

THE SOLICITUDE OF THE CHURCH FOR PRIESTLY VOCATIONS, FORMATION AND EDUCATION

Francis Bonnici

A rediscovered ecclesiology of the Church as the People of God has given the Church today a new pastoral way to help the members of the community to accept the call of God to serve the Christian community. In the Synod Bishops of 1990 about *The Formation of priests in the circumstances of today* and in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992) of John Paul II, the Church proposed the evangelisation of the environment where Christians live as the basis of the pastoral work for vocations.

0 OVER THE CENTURIES

0.1 *The institution of Seminaries*

The Council of Trent established the Seminaries on the fifteenth day of July 1563 when canon 18 of the decree *De Reformatione* was approved.¹ The purpose of establishing the seminaries was to provide the right environment wherein the candidates to the priesthood could be provided with the formation that made them true pastors of the Christian community.²

After the Council of Trent, the Church wanted to implement the prescriptions of the Council about the establishment of the seminaries. The seminaries established by Cardinal Carlo Borromeo served as models to all seminaries that were founded later on in the dioceses of the Church in Europe. Borromeo wrote the *Institutiones ad universum regimen pertinentes* (1582)³ which later on were codified in Canon Law (1917). He also appointed the superiors of the Seminary Institution naming them Rector, confessor and bursar.⁴ This seminary model was referred to and called the Caroline Seminary.

1. See *Enchiridion Clericorum*, 97-103. See also FRANCESCO MARCHISANO, "L'Evoluzione storica della formazione del clero", in *Seminarium* 13 (1973), 307.
2. See MARCHISANO, 307.
3. See MARCHISANO, 309.
4. See *Ibid.*

0.2 To form good pastors

In the Jubilee year of 1725, Benedict XIII (1724-1730) presided over the Roman Provincial Council to bring about the ecclesiastical reform. With the Bull *Credite nobis* coelitus he created the Congregation of Seminaries for the formation of the Clergy.⁵

The formation of good pastors became a recurring theme in the writings of the Popes. In the very first encyclical ever written, *Ubi primum* (3 December 1740), Pope Benedict XIV (1740-1758) gave the greatest importance to the formation of the clergy.⁶ The Pope went so far as to say “that it is certainly better to have not many, but honest, well-trained and useful ministers than to have many pastors who were not good to help the building of the Body of Christ which is the Church.”⁷

The formation of clerics aimed to train the members of the Christian community, especially children, in living a life of piety. This training in learning the Gospel and the teachings of the Church, praying, exercising the Christian virtues and living an upright life could best be imparted in community living, the Seminary.⁸

The responsibility of the formation of the clergy fell on the Bishops. Besides establishing the seminaries for the formation of the future priests, they were obliged to take care of them properly in order to examine the way of life of the inmates, their diligence and progress in study; and they also had to nominate teachers who were well-trained for teaching Theology and who loved the Church.⁹ Bishops should be very careful before they impart ordination to the priesthood.¹⁰

5. See BATTISTA MONDIN, *Dizionario Enciclopedico dei Papi*, Roma, 1995, 413.

6. Ibid, 418; “Il primo compito dei pastori dev’essere la formazione di buoni pastori, e quindi il reclutamento e la formazione del clero.”

7. Ibid; “certamente è meglio avere non troppi ministri ma onesti e adeguati e utili, che averne di più e che non siano destinati per nulla a giovare all’edificazione del Corpo di Cristo che è la Chiesa.”

8. Ibid; “ovunque vengono istituiti i seminari per la formazione dei chierici, dove siano formati sin dalla fanciullezza alla pietà.”

9. Ibid; “è compito dei vescovi vigilare sui seminari ispezionandoli spesso, esaminando la vita, l’indole e il progresso negli studi nei singoli adolescenti, destinando maestri adatti e uomini forniti di spirito ecclesiastico alla loro cultura.”

10. Ibid; “ordinare nessuno frettolosamente.”

0.3 The responsibility of the bishops

The beginning of the nineteenth century was marked by the election of Pius VII (1800-1823) who published the encyclical letter *Diu satus* (15 May 1800) and in it the Pope made it clear that all the bishops of the Church should take a common stand to safeguard the 'deposit of Christ' which consists of doctrine and norms¹¹ and imparted to clerics and children.¹²

This positive attitude towards the formation of the people of God and of the clergy was carried even further by Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) in his encyclical letter *Qui pluribus* (1846) in which he proposed the preaching of the Gospel as the main means of the formation of the members of the Church.¹³ But this new evangelisation needed to have a clergy that was well prepared intellectually and spiritually.¹⁴ Only such a new type of clergy marked by holiness, could, according to Pius IX, attract those people who had gone astray and had abandoned the faith.¹⁵

The programme of evangelisation proposed by Pius IX had a following in the programme of Christianisation of society and of the civil world of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) who expressed his plan of action in his Encyclical letter *Inscrutabili Dei consilio* (1878). Leo XIII was the Pope who had to lead the Church into the twentieth century.

11. Ibid, 436; "indica a tutto l'episcopato cattolico quale comune impegno la salvaguardia del deposito di Cristo che è un duplice deposito: di dottrina e di norme." See also *The Papal Encyclicals 1740-1878*, ed. by Claudia Carlen, Ann Arbor/Michigan 1981, 189.
12. Ibid; "in particolare il Papa insiste sulla formazione teologica dei chierici, sulla dottrina cristiana dei fanciulli, sulla eliminazione del 'mortale flagello' dei libri malsani."
13. Ibid, 455; "per la cura dei mali e dei pericoli che incombono sulla Chiesa Pio IX ripropone gli stessi rimedi già indicati dai suoi predecessori Pio VII e Gregorio XVI: predicazione del Vangelo... e la formazione del clero prima nei seminari e successivamente con apposito aggiornamento mediante gli esercizi spirituali."
14. Ibid; "il clero deve 'risplendere per serietà di costumi, integrità di vita, santità e dottrina.'"
15. Ibid; "anche chi è lontano dalla Chiesa sentirà il suo fascino tanto più facilmente quanto più avrà constatato che il clero supera tutti gli altri per pietà, integrità e sapienza e per splendere di virtù esemplari."

It was at this time that the higher philosophical institute, *Institut superieur de philosophie*, due to the initiative of Pope Leo XIII, was instituted in the Catholic University of Louvain.¹⁶ And in the United States of America a whole system of Catholic Schools and the Catholic University of America (1884) were established mostly due to Cardinal James Gibbons.¹⁷

In *Aeterni Patris* (1879) Pope Leo XIII recommended with authority and passion a return to the Philosophy of St Thomas Aquinas who among all Christian philosophers was the most successful to harmonize faith with reason.¹⁸

0.4 The intellectual, spiritual and pastoral formation of the clergy

As a means “to renew everything in Christ”, Pius X (1903-1914) in his first Encyclical letter *E supremi apostolatus* (1903) proposed an adequate preparation of the clergy both on the intellectual level and also on the spiritual level which had to be given in the Seminaries.¹⁹ In his first allocution (9 November 1903) Pope Pius X insisted on “the holiness of the priest and asked for a severe preparation in studies, discipline and prayer for all the candidates to the priesthood.”²⁰ After three years from the publication of the first Encyclical of Pius X, a general programme of studies for Seminaries was published in 1907 and it was followed by the Norms for the educational and disciplinary programme of Seminaries (1908).²¹ However, Pius X had a pastoral mind and had worked as a shepherd with his flock in different parishes and dioceses addressing himself to the lay people and he held them responsible together with the priests “to renew everything in Christ.”²²

As the twentieth century was underway, Pope Benedict XV (1914-1922) expressed his intention “to follow the formation and holiness of the clergy very

16. See *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* 9 (1910) 395.

17. See “The Catholic University of America”, in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* 3 (1908) 455.

18. *Ibid*; “...raccomandare con autorità e calore il ritorno della filosofia di San Tommaso, che fra tutti i filosofi cristiani è colui che è riuscito meglio ad armonizzare la fede con la ragione...”

19. *Ibid*, 488; “...l’adeguata preparazione del clero sia sul piano intellettuale che spirituale, preparazione da attuarsi specialmente nei seminari.”

20. See *ibid*.

21. See *ibid*, 490.

22. *Ibid*, 488; “...non sono per tanto i sacerdoti solamente, ma i fedeli tutti senza eccezione, che debbono darsi pensiero degli interessi di Dio e delle anime.”

closely.”²³ He pointed out that the formation of priests should be the principal work of the bishops.²⁴ Pope Benedict XV himself gave his contribution to the formation of the clergy and encouraged ecclesiastical studies. On the 14 November 1915, the Pope re-organized the Congregation for Seminaries and Universities.²⁵

During the Pontificate of Benedict XV, in 1917, the Church published the Code of Canon Law. Canons 1352-1371 summarized all the elements that were promulgated by the Church along the centuries about the formation of the future priests. The Seminary thereby became a stable and well organized institution of the Church with precise functions and a clear structure that were expected from all Seminaries around the world. However, although the norms for the formation of priests were set and codified in the Code of Canon Law, there was still space for development in the formation of future priests.

Pius XI (1922-1939) expressed his idea about the Philosophical and Theological formation of the future priests in *Studiorum duces* (29 June 1923),²⁶ the Encyclical letter published in honour of St Thomas Aquinas. But Pius XI also wanted to raise sacred studies to their ancient splendour²⁷ and also to impose a system of Philosophical and Theological studies on all the Seminaries of the Church by the publication of *Deus scientiarum Dominus* (1931). The obligation to abide by the rules of the Apostolic Constitution was such that those Faculties which failed to conform to the new prescriptions within one year were threatened with closure.

In the Encyclical *Ad Catholici sacerdotii* (20 December 1935), Pius XI showed that he was aware that there was and there was going to be a shortage of priests in the Church in the near future; notwithstanding the regrettable shortage of priests, he insisted that “due strictness should always be brought to bear on the choice and

23. Ibid, 496; “un altro obiettivo che Benedetto XV intende perseguire nel suo pontificato è la formazione e la santificazione del clero.”

24. Ibid; “questa dev’essere la cura principale d’ogni vescovo: formare degnamente per l’ufficio così venerabile con la più disciplinata educazione gli alunni del Santuario.”

25. See Motu Proprio *Seminaria clericorum*: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* subsequently quoted AAS 7 (1915) 493-495; see also, MARCHISANO, 311.

26. See AAS 23 (1931) 241-284.

27. See MARCHISANO, 312.

the testing of students.”²⁸ A remedy for the lack of vocations for the priesthood was offered by Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) when he established the Pontifical Work for priestly vocations with the *Motu Proprio Cum nobis* (4 November 1941).²⁹

0.5 Only suitable candidates admitted for the priesthood

With the publication of the Apostolic Constitution *Menti nostrae*, (23 September 1950) Pope Pius XII dealt with the insufficient number of priests to cope with the increasing demands both in Catholic countries and in the mission territories.³⁰ Therefore the priests of the future had to be trained in such a way that since the time of their seminary formation they should become conscious of their obligations of the priesthood and carry out their pastoral duties carefully and with zeal.

In *Menti nostrae* Pius XII also raised two important points regarding vocations to the priesthood. First of all he called all priests, religious and lay people especially parents, teachers and members of Catholic associations to help in the work of vocations to the priesthood.³¹ Secondly, the Pope also spoke about the cultivation of vocations even at a mature age.³² The topic of vocations in different ages of man was dealt with by Pius XII also in *Sedes sapientiae* (31 May 1956).³³ This Apostolic Constitution drew up very clearly the general principles of the whole course of priestly training beginning from the organization of the Seminary, the spiritual formation, the courses of Philosophical and Theological studies, the common life of the Seminary, the rule of the students and the pastoral practice of the future priests.³⁴ No one could begin the seminary life and the priestly formation unless he was judged a suitable candidate by the lawful ministers of the Church.³⁵ These general principles of priestly training had to be adapted and decided upon by the Episcopal Conferences.

28. See AAS 28 (1936) 5-53. See also, VATICAN COUNCIL II, *Optatam totius*, parag. 6, fn. 11.

29. See AAS 33 (1941) 479.

30. See VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree *Optatam totius*, parag. 2, fn. 3.

31. See *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, Roma (1970), parag. 1, fn. 5.

32. See *ibid*, fn. 58.

33. See Pius XII, *Sedes sapientiae*, AAS 48 (1956) 357.

34. See *ibid*. See also *Optatam totius*, parag. 1, fn. 2.

35. See *ibid*, parag. 2, fn. 4.

With *Ad Petri cathedram* (29 June 1959),³⁶ Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) paid great attention to the Roman Seminary. And on the hundredth anniversary of the death of the Curate of Ars, St John Mary Vianney, John XXIII published his second Encyclical *Sacerdotii nostri primordia* (1 August 1959)³⁷. In his Allocution *E' grande* (21 April 1961)³⁸ which John XXIII addressed to the first National Italian Congress about vocations, the Pope spoke about the necessary means to take care of vocations and about the people who could help in the pastoral work for vocations.³⁹ He also addressed the first International Congress for Vocations with the Allocution *Quod spectaculum* (26 May 1962)⁴⁰ on the theme of the persons who could help in the pastoral work for vocations.⁴¹

On the occasion of the fourth centenary of the Institution of Seminaries by the Council of Trent, Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) made the Allocution *Il grande rito* (4 November 1963)⁴² in which he said that vocation in children is linked to their special piety, to their ardent love for God and for their neighbour and to their will to participate in the apostolate of the Church.⁴³ On the same day, Pope Paul VI published the Apostolic Letter *Summi Dei Verbum* (4 November 1963).⁴⁴ The Pope spoke about the general duty of priests to give their support to Seminaries⁴⁵ and also about other people who could help vocations.⁴⁶ But while priestly vocations could be found among men of different age groups,⁴⁷ Pope Paul VI stressed the importance of judging the suitability of candidates.

The time had come for the establishment of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations. Pope Paul VI delivered his Allocution *Pregate il Padrone* (11 April 1964).⁴⁸ The establishment of this World Day of Prayer for Vocations had become

36. See *The Papal Encyclicals*, 1958-1981, 51.

37. See *ibid*, 21.

38. See AAS 53 (1961) 311.

39. See *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, parag. 1, fn. 6.

40. See AAS 54 (1962) 451-453.

41. See *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, parag. 8, fn. 55.

42. See PAUL VI, *Insegnamenti*, I, 288-290.

43. See *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, parag. 7, fn. 52.

44. See AAS 55 (1963).

45. See *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, parag. 2, fn. 9.

46. See *ibid*, parag. 8, fn. 55.

47. See *ibid*, parag. 7, fn. 52.

48. See PAUL VI, *Insegnamenti*, II, 240-242.

a reminder to the whole Church to observe its duty to pray for vocations and to revive its efforts to help the Christian communities around the world to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest so that the Church would never lack the priests and other vocations that are necessary to carry on its salvific mission in the world.

0.6 From the priesthood of the faithful to the ministerial priesthood

One year after his election to the Papacy, Paul VI published his first Encyclical letter, *Ecclesiam suam*. The title chosen for this Encyclical was enough to understand the mind and heart of Paul VI: his love for the Church. Announcing the publication of *Ecclesiam suam* on 6 August 1964, the Pope said that the Encyclical letter was intended to show the ways the Church should follow in the coming years, namely:

1. The spiritual way whereby it deepens and discovers its own mystery being the Body of Christ;
2. The moral way through which it reforms itself to become the ever more perfect spouse of Christ;
3. The apostolic way which leads it to open dialogue with all its members, with the other Christian churches, Religions and all men.⁴⁹

This was the programme which Paul VI planned for the Church which he was leading to the threshold of the third millennium. This programme coincided with the programme of the Second Vatican Council.⁵⁰ The work on the scheme *De Ecclesia* was initiated by the Second Vatican Council in its first session (11 October 1962 – 8 December 1962)⁵¹ When Giovanni Battista Montini was still Cardinal Archbishop of Milan and participating actively in the running of the Council, he insisted with the Secretary General of the Central Commission of the Council that the work on the theme *De Ecclesia* should make progress and that the scheme should precede all the other schemata of the Council.⁵² During the period of discussion the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council changed the title *De Ecclesia*

49 See MONDIN, 561-562.

50 See *ibid.*

51 See *ibid.*, 551-552.

52 See *ibid.*, 561. See also *ibid.*, 566; “soon after the closure of the first session, on the 21 June 1963, Cardinal Montini was elected Pope and took the name of Paul VI. It was he who had to push forward the work of the Second Vatican Council and especially the scheme on *De Ecclesia*.”

to *Lumen gentium*. This was not just a change in title, but it was a paradigmatic change in the vision of the Church. *De Ecclesia* had consisted of four chapters which included The Mystery of the Church, The hierarchical structure of the Church and in particular the Episcopate, The people of God and especially the laity and The call to holiness in the Church. But in the new text *Lumen gentium* the chapter on The People of God was placed soon after that on The Mystery of the Church and before those on The hierarchical structure of the Church and The laity. At the end of the third session, on the 21 November 1964 the Second Vatican Council approved the Constitution of the Church *Lumen gentium*. What was especially new in this Constitution was the unification of all the members of the Church, pastors and lay people under the title 'The people of God'. Within the people of God all the different ministries and charisms in the Church found their right place.⁵³

Within the context of "total Ecclesiology",⁵⁴ the Church rediscovered the universal priesthood of the faithful based on the "regeneration and anointing of the Holy Spirit in Baptism."⁵⁵ Besides discovering the universal priesthood of the faithful, the Church also pointed out that the layman was distinguished within the Ecclesial community from the ordained ministers and from those who were consecrated to God in the following of Christ poor, pure and obedient. However, within this Ecclesiology, the Church also discovered that there is a reciprocal ordination of the ministerial and the common priesthood.⁵⁶

This re-discovered perspective of the Church and of Ecclesiology affirmed by the Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, brought forth a complete change not only in Ecclesiology but also in the pastoral work for vocations to the priesthood. On the one hand it was the whole Christian community that became responsible to help and promote vocations to the ministerial priesthood, and on the other hand, the ministerial priesthood took up its responsibility to serve the People of God and the Christian communities of the Church at large.

53 See *ibid*, 567; in the fourth session of the Second Vatican Council (14 September 1965 – 7 December 1965), the Bishops approved the decrees concerning different categories of the People of God, namely On the pastoral office of Bishops, On the formation of priests, On the apostolate of the laity and On the ministry and life of priests.

54 See BRUNO FORTE, *La Chiesa della Trinità*, Milano 1995, 299.

55 See *ibid*.

56 See *ibid*, 301-305.

1 PRIESTLY VOCATIONS IN MALTA

Very soon after the last session of the council of Trent, we know that in 1575 there were plans for the erection of a Seminary in Malta. This was to comply with the decree of the Apostolic Visitor Monsignor F. Dusina.⁵⁷ But the Seminary was not built. Another attempt to build a Seminary in Malta was made in 1591 by Bishop Tommaso Gargallo (1578-1614).⁵⁸ But it also failed. After many vicissitudes, the Seminary opened its doors for the first six Seminarians in Mdina on the 25th day of March 1703.⁵⁹

The Seminary was transferred from Mdina to other places in the diocese of Malta by different Bishops who deemed it necessary to make the shift to offer a better formation to the future priests. Bishop Gaspare Gore Mancini (1722-1727) transferred the Seminary to Valletta in 1723;⁶⁰ but in 1728 Bishop Alferan de Bussan (1728-1757) wanted the Seminary to return to Mdina and later, in 1740, it was housed in a new building situated near the Cathedral Church of Mdina.⁶¹

In Malta there was never a problem about the number of vocations to the priesthood. But although these vocations were always forthcoming, there was a continual fall in the number of priests and at the same time there was always concern for the adequate formation of the Maltese priests.

57 See ARTHUR BONNICI, *The History of the Church in Malta*, II, Floriana 1968, 1.

58 Ibid, 11; "through the Bishop's efforts, Pope Clement VIII decreed, in the year 1592, the erection of the Jesuit college in Valletta for the education of youth called to the priesthood, in lieu of a Seminary."

59 See *Visitatio Pastoralis Cocco-Palmieri 1708-1710*, Archbishop's Curia Archives, 27b-28.

60 See *Visitatio Pastoralis Bartholomeus Rull, 1758*, Archbishop's Curia Archives, 266b.

61 See Ibid, 270-27b; Bonnici, 15: "De Bussan was very earnest in having a good and learned clergy in his diocese, and for this purpose he erected another Seminary, on a new site in Notabile, which was completed in May 1740."

1.1 Malta in the eighteenth century: less priests and well-formed clergy

When Pope Pius VI published the Motu Proprio *Ea semper* on 25 June 1777, he imposed a limit to the conferment of tonsure and to the ordination of Maltese Catholics.⁶² This Motu Proprio was applied very strictly by Bishop Vincenzo Labini (1780-1807).⁶³

The number of Maltese priests declined in the second half of the eighteenth century and the decline continued ever since.⁶⁴ The decline in the number of priests in the late eighteenth century and after was not only due to the Motu Proprio *Ea semper*, but it was also caused by an epidemic which struck Malta during the first half of 1799 and also by the pressure that was brought about by the higher standards of education and intellectual formation that was asked from the candidates to the priesthood by the Holy See and by the Maltese Ecclesiastical authorities.⁶⁵

In 1858, Bishop Pace Forno (1857-1874) wanted to make “a radical reform in the Seminary.”⁶⁶ The shift of the Seminary from Mdina to Floriana marked also the change in the curriculum of ecclesiastical studies introducing new disciplines

62 See BONNICI, 17. The Motu Proprio of Pope Pius V, *Ea semper*, regarding clerics and personal immunity and local immunity was published on the 25th day of June 1777 and it is found in A.O.M., Ms. 273, *Liber Conciliorum Status*, fols. 160-7; R.M.L., Misc. 451. pp. 4-13, printed in Malta 1781; see also Philip Callus, *The Rising of the Priests*, Appendix VII, p.107-117, Malta University Press 1961. The translation in Italian is found in Achille Ferris, *Storia Ecclesiastica di Malta*, Malta 1877, 288-302.

63 Ibid; “Monsignor Labini inaugurated his episcopate with a Pastoral Visitation, with the scope (aim) of getting information required in a new Pastor about his clergy and his fold. The religious state of the Diocese however, was not found as bad as it had been reported to him. The clergy was sufficiently cultured, submissive and docile. Monsignor Labini saw to the proper education of those called to the priesthood in the Seminary, as well as of his diocesans, by setting up courses of Pastoral Theology for the former and classes of catechism for the latter.”

64 VINCENT BORG, “The Diocesan Priests in the Maltese Islands: 1551-1950”, in *Bullettin ta' l-Arcidjocesi u Liturgija tal-Kelma* 32 (1982) 247-249:
 Period 1701-1750 — 1679 priests in Malta and Gozo
 Period 1751-1800 — 1102 priests in Malta and Gozo
 Period 1801-1850 — 966 priests in Malta and Gozo
 Period 1851-1900 — 959 priests in Malta and Gozo
 Period 1901-1950 — 791 priests in Malta and Gozo.
 See also, FORTUNATO P. MIZZI, *Priestly Vocations in the Maltese Ecclesiastical Province 1911-1964*, Malta 1966.

65 See *ibid*, 243.

66 See ARTHUR BONNICI, *History of the Church in Malta*, III, Floriana 1975, 90.

of Sacred Scripture, the Hebrew language and Sacred Eloquence.⁶⁷ Bishop Pace Forno wanted also to teach the English language to the seminarians and he brought English priests to teach at the Seminary.⁶⁸ With the permission of the Holy See, Bishop Pace Forno granted degrees in Theology at the Seminary from 1860 to 1874.⁶⁹

1.2 Reform in priestly formation at the beginning of the twentieth century in Malta

Stricter demands were imposed on candidates for the priesthood by the Apostolic Administrator Bishop Antonio M. Buhagiar (1885-1888).⁷⁰ Bishop Buhagiar removed the possibility that future priests would be trained by individual priests who provided them with private tuition.⁷¹ There were now only two ways by which candidates to the priesthood could follow their ecclesiastical studies: either at the Seminary or at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta.⁷²

In 1900 there was only one student in the Faculty of Theology of the University of Malta.⁷³ Because the number of students in the Faculty of Theology was so small, new professors to the Faculty could not be approved nor other disciplines included, other than those already taught, namely Dogmatic Theology and Moral Theology.⁷⁴ Speaking in the Council of Government on the 28th February 1900, however, Mr Wettinger proposed that a student of the Faculty of Theology should be awarded a scholarship to study abroad to have a more complete intellectual formation was accepted by the Council of Government.⁷⁵ As an alternative to the reward of a scholarship to study abroad, it was also suggested that “theological instruction in Malta be given in a more complete way by a better co-operation between the Seminary system and the University system.”⁷⁶

67 See *ibid.*

68 See *ibid.*

69 *Ibid.* See also Borg, 239; “while the Seminary had obtained a similar authorization from the Holy See in 1858 and bestowed such degrees until 1874.”

70 See BORG, 241.

71 See *ibid.*

72 See *ibid.*

73 See MALTA. COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENT, Sitting 21 (28 February 1900) 930.

74 See *ibid.*

75 See *ibid.*, 937.

76 See *ibid.*, 933.

In 1909, the Holy See sent Cardinal Pietro La Fontaine as an Apostolic Visitor in Malta with the mission to investigate the life of the Seminary.⁷⁷ Following this visitation, the Sacred Concistorial Congregation told Bishop Pietro Pace (1889-1914) “to abolish all day students in the major Seminary.”⁷⁸ In a letter dated 6 September 1910, Bishop Pietro Pace ordered that all students whether they were studying at the Seminary or in the Faculty of Theology had to reside in the Seminary.⁷⁹

These reforms in the educational system of the seminarians brought two main consequences in the life of the Seminary:

1. first of all ecclesiastical studies were all under the control of institutions approved by the Ecclesiastical authorities, namely the Seminary and the Faculty of Theology;
2. and secondly, these policies about Ecclesiastical studies could have contributed to the decline in the number of candidates to the priesthood.

In 1911 there were 553 diocesan priests in the Diocese of Malta.⁸⁰ With a few exceptions these priests had received their formation in the Seminary of Malta.

When Monsignor Angelo Portelli (1914-1915) was nominated Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Malta, he tackled the problem of the Seminary⁸¹ which was housed in Casa Manresa at Floriana. The surroundings of the Seminary did not provide a good environment for the seminarians.⁸² With the help of the Cathedral Chapter and that of the Rector of the Seminary, Monsignor Anton Vella D.D., Monsignor Portelli succeeded in transferring the Seminary to the old premises at Mdina “where the seminarians could pray and study in a more silent and recollected atmosphere.”⁸³

77 See BORG, 241.

78 Ibid.; “the Sacred Concistorial Congregation in a letter to Bishop Pietro Pace dated 18 June 1910 communicated the main points at issue resulting from this visit, insisting first and foremost on a gradual abolition of all day students in the major Seminary.”

79 See *ibid.*

80 BORG, 241;

81 See FILIPP MALLIA, *L-Isqof li habbu kulhadd*, Malta 1982, 155.

82 Ibid.; “there were many bars that were frequented by the people of the English Navy.”

83 See *ibid.*

He also chose three new professors: Prof. Daniel Callus O.P. for Dogmatic Theology, Fr Alfred Fsadni for Philosophy and Monsignor Frangisk Ferris for English Literature.⁸⁴ The opening of the “new” Seminary was the occasion to allow as many people as possible to visit the Seminary. The families of the seminarians and many lay people really loved the Seminary.⁸⁵ In his inaugural speech, Monsignor Portelli said that he had great hopes for the Seminary and for the future of the Diocese of Malta. He said also that he hoped that the members of the clergy would be well instructed and holy.⁸⁶ Monsignor Portelli was very keen to give a good preparation to the seminarians who were to lead the Christian communities of Malta in future.⁸⁷

The reform of the Seminary made strides forward when Monsignor Giuseppe De Piro was nominated Rector of the Seminary of Malta on 30 September 1918.⁸⁸ In the eleven-page report read on 27 August 1920, at the end of the second scholastic year of his rectorship, Monsignor De Piro gave some positive and negative points of the situation of the formation that was being imparted to the seminarians at the time.⁸⁹ According to Monsignor De Piro the teaching of Philosophy and Theology made steps forward because Archbishop Mauro Caruana (1915-1943) created the office of Prefect of Studies in the person of Professor Reverend Nerik Dandria on the suggestion of De Piro himself.⁹⁰ However, Monsignor De Piro showed the dire need of a resident spiritual director.⁹¹ He also asked for a resident bursar to supervise the proper provision of food.⁹²

Monsignor De Piro gave a list of professors who at that time imparted their teaching to the seminarians.⁹³ But he also pointed out the lack of the teaching of Spiritual Theology and Gregorian Chant; he also suggested the introduction of the teaching of Christian sociology.⁹⁴ Monsignor De Piro saw other problems in the

84 See *ibid.*, 155-156.

85 See *ibid.*

86 See *ibid.*

87 See *ibid.*

88 See ALEXANDER BONNICI, *Monsinjur Guzeppi De Piro (1877-1933)*, Rabat/Malta 1988, 11. 20.

89 See *ibid.*, 25.

90 See *ibid.*

91 See *ibid.*

92 See *ibid.*

93 See *ibid.*

94 See *ibid.*

formation of seminarians and these regarded the examinations, the food especially at supper and also the revolutionary spirit that penetrated the Seminary; he also lamented that some parish priests did not fulfil their duty when they gave their report on the behaviour of the seminarians during their holidays; he also regretted that there were seminarians who were missing their recreation which they should enjoy by going outside the Seminary.⁹⁵

The last comment which was made by Monsignor De Piro was that most of the seminarians came from poor families.⁹⁶

1.3 *Faithful and priests in joint effort to promote vocations in twentieth century Malta*

The effort that was made by the Ecclesiastical authorities and in particular by the Seminary of Malta was very necessary for the better formation of the Maltese priests. As early as 1917 it was said that “to have leaders and priests to take care of young people one must face the most difficult and thorny problem of all pastoral work...to find suitable young men...to take care of vocations.”⁹⁷

This human and Christian formation was given to the young people of Malta by their Christian families and by lay associations that were in their beginning in the early years of the twentieth century. These facts were testified by certain priests and lay people who were interviewed for the express purpose of this dissertation.⁹⁸ Priests made “a precious work by founding and running institutions which taught catechism to children like the admirable work of Father George Preca (1880–1962) which can be found all over the island.”⁹⁹

95 See *ibid.*

96 See *ibid.*, 31.

97 See *La Diocesi di Malta*, II (1917) 129-130.

98 Monsignor Laurence Spiteri B.L.Can., D.D.; Professor Sir Anthony Mamo; Monsignor Joseph Lupi D.D., B.L. Can., Ph.L.; Father Philip Callus B.A., D.D.

99 See *La Diocesi di Malta*, 124.

The future priests must also have been attracted to the priesthood by the image of the Maltese priest himself. The whole body of priests in Malta created an impression on the young people because in every parish there was a good number of priests who served the Christian community. However, young people needed a very basic formation, both human and Christian, in order to develop some sign of a vocation that could be perceived in their way of life.¹⁰⁰ In their teens, these children could show “an ardent desire to make themselves useful to serve others.”¹⁰¹ In the little heart of a young boy, these desires could become mature motivations which could help young people to become future apostles.¹⁰² The vocations to the priesthood and to the family life were considered at the time as a step forward in the formation of young people.¹⁰³ The two vocations were considered distinct and so was their preparation.¹⁰⁴ The vocation to the priesthood was believed to be a call to intervene between God and man. While the vocation to the family life aimed to form new human beings.¹⁰⁵ The direct contact with counsellors was considered imperative for any one who intended to make a discernment of the will of God for him and to integrate it in his life.¹⁰⁶

Young people who wanted to become priests had to present their certificate of Baptism and Confirmation together with a certificate made by the parish priest in order to show that they had a good conduct and that their family enjoyed a good name. The parish priest also certified that the individual had signs of a vocation to the priesthood.¹⁰⁷ When these young people entered the Seminary of Malta, they were expected to pass through all the stages of the Seminary life.¹⁰⁸

When the student entered the Minor Seminary he also became a boarder and his new life in the Seminary made it easier for him to overcome the extra difficulties which he had to face if he had lived at home and attended other schools.¹⁰⁹ This

100 See *ibid*, 277.

101 See *ibid*, 278.

102 See *ibid*.

103 See *ibid*.

104 See *ibid*.

105 See *ibid*.

106 See *ibid*.

107 See *Annuario della Diocesi di Malta*, I (1933) 69.

108 See *ibid*.

109 See SALVATORE SAMMUT, “Nedukaw lil uliedna”, in *Pro Sacerdotibus Christi* 9 (1955) 2-4.

was the line of action that had to be followed by the Seminary in order to put into action the dispositions of the Maltese Regional Council of 1935.¹¹⁰ After finishing the matriculation class and succeeding in obtaining a General certificate of education, the young person could begin the course to the priesthood attending the Philosophy and Theology courses in the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta and at the same time residing at the Seminary to study and pray.¹¹¹ If the student failed to have a full General certificate of education, he could attend the Philosophy and Theology courses at the Faculty of Theology but sit for the examinations at the Seminary, where he also received his spiritual formation.

The problem of poverty in the social life of the Maltese people was hitting hard the vocations to the priesthood. This can be seen from the efforts that were made by the Seminary to collect funds to pay the fees of the seminarians.¹¹² Many Maltese people, called benefactors, contributed money to the “Fondo per chierici poveri.” They did not only give a sum of money every time that this was needed, but they also gave money to make a bursary.¹¹³

The “Pro Sacerdotibus Christi”¹¹⁴ was the name given to the association of women which began to cater for priestly vocations in the diocese of Malta. The association received its approval by the Holy See in 1950.¹¹⁵ “Pro Sacerdotibus Christi” wanted “to announce the exact nature, the need and the greatness of the Catholic priesthood because the world could not understand its greatness and it was taking a hostile attitude against the priests.”¹¹⁶ For this purpose the association established the *ċenakoli* or groups of female members in many parishes of Malta.¹¹⁷ The members prayed for vocations and they looked for vocations among the boys and young people of the parishes.

110 *CONCILIUM REGIONALE MELITENSE*, Malta 1936, APPENDIX II

111 See GAKKINO SCHEMBRI, “Miċ-Ċella tas-Seminarju”, in *Pro Sacerdotibus Christi* 7 (1953) 6-8.

112 See *Annuario*, 69.

113 *Ibid*; “Borsa di studio.”

114 See *Opra Vokazzjonijiet Ekklesjastici ta' l-Arcidjocesi ta' Malta* 5 (1951) 98.

115 See Bonnici, 91.

116 See ALWIG MICALLEF, *Liema huma l-ghanijiet ta' l-Opra tal-Vokazzjonijiet Ekklesjastici*, in *Iċ-Ċenaklu* 2 (1965) 31-32.

117 See *ibid*.

1.5 A rich harvest of vocations

At this time, many students from the State and Church Secondary schools began to attend the Vocation evenings in the parishes and the Vocations Guidance Courses at the Seminary which were co-ordinated by Monsignor Victor Grech who at that time was the Rector of the Seminary of Malta. In 1963, the Seminary published the first issue of *Spark*, a review about vocations to the priesthood.¹¹⁸

On Sunday, 12 April 1964, the Church in Malta celebrated the first World Day of prayer for Vocations that was inaugurated by Pope Paul VI.¹¹⁹ The aim of the World Day of Prayer for Vocations was to pray and help the vocations to the Priesthood to grow in number among the people of God.

Commenting on the issue of such a successful pastoral project for vocations, Walter Gardini, a reporter of *L'Osservatore Romano* said that "vocations in Malta are cultivated in the diocese of Malta not because the country lacks priests but because today the Church in Malta is directed to be part of the Universal Church and that the need is felt to donate to other countries the gift of the many vocations which God had given to Malta."¹²⁰ In the early sixties of the twentieth century, the diocese of Malta was described at that time "as a reservoir of vocations"¹²¹ and it was considered as "the country that had the largest rate of vocations after Ireland and Spain."¹²² There was an average of 10.3 seminarians every year in the period 1956-1965; in the following decade, 1966-1975, the average rose to 11.2 new seminarians every year.¹²³ This was the climax in numerical terms of the vocations to the priesthood in the diocese of Malta.

In 1968, the Centre for Diocesan Vocations was founded within the community of the Seminary of Malta¹²⁴ on the initiative of Monsignor Victor Grech who was

118 See Malta: Centre for Diocesan Vocations' Archive: *Spark*.

119 See *Lehen is-Sewwa* (9 April 1964) 1.

120 See *L'Osservatore Romano* (5 Marzo 1964) 8.

121 See *The Times of Malta* (5 October 1964) 5.

122 See *ibid*.

123 See Malta: Centre for Diocesan Vocations' Archives. Album 1.

124 See Annual report of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations, Floriana 1968, 4.

then the Rector of the Seminary. In the same year a director of Vocations was appointed by the Archbishop of Malta, Monsignor Michael Gonzi (1943-1976) in the person of Fr John Caruana who was succeeded by Fr Francis Bonnici in 1972. This pastoral work for vocations consisted of reaching as many young people as possible, giving them all the information that was necessary about the vocation to the priesthood and preparing them to accept it if God called them to serve the Church. After its first year of existence, the Annual Report of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations for 1968 stated that “to date the number of seminarians in the Archbishop’s Seminary was satisfactory – indeed one of the highest since the end of the Second World War.”¹²⁵

Although the Centre for Diocesan Vocations continued to plan its pastoral programme for vocations with full vigour, and it succeeded in helping a continuous flow of young people to the Seminary, the second half of the 1970’s and the 1980’s were described as hard times for vocations to the priesthood.¹²⁶ From 1976 to 1985, the average yearly intake of seminarians fell to 5.6 and in the period 1986-1996 the average yearly intake went down to 5.3.¹²⁷

Since 1985, there has been a yearly intake of students to the Major Seminary. However, it could be noted that among the new vocations to the priesthood, there was a number of seminarians who never attended the activities of the Centre for Diocesan Vocations and had already taken up a career. It could also be noted that these people were not even members of the traditional Catholic associations. Some had been members of the new ecclesial movements. These members of the new ecclesial movements were making an experience of the universal priesthood of the faithful by living the commitments which they undertook in Baptism and Confirmation. Within this new way of life, some members of the new ecclesial movements were discovering that God was calling them to the ministerial priesthood.

The communities from which these new vocations sprang out are the new sources of vocations to the priesthood today.

125 See *ibid.*

126 See *ibid.*

127 Malta: Centre for Diocesan Vocations’ Archives. Album 1.

2 THE THEOLOGY OF VOCATION AND THE ECCLESIAL DIMENSION OF PRIESTLY VOCATIONS

2.1 *The Church reflects the Mystery of the Trinity*

The Church has been defined by the Second Vatican Council as the people of God that is gathered in the unity of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.¹²⁸ Reflecting the mystery of the Holy Trinity, the Church is a mystery of vocation which bears in it the mystery of the Father who calls all to sanctify His name and to do his will;¹²⁹ it guards in it the mystery of the Son who is called by the Father and sent to announce to all the Kingdom of God and calls everyone to follow him;¹³⁰ and it is the deposit of the Holy Spirit who consecrates for mission those whom the Father calls through his Son, Jesus Christ.

It is within the communion of the Church that the members of the Church or the baptized persons live their Christian vocation to become holy by participating in the life of the Church: listening to the Word of God and living it, taking part in the sacraments of salvation and exercising themselves in giving their lives for others and fulfilling the will of God for them while they live on earth. Because the Church is a living reflection of the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity it is first and foremost the people of God whose life is described by Jesus himself when He said: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in their midst."¹³¹ The binding force of this communion in the life of the Church is the commandment of love: "Love one another as I have loved you."¹³² And Jesus gave an example of this love when He chose to die on the cross for the sake of all men. "A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends."¹³³

2.2 *The Church is a mysterium vocationis*

The theology of vocation and in particular the vocation to the priesthood together with the pastoral work for vocations can be explained only by the mystery of the Church as *mysterium vocationis*. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Pastores*

128 See SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, 4.

129 See JOHN PAUL II, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992) 35.

130 See *ibid.*

131 See Mt 18, 20.

132 See Jn 15, 12.

133 See Jn 15, 13.

dabo vobis pinpoints four important elements that are the foundation stones of the pastoral work of vocations to the priesthood.

First of all, the exhortation enunciates that “every Christian vocation is based on the gratuitous election coming from the part of the Father (see Eph 1, 3-5). In response to the gratuitous love of the Father, man returns this love to the Father and to his neighbours and he discovers his vocation to love and to live in communion.”¹³⁴

Secondly, *Pastores dabo vobis* affirms the principle that “the Christian vocation is a gift of God - but it never comes independently from the Church; it passes always in the Church and through the Church” (see *Lumen gentium* 9).¹³⁵ God also gives man the strength to give “a responsible reply in the building up of a filial relationship with the Father and a fraternal relationship with the great family of the children of God.”¹³⁶

Thirdly, John Paul II says in the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* that the Church is constitutively vocation and as such the Church is the generator and the educator of vocations. But the Church is the Body of Christ who is called and sent by the Father to bring God, as father, close to men and women to reveal His face and His name to them.¹³⁷ The Church fulfils her vocation to mankind by preaching the Word of God, celebrating the sacraments and serving in charity. Not only are vocations derived from the Church but they are also aimed at serving the Church and help it grow as the Kingdom of God on earth.¹³⁸

Fourthly, *Pastores dabo vobis* says that “what is said of every Christian vocation can be said for the particular vocation to the priesthood.”¹³⁹ This vocation of some members of the Church to be priests is a call made by the Church through the sacrament of Orders so that some members of the Church put themselves at the service of the People of God with a particular belonging and configuration to Jesus Christ and with His authority to act in the name and person of Him who is the Head and Pastor of the Church.

¹³⁴ See *Pastores dabo vobis*, 35.

¹³⁵ See *ibid.*

¹³⁶ See *ibid.*

¹³⁷ See Jn 17, 6.

¹³⁸ See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 35.

¹³⁹ See *ibid.*

2.3 New priests for the service of the Christian community

The Church strongly believes that vocations to the priesthood will always be forthcoming in the Church because vocations to the priesthood are a gift of God to his Church. "God will not allow his Church to lack ministers if the worthy are promoted and those who are less suited to the ministry are guided with fatherly kindness and in due time to adopt another calling."¹⁴⁰ It was Jesus himself who commanded his disciples to pray to the Lord of the harvest to send labourers to his harvest.¹⁴¹ The Apostles realized the intention of Christ that "the people whom He chose and acquired by his blood (see Acts 20, 28) should always and until the end of the world have its own priests for fear Christians would ever be like sheep that have no shepherd,"¹⁴² and the Apostles under the guidance of the Holy Spirit considered it their duty to choose ministers who should be able to teach others also (see 1 Tim 2, 2).

The New Testament clearly shows that the twelve Apostles not only laid their hands on "seven men of reputation"¹⁴³ to take care of the poor in the Christian community, but they also ordained their closest collaborators to continue the salvific mission of Christ. Paul wrote to Timothy and told him: "that is why I am reminding you now to fan into a flame the gift that God gave you when I laid my hands on you."¹⁴⁴

2.4 The exterior call and the interior call

St Thomas Aquinas distinguished the "exterior" call from the "interior" call. Aquinas gave the call of Simon and Andrew as an example of the "exterior" call. But, according to St. Thomas the external call is not enough. It needs another call, the *vocatio interior* so that the person called can respond to the call of God. The *vocatio interior* which God imparts to man and with which He enlightens the mind of man and moves his heart to respond to the call is expressed by St. Thomas as *interior instinctus Dei invitantis*.¹⁴⁵

140 See Pius XI, Encyclical letter *Ad Catholici sacerdotii* (20 December 1935) and quoted by VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree On Priestly Formation, 6.

141 See Mt 9, 32.

142 See VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 11.

143 See Acts 6, 3.

144 See 2 Tim 1, 6

145 See *Summa Theologiae*, II-II q.a. 9. ad 3.

A whole series of papal teaching in the twentieth century especially that of Pope Pius XI emphasised the need for the “interior” call. In the Apostolic letter *Officiorum omnium* (1 August 1922),¹⁴⁶ Pius XI wrote about the need of prayer to ask for the call to the priesthood. While in the Encyclical *Mens Nostra* (29 December 1929)¹⁴⁷ the same Pope spoke about the usefulness of spiritual retreats where the participants not only find the help to live according to the will of God, but, not rarely, they listen to the voice of God in their hearts calling them to the sacred ministry and to the apostolate. In the Apostolic letter *Ad Catholici sacerdotii* (20 December 1935) Pius XI said first there is the call of God and then the hierarchy gives the mandate.¹⁴⁸ The aspirant to the priesthood should possess the required dispositions such as physical and psychological fitness and the right intention. These subjective dispositions can be considered as effects and signs of the interior divine call prior to the invitation of the superior and therefore he can be called by the ecclesiastical authority.

2.5 The Pastoral work for vocations

2.5.1 The response to the call to the priesthood

God calls man because He has a plan for him. In the letter to the Romans, Paul said, “we know that by turning everything to their own good God co-operates with all those who love him, with all those that he has called according to his purpose.”¹⁴⁹ Taking into consideration that all men are called to be saved and to be holy,¹⁵⁰ all particular vocations are inscribed in the interior of a general vocation of all the People of God; all particular consecrations are written in the heart of a universal consecration which is constitutive of the People of God. Christians respond to this call of God “each in his own way.”¹⁵¹ But they receive from the Holy Spirit the charisms or spiritual gifts which are useful for the renewal and development of the Church.

146 See AAS 14 (1922) 449.

147 See AAS 21 (1929) 70.

148 See PAUL GALEA, *Is-Sejhat ghas-sacerdozju u ghall-hajja reliġjuża f'taġħlim San Tumas ta' Akwinu*, Rabat/Malta 1986, 78.

149 See Rom 8, 28.

150 See *Lumen Gentium*, 39.

151 See *ibid*, 11.

The theology of the People of God and the promotion of the laity by the Second Vatican Council has brought forward the charismatic dimension of the Church and many Christians are taking up their responsibilities in the Church. First and foremost they live a true Christian life everywhere they live. The Second Vatican Council spelled out the whole vocation of man when it said that “the world which the Council has in mind is the whole human family which in the whole Christian vision has been created and is sustained by the love of its Maker and which has been freed from the slavery of sin by Christ.”¹⁵²

Since it is the whole Church: families, parishes, lay associations and schools, priests and Bishops who should animate and promote vocations to the priesthood,¹⁵³ only when Christians who live up to the ideals of the Gospel can listen to the call of God to serve their brothers in the ministerial priesthood. If God is the subject who calls, some Christians are asked to exercise their free will and answer the call of God to serve the Christian community in the priesthood. There are many Christians today who live the Gospel in their daily lives and they are the Christians of the third millennium. But the Church will always find some of these Christians who are suitable because they have the right intention and full liberty to be approved and to be called and consecrated with “the seal of the Holy Spirit to the worship of God and the service of the Church.”¹⁵⁴

John Paul II describing the story of every priestly vocation and of every Christian vocation says that this is the story of the unspeakable dialogue between God and man: the love of God who calls and the free will of man who answers God in love.¹⁵⁵ Both elements: love of God and man’s free will, are seen in the Gospel of Mark: “And going up into the mountain, he called unto him whom he would himself; and they came to him.”¹⁵⁶ The pattern of vocation as an interplay between the free decision of Jesus who calls and the Apostles’ response by following Jesus is a pattern that can be found in the prophets, the Apostles, priests, religious, lay people and every person.¹⁵⁷ John Paul II affirms that every vocation is a gift of divine

152 See VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (7 Dec 1965) 2.

153 See *Optatam totius*, 2.

154 See *Lumen gentium*, 2.

155 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 30.

156 See Mk 3, 13.

157 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 30.

grace and never a right of man, never a human promotion and never a personal project. However answering the call of God is “the highest possible honour of the freedom of man because he adheres himself to the call of God and puts his trusts in Him.”¹⁵⁸ In so doing “the will of man is placed to its highest peak: that of oblation, generosity, sacrifice”¹⁵⁹ on the example of Jesus Christ first, then Mary and all those who follow Jesus faithfully.

2.5.2 The Church: the medium of vocations

The Second Vatican Council put the duty of fostering vocations on the whole Christian community and it has indicated to the Christian community that it can carry out its duty by living a full Christian life. The greatest contribution is made by the families which are animated by a spirit of faith, charity and piety and which provide as it were a first seminary and by parishes in whose abundant life the young people themselves take an active part. Teachers and all who are in any way involved in the education of boys and young men – and this applies especially to Catholic societies – should endeavour to train young men entrusted to them to recognize a divine vocation and to follow it willingly.¹⁶⁰

Bishops and priests have the duty in their own way to foster vocations and to help, as fathers, those who in their judgement have been called to God’s service. “All priests are to make it their cherished object to make clear to people the excellence and necessity of the priesthood.”¹⁶¹

This active collaboration by all God’s people in the task of fostering vocations is a response to the action of Divine Providence which endows with appropriate qualities and helps with divine grace those who have been chosen by God to share in the hierarchical priesthood of Christ. It is therefore within the communion of the Church that God may call some of its members to serve the Christian community and to build up the Church and to increase the Kingdom of God in the world.¹⁶²

158 See *ibid.*

159 See *ibid.*

160 See JOHN PAUL II, *Optatam totius*, 2.

161 See *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 11.

162 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 35.

But it is the Church which discerns each and every vocation to serve the Christian community and it is her responsibility to appoint those members who have received this gift from God.¹⁶³ The Church also provides all the necessary means through her ecclesial structures to help those who are called to serve the Church to grow in their faith in Christ and to reach the necessary human, Christian and spiritual maturity that is necessary to cultivate this vocation for the service of the Church. Therefore vocation is not the concern of the individual alone, but it is also the Church that takes part in the vocation as a medium through which God calls some of its members to become priests.

3. THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS ON “THE FORMATION OF PRIESTS IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF TODAY”

In the Synod of Bishops 1990, while reflecting on the formation of priests in the circumstances of today, the bishops spoke about the subject from the theological point of view and they also dealt with the pastoral aspect of the work that is being done and should be done to favour vocations for the priesthood.

3.1 *The origin of the Synod of bishops 1990*

The lay auditors of the Synod of Bishops which was held in 1987 with the title: “The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World” suggested that the next Synod of Bishops (1990) should deal with the topic of the formation that is necessary for both the diocesan and the religious priests in the years before and after Ordination.¹⁶⁴ This suggestion was accepted by John Paul II when in his final discourse to the Synod of Bishops 1990, he said that “the theme of the Synod of Bishops which was held in Rome from the 30 September 1990 to the 28 October 1990, namely, “The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today”, is the answer to the demand that was made by the Synod of Bishops of 1987; in fact many people have shown the close link between the theme of the Synod of Bishops 1987 and that of 1990.”¹⁶⁵

163 See Ibid.

164 See DIONIGI TETTAMANZI, *La Formazione dei sacerdoti nelle circostanze attuali*, Roma 1990, 319.

165 See *ibid.*

Christifideles laici goes in between *Optatam totius* and *Pastores dabo vobis*. The richness of the socio-cultural, psychological-theological contents regarding the subject of vocation that are contained in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici*, makes the post-synodal document a mile-stone in the development of the Theology and Pastoral thought of the Church on vocations.

The reflection on the subject of the formation of future priests and the on going formation after Ordination was preceded by the prayer of all the Ecclesial community. John Paul II speaking during the Angelus on Sunday 30 September 1990 said that he had asked all the Church to pray with new vigour and new hope in the enlightening action of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁶ The Holy Father asked those present for the Solemn inauguration of the Synod of Bishops on “The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today” to persevere in prayer and to show their deep communion with all the Church so that the suggestions and proposals emanating from the Synod will bear the fruit in the Church.¹⁶⁷

3.2 Attention to the signs of the time

The first proposition of the Synod of Bishops about “The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of Today” says that the Synod wanted to develop the Decree of the Second Vatican Council *Optatam totius* and insert it into the experience of today.¹⁶⁸ The Second Vatican Council made a fundamental choice and it gave the Bishops’ Conferences the role to adapt the pastoral work for vocations and the priestly formation to the circumstances of time and place through the national *Rationes institutionis sacerdotalis*.¹⁶⁹ The Church bestowed this freedom to the Bishops even in other official documents of the Church like the *Ratio fundamentalis*¹⁷⁰, the Code of Canon Law¹⁷¹ and *Pastores dabo vobis*.¹⁷²

166 See TETTAMANZI, 31.

167 Ibid; “the whole Church puts its trust in the Holy Spirit who will lead in a mysterious and kingly way the work of the Synod while the persons taking part in the Synod co-operate with one another for the the good of the Church.”

168 See *ibid*, 335.

169 See FRANCESCO RYPAR, “La ‘Pastores dabo vobis’ alla luce del pensiero conciliare sul sacerdozio e sulla formazione sacerdotale”, in *Seminarium* 4 (1992) 530.

170 See *Ratio Fundamentalis*, 1.

171 See CIC 1983, 242.

172 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 61.

The Bishops of Western European countries showed that they were worried about the shortage of vocations¹⁷³ and that it was difficult to replace the existing priests.¹⁷⁴ Considering that the countries of Western Europe are highly industrial and their people live a high standard of living at all levels,¹⁷⁵ yet “there are few vocations to the priesthood because the vertical level of the theological faith in young people and in the Christian communities is too low.”¹⁷⁶ To counteract this situation of a low profile of faith in the Christians of Western Europe, the Bishops at the 1990 Synod suggested that evangelisation must be given top priority¹⁷⁷ and that those who offer themselves to the priestly vocation should be formed very well in the spiritual life.¹⁷⁸ They could find help in the new spiritual movements¹⁷⁹ which open new roads to find God and which offer a better environment for new vocations to the priesthood.

Given the situation of the world as it is today with its positive and negative aspects, this same situation is a challenging one to the Church resulting in the hope of the Church to take up its challenges and to continue to hope in the love of God for her. In the concluding speech of the Synod of Bishops 1990, John Paul II said that “the answer of the Church is an act of hope in the Holy Spirit and we are convinced that this hope will not betray us only if we remain steadfast to the grace which we have received.”¹⁸⁰

173 Ibid, 64; Bishop Lucien Daloz of France said that “the situation as regards vocations differs greatly according to the particular country.”

174 Ibid, 66; Cardinal Godfried Danneels said that “the major worries of the Church in Belgium is the shortage of vocations.”

175 Ibid, 136; Cardinal Danneels said that “there are favourable conditions namely a relatively sound morality of young people, good family life, thriving schools and Catholic youth movements, well organized parishes.”

176 See *ibid*.

177 Ibid, 60; Bishop Derek Worlock of England said that: “Evangelisation is for us in England and Wales, a priority.”

178 Ibid, 180; Bishop Antonio Maria Ruoco Varela of Spain said that, “Careful attention should be paid to the spiritual formation of the seminarian.”

179 Ibid, 258; Bishop Klaus Hemmerle said that “it is necessary to welcome the input of the spiritual movements which require an open attitude towards roads and spiritualities different from those of the proper community.”

180 See *ibid*, 10.

The specific mandate which the Apostles receive from Christ follows their full commitment to Him. It is only when they fully belong to Him that He sends them to all men and by giving them the gift of the Holy Spirit, he gives them the messianic authority which He received from the Father.¹⁸¹ The priestly life and function of the priest helps “the people of God to maintain its priestly nature and to live up to its vocation and give glory to God with all its being.”¹⁸² The priest is faithful to his vocation to serve the Church first of all by making present in the Church the Paschal Mystery through the celebration of the Sacraments which make the Risen Christ present in the ecclesial community; he also serves the Church when he is united with the Bishop and with his presbyterium and when he builds the Christian community; the priest is at the service of the Church’s mission when he announces the Gospel and gives his life for the Gospel.¹⁸³

The priest lives the three dimensions of the Church Mystery, Communion and Mission in his personal life which is very different from his individual life. While the latter closes the priest in his own domain, the former opens his being to God, to his brother priests, to the Church and to the world. Living the Church Mystery, the priest addresses himself to the Father who bestowed on him all His love in creating him, in making him a Christian and choosing him to be a priest. The priest is in communion with the Father in praying, in doing the Will of God and obeying the commandment of love.¹⁸⁴ It is through his unity with the Father that the priest discovers that God is Communion and therefore he lives in the Church-Communion founded by the Son who offered her the Word of God and the sacraments to sanctify all her children.¹⁸⁵ In particular the Priest lives in unity with his Bishop and with the other priests as in “a supernatural family”¹⁸⁶ and the unity among priests has a great impact on the life of the laity and even on those who departed from the Church or who are still outside it.¹⁸⁷

In *Pastores dabo vobis* John Paul II says that “ordained ministry has a radical communitarian form”¹⁸⁸ and it can be lived only in relationship with the Bishop,

181 See Mt 28, 18-20.

182 See JOSEPH RATZINGER, in TETTAMANZI, 35-36.

183 See KLAUS HEMMERLE, in TETTAMANZI, 83.

184 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores*, 16.

185 See SILVANO COLA, in TETTAMANZI, 227.

186 See *ibid.*

187 See Jn 17, 21.

188 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 17.

the other priests and with the laity.¹⁸⁹ The life of communion which the priest lives with the Church opens his heart to all the Church and beyond. The mission of the priest is not limited to his native land, but the world is his parish. Dialogue is the word that opens up the priest to his brothers of the other Churches and Christian faiths, to people of other religions and to all men of good will especially the poor and the weak, and those who still do not know the truth. It was when Jesus Christ gave the Holy Spirit to the Twelve Apostles that He could send them to announce the Gospel to the whole world; and it is through the Holy Spirit that the priest participates in the missionary work of the Church. The Church needs priests imbued with the missionary spirit and in the vision of the New Evangelisation launched in 1983 for Latin America,¹⁹⁰ in 1991 the Church instituted the Commission for the equal distribution of priests in the world.¹⁹¹ It is expected that the sharing of priests among the Churches will also bring unity among the Churches.

It can therefore be said that the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis* re-established the Christological dimension of the Priesthood with all its ontological depth and a wide ecclesiological dimension.¹⁹²

3.3 *Pastoral reflections on the work for vocations for the priesthood*

“‘Come and see’ (Jn 1, 39)” with these words John Paul II begins the chapter on vocations to the priesthood in *Pastores dabo vobis*.¹⁹³ In these words we find the meaning of vocation. But ‘Come and see’ is only one of the many Gospel passages where the mystery of vocation is described.¹⁹⁴ They are significant for the Christian vocation, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ but “they have a particular value with regards to the priestly vocation.”¹⁹⁵ These Gospel passages show that the call is a free gift of God because it is Jesus who calls and invites people to follow him, and on the part of the people called they have or may not have the readiness to follow him and respond to his call. This is the relationship between divine grace and human responsibility. While God loves man, man has to make a gradual and

189 See *ibid.*

190 See “Final Declaration of the First Latin American Continental Congress on Vocations, Itací 1994” (published in *Seminarium* 34 (1994) 656 – 669).

191 See Pio LAGHI, “Pastores dabo vobis. Presentazione”, in *Seminarium*, 4 (1992) 509.

192 See RYPAR, 536.

193 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 34.

194 See Lk 5, 1-11; 27-28; 6,12-15; Jn 1, 35-51; Mt 4, 18-22; 9, 9; Mk 1, 16-20; 2, 13-14.

195 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 34.

concrete development “to seek Christ, find Christ and stay with Christ.”¹⁹⁶ The condition ‘to stay with Christ’ means to leave everything behind¹⁹⁷ and spend all the time with Jesus and with the other Apostles. But the rich young man refused to follow Jesus “for he was very rich.”¹⁹⁸

The method of formation which Jesus followed to give a solid formation to his disciples is a special school where he taught them the laws of life that poured out from the commandment of love: “Happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven;”¹⁹⁹ “unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest.”²⁰⁰ This same method of formation can be followed with young people today when the Church is urgently praying and seeking from among her members new vocations to the priesthood “because the lack of priests is certainly a sad thing for any Church.”²⁰¹ But giving birth, discerning and fostering vocations, particularly those to the priesthood is not just an organization or an activity to promote vocations, but it is the formation of a community that is permeated with the life of the Gospel which is formed up by boys and young people who are disciples of Christ: true Christians before they become priests.

It is the suffering with Jesus on the cross that gives young people and older ones a taste of the Priesthood of Christ who became Priest when He offered Himself, a Victim Crucified, the intermediary between God and man and crying aloud: “God, God, why have you deserted me?”²⁰² But this cry of Jesus and every suffering of young people are transformed into the Resurrection of Jesus Christ who rises to life to continue to love the Church. When seen in this perspective, every attraction that can distract young people from doing the Will of God: material goods, a successful career, a future family life of one’s own, disappear in the full dedication of the young people to do the Will of God and to serve the Church even in the priestly vocation.

196 See *ibid.*

197 See Jn 1,39.

198 See Lk 18, 23.

199 See Mt 5, 3.

200 See Jn 12, 23.

201 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 34.

202 See Mt 27, 46.

3.4 *Evangelisation of the environment: the basis of the pastoral work for vocations*

A new impetus on the part of the Church brings forth an Evangelisation programme that is able to restore a Christian mentality that “points to the true face of God, the Father who calls each one of us in Jesus Christ and to a genuine meaning of human freedom as a principle driving force behind the responsible gift of oneself to the Church.”²⁰³ Evangelisation necessarily opens the heart of Christians to have a sense of belonging to the Church understood as the family of God. This self-belonging to the Church consists mainly in the acceptance of the Teaching of the Church and a passionate love for the Eucharist which is the basis of the unity of man with God and the unity among men. The first disciple of Christ, Mary, opens the door to all the followers of Christ to enter the Church, love it and give their lives for Her because She is the model of all those who listen to the Word of God and practise it in their lives. Following these stages of the Christian life, it will not be difficult for Christians to respond to the vocation to the Priesthood when God makes this call to them.²⁰⁴ When young people become committed to the Gospel, it becomes “natural” for them to say, “God, here I am!”²⁰⁵ every time that He calls them. Vocations to the priesthood become true responses to the calls of God and not self-promotions to reach a high position in the ecclesial structure of the Church. Many experiences of pastoral action that were narrated by the Bishops and the directors of Vocations in the Synod of Bishops 1990 abandoned the word “recruitment” in favour of pastoral action for vocations to the priesthood.²⁰⁶

Christian prayer which can be private or liturgical-communitarian and which is nourished by the Word of God enlightens the participants to discover the project of life that the Father wants to entrust to them.²⁰⁷ However this prayer should not be intended only to pray for vocations to the priesthood in a particular moment, but, as *Pastores dabo vobis* says, it should become “constant habit” of the whole Christian community to pray for new vocations.²⁰⁸ When young people receive a good

203 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 37.

204 See FRANCIS BONNICI, in TETTAMANZI, 97.

205 See Hb 10, 7.

206 See FRANCIS BONNICI, in TETTAMANZI, 97.

207 See *ibid.*

208 See JOHN PAUL II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 38.

formation in prayer and meditation of the Word of God, they participate with all the Church in its dialogue with the Father. Together with the Church, they welcome the invitation which Jesus made to all “to ask the Lord of the harvest that He send forth labourers to his harvest.”²⁰⁹ In silence and listening to the Word of God, young people recognize the call of God to the priesthood and follow it promptly and generously when their prayer is the fruit of their Christian living.²¹⁰ They are already responding to the call of God when, as Christians, young people live according to His commandments and fulfilling the demands of the Gospel.²¹¹ And when they participate fully in the life of the Sacraments as *Pastores dabo vobis* suggests,²¹² young people are in a position to discern the Will of God for them and they find that they can continue to live their Christian life in the marriage or in the single life which God can call them to live it in the priesthood or in the consecrated life. Many times it is the presence of older members of the Church who give true witness to their Christian faith that attracts the younger ones to participate fully in the life of the Church.²¹³ Whether they are married or single people, priests or laymen, witnesses are extremely necessary in the life of the Church today; in particular happy priests attract new vocations to the Priesthood.²¹⁴

At the same time, *Pastores dabo vobis* puts full responsibility to bear and rear new vocations to the Priesthood on the whole Christian community. It asks all the different environments of the Church to be evangelised in order to rise up to the standards of the Gospel. This challenge which *Pastores dabo vobis* made to all the Church was also made to every particular local ecclesial community of the Church.

In the diocese of Malta, this challenge was taken up in the years that immediately followed the publication of *Pastores dabo vobis*. The following study will show the weak and strong points of the socio-cultural and ecclesial environment in which Maltese children, adolescents, young people and adults are living today. However, when the weak and strong points are seen from the point of view of the evangelisation programme of the Church in Malta, they themselves will provide a new programme for the pastoral work for vocations to the priesthood.

‘Cor Jesu’
Triq il-Pitkali
Attard

209 See Mt 9, 38.

210 See *Pastores dabo vobis*, 38.

211 See *ibid.*

212 See *ibid.*

213 See JOSEPH MERCIÉCA, in TETTAMANZI, 187-188.

214 See *ibid.*

