. The COFP surveyed priests of the Archdiocese ordained less than five years. Data that has come from recent studies on newly ordained priests was reviewed. And similar programs and best practices used in a number of other U.S. dioceses were examined.

All newly ordained priests of the Archdiocese of Atlanta are required to participate in the Early Ministry Program during the first five years following their ordination to the priesthood. The EMP is a function of the Office of Priest Personnel and is coordinated by the Director of Ongoing Formation of Priests.

Components of the Program

The program components span the months prior to ordination to the priesthood through the completion of the fifth year of priestly ministry.

Pre-Ordination Meetings

Prior to his ordination to the priesthood, during his time as a transitional deacon, he will meet with the Director of Ongoing Formation. At this meeting an overview of the Early Ministry Program will be presented. Special attention will be given to the mentoring process which will begin soon after his ordination. The goals, objectives and other specifics of the mentoring process will be explained, and the process of assigning a mentor will be initiated.

During that same period, the transitional deacon will have individual meetings with the Archbishop, the Director of Vocations and the Director of Priest Personnel. He is encouraged to speak about his own gifts, interests and desires for ministry. This information will be utilized to whatever extent possible in making assignments, while taking into account the overall needs of the archdiocese.

Post-Ordination Meetings

As soon as possible after the ordination of priests, the Director of Ongoing Formation will coordinate a group meeting of the newly ordained priests, their mentors and the pastors of the parishes where they have been assigned. The purpose of this meeting will be to provide each priest a full orientation to the Early Ministry Program as well as the mentoring process. Expectations of the program will be made clear. It is crucial that each priest (mentor, mentee, and pastor) has a clear understanding of the program requirements. At this meeting, each will be asked to make a firm commitment to the program. The newly ordained priest and his mentor also will be asked to sign the “Mentoring Relationship Agreement.”

Early Ministry Group Meetings

All priests in the EMP are required to attend annually the Newly Ordained Workshop offered at St. Vincent de Paul Seminary in Boynton Beach, Florida. This three day workshop usually is held in early November and it follows a five year cycle. Similar programs for parochial vicars and priests in their first years of ministry are offered every year at various institutions. Participation in these programs is encouraged as well, though only the Florida workshop is required. The Director of Ongoing Formation can recommend and provide information on these programs.

In addition to the Newly Ordained Workshop, priests in the EMP gather at least twice each year to share their experiences, joys and challenges. These gatherings will provide an opportunity for presentations and discussions on various topics related to ministry in the Archdiocese, on their adjustment to their new setting, and their integration into the Atlanta Presbyterate. The Archbishop and/or one of his auxiliary bishops will be present for each of these meetings. Gatherings ordinarily will be held from 10:30 a.m. - 2:30 p.m., including lunch. Promotion and coordination of these gatherings will be the responsibility of the Director of Ongoing Formation.

Below is a partial listing of topics that will be addressed:

- The Why and What of Lifelong Formation
- Living Celibacy
- Stress Management
- Time Management
- Developing and Maintaining Appropriate Ministerial Boundaries
- The Centrality of Prayer and Spiritual Direction
- Cultural Competence
- Collaboration in ministry (with laity and with other priests)
- Self-care

First-Assignment Pastor

Common wisdom has always been that the first assignment of a new priest is crucial in terms of preparing the way for his future ministry. A priest's first assignment/first pastor needs to be very carefully considered. The pastor should be one who has a strong and inspiring pastoral vision, one who is patient yet not overbearing or overly directive. It might not be easy to find this combination of gifts and talents in the first-assignment pastor, but not taking the time and effort to make this match could prove to be a serious mistake.

The first pastor should possess qualities helpful for guiding the newly ordained. These include the following abilities:

- to welcome the newly ordained into the parish community
- to guide him in the functions of priestly service
- to provide a connection to the larger presbyterate
- to model in a constructive way how the priesthood can be lived
- to help him prepare to be a pastor

Mentoring

Just as the first assignment/pastor needs to be carefully chosen, so must the assignment of a good mentor for the new priest. In *The First Five Years of the Priesthood*, Dean Hoge clearly states the importance of the mentoring relationship and highlights its ability to provide a firm foundation for the new priest. The mentoring relationship is an essential component of the Early Ministry Program. A seasoned pastor, equipped with the tools developed and enhanced through mentor training, can help newer or younger priests face and overcome the inevitable challenges that come with the transition from seminary to ministry. Experience indicates that a priest-mentor can be very helpful in the ongoing formation of newly ordained priests. He is neither the first pastor nor a spiritual director but a priest of "exemplary life and pastoral zeal" who, precisely because he is not on-site, can help the newly ordained sort out their experiences and see them with greater objectivity. He brings a wisdom born of experience as well as a sense of the life of the local church. He engages the newly ordained in conversation about his ministry, his sense of priestly identity, rectory life, and other important issues. He is available to answer questions or to help process unfamiliar and perhaps difficult situations. He should not be an authority figure. He must be someone with whom the newly ordained can be comfortable. The mentor also encourages the new priest to be an active and engaged member of the presbyterate. The diocesan priesthood isn't lived in isolation, with each priest acting as a free agent or a lone ranger. Rather we are a sacramental brotherhood, under the leadership of our bishop, a ministry team for which we are all responsible. Fraternity is of the very essence of priesthood.

Mentors and mentees are expected to meet regularly throughout the mentees first two years after ordination. It is recommended that these meetings occur every four to six weeks and last no less than one hour. The focus of these two years is for the new priest to grow in his identity as a priest; build a collaborative relationship with the bishop, his pastor, his brother priests, and the parish staff; and identify areas where he needs to grow personally, pastorally and spiritually.

Mentor training, the pairing of mentors and mentees, and coordination of the mentoring process is the responsibility of the Director of Ongoing Formation along with the Director of Priest Personnel.

Spiritual Director

Priests in their first five years are required to have a spiritual director who is accessible to them and with whom they can meet regularly. The spiritual director should not be his mentor or the pastor at the parish where he is assigned. Every effort should be made to assist the new priest in finding a spiritual director.

Priests' Support Groups

Priests in their first five years of ministry, like all priests, do well to participate in a support group. Not to participate in such a group is a missed opportunity. There are very few settings for serious and confidential discussion to take place about the challenges of being an effective priest on a day-to-day basis. A support group provides this context and is a source of encouragement and spiritual sustenance to any priest. Participation in a support group is highly encouraged and an appropriate amount of time is to be permitted for this activity (recommend one day per month).

Regular Gatherings of Presbyterate

Attendance and participation at clergy events is highly important in that it familiarizes the priest with the ministry and rhythm of the archdiocese. Presence at these gatherings also helps integrate the individual priest more fully into the presbyterate. Clearly no priest is able to attend every scheduled event. However, ordinations, funerals of brother priests, clergy study days, and social gatherings ought to be given a priority in scheduling.

At a minimum, all priests in the Early Ministry Program are expected to attend the following:

- Advent Day of Reflection
- Lenten Day of Reflection and Chrism Mass
- Archdiocesan Priests' Retreat (offered once every two years)
- Convocation of Priests (offered once every two years)

Preparation for First Pastorate

Priests are increasingly more likely to be assigned to their first pastorate within their first five years, or soon thereafter. It cannot be assumed that he possesses all the requisite skills necessary for this new assignment. Every effort should be made to ready the man for this next transition. Ideally every priest should attend the Leadership Roundtable's *Toolbox for Pastoral Management*, or its equivalent, before coming to the end of the Early Ministry Program. The Director of Ongoing Formation can assist him in finding an appropriate setting for this training.

Priests will be encouraged to become familiar with the services provided through the ongoing formation office, some of which are referrals and resources for retreats, spiritual directors, priest support groups, education programs to learn and develop Spanish speaking skills, programs for excelling in American English Language communication, including accent reduction and proper use of grammar for those whose first language is other than English, cultural orientation programs for international priests, and ongoing formation opportunities in addition to those provided by the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Accountability

The best laid plans for ongoing formation will amount to very little if they are not accompanied by a spirit and structure of accountability. Priests are answerable to the Church, to their people, and to themselves and their own sense of integrity, as they grow in their humanity, discipleship, and priestly ministry

The Church, especially through the bishop and other priests, has a right to call priests to accountability for the ways that they have or have not fostered their human, intellectual, pastoral and spiritual growth. Priests ought also to make themselves accountable for their ongoing formation. A simple way to do this is by sharing their choices and commitments for ongoing formation with their staff and people. By doing so, he is letting the community know, "This is what I am doing to serve you better." Sharing formational commitments with a spiritual director, friends and priest support groups also facilitate a sense of accountability.

SOURCES

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