

Inspectis dierum nostrorum:

Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests

INTRODUCTION

Considering the particular needs of theological education in centers of priestly formation today, the Congregation for Catholic Education dedicates this instruction to the study of the fathers of the church, giving such study more extensive treatment here than in its previous general description of it.¹

The call to promote patristic study more intensively in seminaries and theological faculties might seem surprising to some people. Why, they might ask, are professors and students urged to turn toward the past when in church and society today there are so many serious problems that require an urgent solution? A convincing answer may be found if one looks at the history of theology, considers carefully some characteristics of today's cultural climate, and pays attention to the profound needs of spirituality and pastoral care and the new directions which are emerging in them.

A review of the various stages of the history of theology reveals that theological reflection has never renounced the reassuring and guiding presence of the fathers. On the contrary, theological reflection has always been clearly aware that there is something in the fathers which is unique, irreplaceable and perennially valid, as relevant as ever. As Pope John Paul II stated, "The church still lives today by the life received from her fathers, and on the foundation erected by her first constructors she is still being built today in the joy and sorrow of her journeying and daily toil."²

Next, in considering the climate of our contemporary culture, there are many parallels to be drawn between the present and the patristic era, despite obvious differences. Now, as then, one world is fading while another one is being born. Now, as then, the church is carefully discerning spiritual and cultural values in a process of assimilation and purification that enables her to maintain her own identity and to offer in today's complex cultural panorama the riches that the human expression of faith can and must give to our world.³ All of this constitutes a challenge to the life of the whole church and especially to theology, which in order to fulfill its function adequately, must draw from the works of the fathers in a manner analogous to the way it draws from the Sacred Scriptures.

¹ In "The Theological Formation of Future Priests," Feb. 22, 1976, Nos. 85-88.

² John Paul II, apostolic letter *Patres Ecclesiae*, Jan. 2, 1980, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 72 (1980), p. 5.

³ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Aug. 6, 1964, AAS 56 (1964), pp. 627-628.

Last, observation of the present condition of the church reveals how the needs of the church's pastoral mission and the emergence of new currents of spirituality call for healthy nourishment and reliable sources of inspiration. So many efforts seem to be sterile, but there is a fresh breath of true wisdom and Christian authenticity that flows from the patristic works. It is a breath which contributed recently to the resolution of numerous liturgical, ecumenical, missionary and pastoral phenomena, which were noted by the Second Vatican Council and which are considered a source of encouragement and light by the church today.

Therefore, the fathers demonstrate their continued relevance and still have many things to say to those who study or teach theology. It is for this reason that the Congregation for Catholic Education now addresses itself to those in charge of priestly formation in order to suggest some useful ideas to them regarding the current state of patristic studies (I), their rationale (II), their methods (III), and their programming in the curriculum (IV).

I. SOME ASPECTS OF THE CURRENT SITUATION

Any discussion on the above topics supposes, as a point of departure, familiarity with the situation in which patristic studies are found today. One asks, therefore, what place is reserved for them today in the preparation of future priests and what are the church's instructions in this regard.

1. The Fathers in Theological Studies Today

The current state of patristics in centers of priestly formation is closely connected with the overall situation of theological teaching, with its basic plan, structure and fundamental inspiration, with the quality and specific preparation of professors, with the intellectual and spiritual level of the students, with the state of libraries and, in general, with the availability of teaching materials. Its situation is thus not the same everywhere. It not only differs from one country to another, but it also differs among the various dioceses of individual countries. In this regard, however, some positive aspects can be identified as well as some common features and tendencies at the level of the universal church which at times raise problems for ecclesiastical studies.

a) The inclusion of the historical dimension into the scientific work of theologians which occurred at the beginning of this century called attention once again to the fathers of the church. This has shown itself to be extraordinarily profitable and fecund. It has made possible better knowledge about Christian origins and the genesis and historical evolution of various questions and doctrines. This study of the fathers has also brought forth some great scholars who are truly erudite and intelligent. They have shown the vital link that exists between tradition and the most urgent problems of the present moment. With such access to the sources, the long and tiring task of historical research has not remained set on a mere investigation of the past, but has influenced the spiritual and pastoral direction of the present-day church, thus indicating the path toward the future. Naturally, theology has derived the greatest advantage from this.

b) Such interest in the fathers continues today, even if in somewhat different conditions. Despite a considerable overall neglect of education in the humanities, there is a reawakening in patristics here and there which involves not only well-known experts among religious and diocesan clergy, but also numerous members of the laity. In recent times there has been a multiplication of publications of excellent patristic collections and scientific papers which are perhaps the most obvious indication of the popularity of the fathers' spiritual heritage. This is a consoling phenomenon which is reflected positively in theological faculties and seminaries as well. Nonetheless, the evolution that has taken place in the theological and cultural field in general puts before our eyes certain shortcomings and various obstacles to the seriousness of the work which cannot be overlooked.

c) Today there are many theological concepts or tendencies which, contrary to the indications of the decree *Optatam Totius* (No. 16), pay little attention to the fathers' witness and in general to ecclesiastical tradition, and confine themselves to the direct confrontation of biblical texts with social reality and life's concrete problems with the help of the human sciences. These are theological currents which do without the historical dimension of dogmas and for which the immense efforts of the patristic era and of the Middle Ages do not seem to have any real importance. In such cases, study of the fathers is reduced to a minimum, practically caught up in an overall rejection of the past.

In various theologies of our times which are detached from the stream of tradition, theological activity is either reduced to pure "biblicism" or it becomes a prisoner of one's historical horizon by being taken over by the various fashionable philosophies and ideologies of the day. Theologians, who are practically left to themselves, think that they are doing theology but are really only doing history, sociology, etc., flattening the contents of the Creed to a purely earthly dimension.

d) A certain type of one-sidedness that is evident today in various sorts of exegetical method is also negatively reflected in patristics studies. Modern exegesis, that makes use of historical and literary criticism, casts a shadow on the exegetical contributions of the fathers, who are considered simplistic and basically useless for an in-depth knowledge of Sacred Scripture. Such positions, while they impoverish and distort exegesis itself by breaking its natural unity with tradition, undoubtedly contribute to the waning of interest in patristic works. Instead, the exegesis of the fathers could open our eyes to other dimensions of spiritual exegesis and hermeneutics which would complete historical-critical exegesis and enrich it with profoundly theological insights.

e) In addition to the difficulties arising from some exegetical tendencies, others that come from distorted concepts of tradition must also be mentioned. In some cases, in fact, instead of the concept of a living tradition that progresses and develops with the evolution of history, there is an overly rigid concept, called at times "integralist," that reduces tradition to the repetition of past models, making it a monolithic and fixed block that does not leave any room for legitimate development and the need for faith to respond to new circumstances. In this way prejudices with

regard to tradition are easily created which impede a balanced approach to the works of the fathers.

Paradoxically, an unfavorable influence is exercised in appreciation of the patristic era by the concept of living ecclesiastical tradition when theologians do not take into sufficient consideration the foundational contribution made by the fathers by insisting on the equal value of all historical periods.

f) Many students of theology today who come from technical-type schools do not know the classical languages which are necessary for seriously approaching the works of the fathers. Consequently, the state of patristics in centers of priestly formation is considerably affected by the current cultural changes, characterized by a growing scientific and technological spirit which concentrates almost exclusively on studies of the natural and human sciences and ignores the humanities.

g) Last, in some centers of priestly formation, the programs of study are so overloaded with various new disciplines that are considered more necessary and “current” that there is no room left for patristics. As a result, this subject must be satisfied with a few hours a week or makeshift solutions in the context of the history of the ancient church. To these difficulties is often added the lack of patristic collections in libraries and of adequate bibliographical aids.

2. The Fathers in the Directives of the Church

Presentation of the current state of patristic studies would not be complete without mentioning the official norms of the church in this regard. As will be seen, they draw attention to theological, spiritual and pastoral values contained in the works of the fathers for the purpose of making them fruitful in the preparation of future priests.

a) Among these instructions, the first place is occupied by the guidelines of the Second Vatican Council regarding the method of theological teaching and the role of tradition in interpreting and transmitting Sacred Scripture.

In No. 16 of the decree *Optatam Totius*, the “genetic” method for the teaching of dogma is prescribed. In the second stage of this method, the students should be shown the contribution of the fathers of the Eastern and Western church “to the fruitful transmission and illumination of the individual truths of revelation.” This contributes to but does not replace the need of the students to penetrate the mysteries of salvation more deeply “with the help of speculative reason exercised under the tutelage of St. Thomas” (ibid).

This method, which is so important for understanding the progress of dogma, was confirmed once again by the recent extraordinary Synod of Bishops in 1985 (cf. Final Report II, B, 4).

The importance of the fathers for theology and, in particular, for understanding Sacred Scripture appears even clearer from statements in the constitution *Dei Verbum* on the value and role of tradition:

“There exist a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture.... Tradition hands on in its full purity God’s word, which was entrusted to the apostles

by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit... Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of devotion and reverence” (No. 9).

Sacred Scripture, which must be “the soul of theology” and “its perpetual foundation” (No. 24), forms an inseparable unit with sacred tradition, “one sacred deposit of the word of God which is committed to the church” such that one cannot stand without the other (No. 10). “The words of the holy fathers witness to the living presence of this tradition, whose wealth is poured into the practice and life of the believing and praying church” (No. 8).

Therefore, still today, despite the undeniable progress achieved by modern exegesis, the church “is concerned to move ahead daily toward a deeper understanding of Sacred Scripture so that she may unceasingly feed her children with the divine words. Therefore, she also rightly encourages the study of the holy fathers of both East and West and of sacred liturgies” (No. 23).

b) In the “Fundamental Principles of Priestly Formation” (*Ratio Fundamentalis*) and in the document “The Theological Formation of Future Priests,” the Congregation for Catholic Education repeats the above recommendations of the Second Vatican Council and stresses some of their important aspects.

Vis-a-vis certain reductive tendencies in dogmatic theology, the integrity and completeness of the “genetic” method⁴ is insisted upon by illustrating its validity and didactic value⁵ as well as the conditions required for its correct application.⁶ In this regard, explicit reference is made to the patristic-historical stage.⁷

The *Ratio Fundamentalis*⁸ stresses that professors and students must adhere with complete fidelity to the word of God in Sacred Scripture and in tradition, and draw its living meaning “first of all from the works of the holy fathers.” They are to be highly valued because “their work belongs to the living tradition of the church to which, through providential provision, they have made contributions of lasting value in eras that were more favorable to the synthesis of faith and reason.”⁹ A closer approach to the fathers can therefore be considered the most effective means for discovering the vital strength of theological formation¹⁰ and, above all, for being inserted into the dynamism of tradition “that guards from an exaggerated individualism by guaranteeing objectivity of thought.”¹¹

Some norms for the systematic study of patristics are given in the document mentioned above, “The Theological Formation of Future Priests” (Nos. 85-88), so that these exhortations not be in vain.

⁴ “The Fundamental Principles of Priestly Formation” (*Ratio Fundamentalis*), 2nd ed., 1985, No. 79.

⁵ “The Theological Formation of Future Priests,” Nos. 89, 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Nos. 90, 91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Nos. 92, 4b.

⁸ *Ratio Fundamentalis*, No. 86.

⁹ “The Theological Formation of Future Priests,” No. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, No. 74.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

c) The encouragement to study the fathers given by the council and the Congregation for Catholic Education has been stressed during the last decades on various occasions by the supreme pontiffs. Their contributions, like those of their predecessors, are outstanding for the variety of subject matter and for their incisiveness with regard to the current theological and spiritual situation:

“The study of the fathers, which is of great use to everyone, is absolutely necessary for those who care about the theological, pastoral and spiritual renewal promoted by the council and wish to cooperate in it. In them, in fact, are all the constant factors that are at the basis of any authentic renewal.”¹²

Patristic thought is Christ centered.¹³ It is an example of a unified, living theology matured in contact with the problems of the pastoral ministry.¹⁴ It is an excellent model of catechesis,¹⁵ source of knowledge about Sacred Scripture and tradition,¹⁶ as well as about the whole human person and true Christian identity.¹⁷ The fathers, “in fact, are a stable structure of the church, and they fulfill a perennial function for the church of all centuries. Thus every subsequent proclamation and teaching, if it is to be authentic, must be compared with their proclamation and their teaching. Every charism and every ministry must draw from the vital source of their fatherhood; and every new stone, added to the sacred edifice ... must be set in the structures already placed by them, and be welded and joined to them.”¹⁸

Therefore, expressions of encouragement to study patristics more intensively abound. They are numerous and well motivated. In order to make this urging even more explicit, we feel it is useful to present the following reasons.

II. WHY STUDY THE FATHERS

Obviously, patristic studies will attain the necessary scientific level and bear the desired fruits only if they are cultivated seriously and lovingly. Experience teaches that the fathers reveal their doctrinal and spiritual riches only to those who make the effort of entering into their depths

¹² Paul VI, “Letter to Cardinal Michele Pellegrino for the Centenary of the Death of J.P. Migne,” May 10, 1975, AAS 67 (1975), p. 471.

¹³ John Paul II, “Address to Professors and Students of the Augustinian Patristics Institute (*Sono Lieto*),” May 8, 1982, AAS 74 (1982), p. 798. “Placing oneself, therefore, in the school of the fathers means learning to know Christ better and to know the human person better. This knowledge, which is scientifically documented and proved, will enormously help the church in the mission of preaching to all, as she does tirelessly, that Christ alone is our salvation.”

¹⁴ Paul VI, “Address Inaugurating the Augustinian Patristics Institute (*I Nostri Passi*),” May 4, 1970, AAS 62 (1970), p. 425. “As pastors, then, the fathers felt the need to adapt the evangelical message to the contemporary mentality and to nourish themselves and the people of God with the food of the truth of faith. This made catechesis, theology, Sacred Scripture, liturgy, spiritual and pastoral life for them be joined into a vital unit, and it made them speak not only to the intellect, but to the whole person involving thought, will and feeling.”

¹⁵ John Paul II, apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, Oct. 16, 1979: AAS 71 (1979), No. 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, *Sono Lieto*, p. 796f.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 797f.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, *Patres Ecclesiae*, p. 6.

through continuous and regular familiarity with them. Therefore, real commitment is required on the part of professors and students because:

- 1) The fathers are privileged witnesses of tradition.
- 2) They have passed down to us a theological method that is both enlightened and reliable.
- 3) Their writings offer cultural, spiritual and apostolic richness that makes them great teachers of the church yesterday and today.

1. Privileged Witnesses to Tradition

In first place among the various qualities and roles that the documents of the magisterium attribute to the fathers is the fact that they are privileged witnesses to tradition. In the flow of living tradition that continues from the beginning of Christianity over the centuries up to our present time, they occupy an entirely special place, which makes them stand out compared with other protagonists of the history of the church. They laid down the first basic structures of the church, together with doctrinal and pastoral positions that remain valid for all times.

a) In our Christian mind, the fathers are always linked to tradition, having been both its protagonists and its witnesses. They are closer to the sources in their purity. Some of them were witnesses to the apostolic tradition, the source from which tradition itself is drawn. The fathers of the first centuries especially can be considered authors and exponents of a “founding” tradition, which was preserved and continuously elucidated in subsequent ages. In any case, the fathers have transmitted what they received, “they have taught the church what they have learned in her.”¹⁹ “What they found in the church they kept; what they learned they taught; what they learned from their fathers they transmitted to their children.”²⁰

b) Historically, the age of the fathers is the period of some important firsts in the ecclesial order. It was they who set “the entire canon of the sacred books,”²¹ composed the basic professions of faith (*regulae fidei*), defined the deposit of faith in response to heresies and contemporary culture, thus giving rise to theology. Furthermore, it was again they who laid the foundations of canonical discipline (*statuta patrum, traditiones patrum*) and created the first forms of liturgy that remain an obligatory reference point for all subsequent liturgical reforms. In this way, the fathers gave the first conscious and reflective response to the divine Scriptures and formulated it, not so much as an abstract theory, but as daily pastoral practice of experience and teaching in the heart of the liturgical assemblies gathered together to profess the faith and celebrate the worship of the risen Lord. They were in this way the authors of the first great Christian catechesis.

c) Tradition, to which the fathers are witnesses, is a living tradition that demonstrates unity in variety and continuity in progress. This is seen in the plurality of liturgical families and

¹⁹ St. Augustine, *Opus Imp. c. Iul.* 1, 117: *Patrologia Latina* 45, 1125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, *Contra Iul.* 2, 10, 34: PL 44, 698.

²¹ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, 8.

in the spiritual, disciplinary and exegetic-theological traditions that existed in the first centuries (e.g., the schools of Alexandria and of Antioch). They were differing traditions, but all were united and rooted in the firm and unchangeable common foundation of the faith.

d) Tradition, therefore, as it was known and lived by the fathers, is not like a monolithic, immovable and sclerotic block, but a multiform organism pulsating with life. It is a practice of life and doctrine that experiences, on the one hand, even uncertainties, tensions, research made by trial and hesitancy and, on the other, timely and courageous decisions of great originality and decisive importance. To follow the living tradition of the fathers does not mean hanging on to the past as such, but adhering to the line of faith with an enthusiastic sense of security and freedom, while maintaining a constant fidelity toward that which is foundational: the essential, the enduring, the unchanging fidelity *usque ad sanguinis effusionem* to dogma and those moral and disciplinary principles that demonstrate their irreplaceable function and their fecundity precisely at the times when new things are making headway.

e) The fathers are thus witnesses and guarantors of an authentic Catholic tradition, and hence their authority in theological questions has been very great and always remains so. When it has been necessary to denounce the deviation of certain schools of thought, the church has always referred to the fathers as a guarantee of truth. Various councils, for instance the councils of Chalcedon and Trent, begin their solemn declarations with reference to the patristic tradition by using the formula: “In following the holy fathers ... etc.” References are made to them also even in questions which had already been resolved through recourse to Sacred Scripture.

In the Council of Trent²² and in the First Vatican Council²³ the principle was explicitly enunciated that the unanimous consent of the fathers constitutes a certain rule for interpreting Scripture. This principle of tradition as normative – formulated by St. Vincent of Lerins²⁴ and earlier still by St. Augustine – has always been followed in the history of the church.

f) The examples and teaching of the fathers, witnesses to tradition, were particularly valued and put to good use by the Second Vatican Council. Due precisely to them, the council was able to achieve a keener understanding of the church herself and to identify the sure path particularly for liturgical renewal, for fruitful ecumenical dialogue and for the encounter with non-Christian religions by making the ancient principle of unity in diversity and of progress in the continuity of tradition bear fruit in present-day circumstances.

2. Theological Method

The delicate process of grafting Christianity onto the world of ancient culture and the need to define the contents of the Christian mystery compared to pagan culture and heresies stimulated the fathers to deepen the faith and illustrate it rationally with the aid of the best categories of thought in the philosophies of their times, especially in the refined Hellenistic

²² Council of Trent, ed. Goeressiana, V (Acta II) 91ff.

²³ Vatican Council I, coll. Lac. 7.251.

²⁴ *Comm. Primum*, 2, 10, 33: PL 50, 639, 650.

philosophy. One of their most important tasks was to give birth to theological science and define some coordinates and norms of procedure at its service which revealed themselves to be valid and fruitful even for future centuries as St. Thomas Aquinas would show in his work, in complete fidelity to the doctrine of the fathers.

In this activity as theologians, some particular attitudes and points are outlined in the fathers which are of great interest and which must be kept in mind today in sacred studies:

- a) A constant recourse to Sacred Scripture and the meaning of tradition.
- b) Awareness of Christian originality while recognizing the truths contained in pagan culture.
- c) Defense of the faith as the supreme good and continuously deepening understanding of the content of revelation
- d) The sense of mystery and the experience of the divine.

a) Recourse to Sacred Scripture, Sense of Tradition

1. The fathers are primarily and essentially commentators on Sacred Scripture: *divinorum librorum tractatores*.²⁵ In this task, from our present-day point of view, their method presents certain undeniable limits. They did not know and could not have known about the resources of a philological, historical and anthropological-cultural order nor the input of research, documentation and scientific elaboration that are available to modern exegesis; and therefore, a part of their work is to be considered timeworn. Nonetheless, their merits for a better understanding of the sacred books are incalculable. They are still true teachers for us and superior in many ways to the exegetes of the Middle Ages and the modern era due to “a sort of sweet intuition about heavenly things through an admirable penetration of spirit, whereby they go farther into the depths of the divine word.”²⁶ The example of the fathers can indeed teach modern exegesis a truly religious approach to Sacred Scripture as well as an interpretation that constantly adheres to the criterion of communion with the experience of the church proceeding through history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. When these two interpretative principles – religious and specifically Catholic – are neglected or forgotten, modern exegetical studies often result in being impoverished and distorted.

For the fathers, Sacred Scripture was the object of unconditioned veneration, the foundation of the faith, the constant subject of preaching, nourishment of devotion, the soul of theology. They always maintained its divine origin, lack of error, normativity and inexhaustible wealth of vigor for spirituality and doctrine. It is sufficient to recall what St. Irenaeus wrote about the Scriptures: They “are perfect because they are dictated by the Word of God and his Spirit,”²⁷ and that the four Gospels are “the foundation and pillar of our faith.”²⁸

²⁵ Augustine, *De Lib Arb.*, III, 21, 59; *De Trin.*, II, 1, 2; PL 32, 1300; 42, 845.

²⁶ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, Sept. 30, 1943: AAS 35 (1943), p. 312.

²⁷ *Adv. Haer.*, 2, 28, 2: *Patrologia Graeca* 7, 805.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 3, 1, 1: PG, 7, 844.

2) Theology was born out of the exegetic activity of the fathers *in medio ecclesiae* and especially in the liturgical assemblies in contact with the spiritual needs of the people of God. That exegesis in which spiritual life is blended with rational theological reflection always aims at the essentials while being faithful to the entire sacred deposit of the faith. It is entirely centered on the mystery of Christ, to whom all the individual truths are referred in a wonderful synthesis. Rather than getting lost in numerous marginal problems, the fathers seek to embrace the totality of the Christian mystery by following the basic movement of revelation and of the economy of salvation that goes from God through Christ to the church, sacrament of union with God and dispenser of divine grace, in order to return to God. Thanks to this insight, due to their lively sense of ecclesial communion, to their proximity to Christian origins and familiarity with Scripture, the fathers look at the whole in its center and make this whole present in each of its parts, reconnecting each outer question with itself. Following the fathers in their theological itinerary means, therefore, grasping more easily the essential nucleus of our faith and the *specificum* or our Christian identity.

3) The veneration and fidelity of the fathers regarding the sacred books may be compared to their veneration and fidelity to tradition. They do not consider themselves masters, but servants of the Sacred Scriptures since they received them from the church, read and commented on them in and for the church, according to the rule of faith proposed and illustrated by ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition. St. Irenaeus, the great lover of the sacred books, maintains that whoever wishes to know the truth must look at the tradition of the apostles.²⁹ He adds that even if the apostles had not left us Scripture, tradition would have been enough for our instruction and salvation.³⁰ Origen himself, who studied the Scriptures with so much love and passion and worked so much for their comprehension, openly states that only those must be believed as truths of faith that in no way depart from “ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition,”³¹ thereby making tradition the interpretative norm of Scripture. Later, St. Augustine, who found his “delight” in meditating on Scripture,³² stated this marvelously luminous and sound principle that again refers to tradition: “I would not believe in the Gospel if the authority of the Catholic Church had not led me to do so.”³³

4. Therefore, when the Second Vatican Council stated that “sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture form one sacred deposit of the word of God, which is entrusted to the church,”³⁴ it merely confirmed an ancient theological principle that was practiced and professed by the fathers. This principle, that enlightened and guided their whole exegetic and pastoral activity, certainly remains valid for theologians and pastors of souls today. From this it follows concretely that the return to Sacred Scripture, which is one of the major characteristics of the life of the

²⁹ Ibid., 3, 3, 1: PG, 7, 848.

³⁰ Ibid., 3, 4, 1: PG, 7, 855.

³¹ *De Principiis*, 1, praef. 1 cf. *In Mt. Comm.*, 46: PG, 11, 116: cf. 13, 1667.

³² *Confess.* 11, 2, 3: PL, 32, 809.

³³ *Contra ep. fund.* 5, 6: PL 42, 176.

³⁴ *Dei Verbum*, 10.

church in the present, must be accompanied by the return to tradition attested to by patristic writings if the desired fruits are to be produced.

b) Christian Originality and Inculturation

1. Another important and very apposite characteristic of the fathers' theological method is that it sheds light on understanding "by what means the faith can be explained in terms of the philosophy and wisdom of the peoples."³⁵ They have in fact drawn the clear awareness of Christian originality from Scripture and tradition: that is, the firm conviction that Christian teaching contains an essential nucleus of revealed truths that constitute the norm for judging human wisdom and distinguishing truth from error. If such a conviction led some of them to reject the contribution of this wisdom and consider philosophers almost as the "patriarchs of the heretics," it did not stop the majority of them from accepting this contribution with interest and gratitude, as proceeding from the one source of wisdom which is the Word. In this regard, let it suffice to recall St. Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, St. Gregory of Nyssa and, in a special way, St. Augustine. In his work *De Doctrina Christiana*, he outlined a program for this activity:

"If they who are called philosophers have said true things in harmony with our faith ... not only should they not cause fear, but ... they should be claimed for our use.... Is this not precisely what many of our good faithful have done? Cyprian ... Lactantius ... Vittorinus ... Optatus, Hilary, to speak only of the dead, and a countless number of Greeks."³⁶

2. To this study of assimilation another is added, no less important and inseparable from it, which we could call dissimilation. Being anchored to the norm of faith, the fathers accepted many contributions from Greco-Roman philosophy, but they rejected its grave errors and especially avoided the danger of syncretism which was so widespread in the then-prevailing Hellenistic culture. They also avoided rationalism that risked reducing faith to only the aspects that were accepted by Hellenist rationality. "Against their great errors," St. Augustine writes, "Christian doctrine must be defended."³⁷

3. Thanks to this careful discernment of values and the limits hidden in the various forms of ancient culture, new paths were opened up toward the truth and new possibilities for announcing the Gospel were seized. Taught by Greek, Latin and Syriac fathers, the church "learned early in its history to express the Christian message in the concepts and language of different peoples and tried to clarify it in the light of the wisdom of their philosophers: It was an attempt to adapt the Gospel to the understanding of all men and the requirements of the learned."³⁸ In other words, the fathers, being aware of the universal value of revelation, began the great task of Christian inculturation, as it is usually called today. They become the example of a rich encounter between faith and culture, faith and reason, which continues to be a guide for

³⁵ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, 22.

³⁶ *De. Doctr. Chr.*, 2, 40, 60-61: PL, 34, 63.

³⁷ *Retract.*, 1, 1, 4: PL 32, 587.

³⁸ Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

the church of all ages that is committed to preaching the Gospel to people of such different cultures and working in their midst.

As we can see, due to those attitudes of the fathers, the church shows herself to be from the beginning “missionary by nature”³⁹ even on the level of thought and culture. Therefore, the Second Vatican Council prescribes that “this kind of adaptation and preaching of the revealed Word must ever be the law of all evangelization.”⁴⁰

c) *Defense of the Faith, Dogmatic Progress*

1. Within the church, the encounter of reason with faith has given rise to many and long controversies regarding the major themes of Trinitarian, Christological, ecclesiological, anthropological and eschatological dogma. On such occasions, in defending the truths that touch on the very essence of faith, the fathers were the authors of a great advance in the understanding of dogmatic content and rendered a valuable service to the progress of theology. Their apologetic *munus*, exercised with a conscious pastoral concern for the spiritual good of the faithful, was a providential means for making the entire body of the church grow. As St. Augustine said regarding the increase of heretics: “God has allowed them to spread so that we would not nourish ourselves only with milk and stay in a state of rude childhood,”⁴¹ because “the need to defend the truths of the faith from the questions raised astutely and disturbingly by heretics led to the truths being examined more diligently, understood more clearly and preached more insistently so that the raising of a question by an adversary became the occasion for an advance in learning.”⁴²

2. In this way the fathers became the initiators of rational procedure applied to the data of revelation, enlightened promoters of that *intellectus fidei* that belongs to the essence of every authentic theology. It was their providential task not only to defend Christianity, but also to rethink it in the Greco-Roman cultural environment; to find new formulas for expressing an ancient doctrine; non-biblical forms for a biblical doctrine; to present, in a word, the faith in the form of human discourse that is fully Catholic and capable of expressing the divine content of revelation by always safeguarding its identity and transcendence. Numerous concepts introduced by them into Trinitarian and Christological theology (e.g., *ousia*, *hypostasis*, *physis*, *agenesia*, *genesis*, *ekporeusis*, etc.) have played a decisive role in the history of the councils and have entered into dogmatic formulas and become parts of our normal theological terminology.

3. The dogmatic progress that was accomplished by the fathers, not as a purely intellectual abstract project but mostly in homilies in the midst of liturgical and pastoral activity, constitutes an excellent example of renewal in the continuity of tradition. For them “the Catholic faith coming from the doctrine of the apostles ... and received through a series of successions” was “to be transmitted whole to their descendants.”⁴³ Therefore, it was treated by them with the

³⁹ *Ad Gentes*, 2.

⁴⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

⁴¹ Augustine, *Tract. in Ioh.* 36, 6: PL, 35, 1666.

⁴² *Ibid.*, *De Civ. Dei*, 16, 2, 1: PL, 41, 477.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, *Tract. in Ioh.*, 37, 6: PL, 35, 1672.

maximum respect in complete fidelity to its biblical basis and, at the same time, with an appropriate openness of spirit toward new needs and new cultural circumstances: the two characteristics of the living tradition of the church.

4. These first sketches of theology handed down to us by the fathers point out some of their typical basic attitudes toward the data revealed that can be considered of permanent value and hence valid for the church today. It is a foundation laid once and for all to which every later theologian must make reference and, if necessary, return. It is a heritage that is not exclusive to any particular church, but one that is very dear to all Christians. It goes back, in fact, to the times preceding the division between the Christian East and West, and transmits common treasures of spirituality and doctrine. It is a rich table around which theologians of various denominations can always meet. The fathers are fathers both of Eastern Orthodoxy and of Latin Catholic theology, of the theology of Protestants and of Anglicans, the common object of study and veneration.

d) Sense of Mystery, Experience of the Divine

1. If the fathers have given proof on so many occasions of their responsibility as thinkers and seekers with regard to revelation following, it can be said, the program of *credo ut intelligam* and of the *intelligo ut credam*, they have always done so as truly believing, authentic men of the church, without compromising the purity or, as St. Augustine said, the “virginity”⁴⁴ of the faith. As “theologians,” they did not make use of the resources of reason only but, more properly, also of the religious resources gained through their affective existential knowledge, anchored in intimate union with Christ, nourished by prayer and sustained by grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In their attitudes as theologians and pastors they showed to a marked degree their deep sense of mystery and their experience of the divine that protected them from the ever recurring temptations both of exaggerated rationalism or of a flat and resigned fideism.

2. The first thing that strikes us in their theology is the living sense of the transcendence of the divine truth contained in revelation. Differing from many other ancient and modern thinkers, they give proof of great humility before the mystery of God contained in Sacred Scripture on which they, in their modesty, prefer to be mere commentators who are careful not to add anything to it that might alter its authenticity. It can be said that this attitude of respect and humility is none other than lively awareness of the insuperable limits that the human intellect experiences in the face of divine transcendence. It is enough to recall here, in addition to the homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the incomprehensibility of God, what St. Cyril, bishop of Jerusalem, writes in addressing himself to catechumens, “When it is a question of God, it is a great knowledge to confess ignorance.”⁴⁵ Like him, the bishop of Hippo, St. Augustine, would later say to his people: “A faithful ignorance is preferable to a foolhardy knowledge.”⁴⁶ Before

⁴⁴ Augustine, *Serm.* 93, 4; 341, 5; etc.: PL, 38, 574; 39, 1496.

⁴⁵ *Catech.*, 6, 2: PG, 33, 542.

⁴⁶ *Serm.*, 27, 4: PL, 38, 179.

them, St. Irenaeus had stated that the generation of the Word is indescribable, and that those who presume to explain it “have lost the use of their reason.”⁴⁷

3. Given this lively spiritual sense, the image of themselves that the fathers offer us is that of men who are not only learning but, above all, are experiencing divine things, as Dionysius the pseudo-Aeropagite said about his teacher Hierotheos: “*Non solum discens sed et patiens divina.*”⁴⁸ Most of the time they are specialists in the supernatural life who communicate what they have seen and experienced in their contemplation of divine things, what they have known through the path of love, “*per quamdam connaturalitatem,*” as St. Thomas Aquinas said.⁴⁹ In their way of expressing themselves the savory accent of the mystics is often perceptible, revealing a great familiarity with God, a lived experience of the mystery of Christ and the church, and in constant contact with all the genuine sources of the interior life considered by them as fundamental to Christian life. It can be said that, along the lines of the Augustinian “*intellectum valde ama,*”⁵⁰ the fathers certainly appreciate the usefulness of speculation, but they know it is not enough. In the same intellectual effort to understand their own faith, they practice love that, by making friends between the two,⁵¹ becomes by its very nature the source of new understanding. In fact, “no good is perfectly known if it is not perfectly loved.”⁵²

4. These methodological principles, which were first practically followed and lived before they were expressly enunciated, were also the object of the fathers’ explicit reflections. In this regard, it is sufficient to refer to St. Gregory Nazianzen. In the first of his five famous theological orations dedicated to the way to do theology, he deals with the need for moderation, humility, inner purification and prayer. St. Augustine does the same when he recalls the place faith has in the life of the church and, in speaking about the role that theologians play in her, he writes that they are to be “piously learned and truly spiritual.”⁵³ He gives an example of this himself when he writes the *De Trinitate* aimed at responding “to the garrulous reasoners” who “in despising the humble beginnings of the faith, let themselves be led astray by an immature and perverse love of reason.”⁵⁴

For all these reasons, the theological activity of the fathers is still relevant for us now. They continue to be teachers for theologians, representatives of an important, decisive and indelible period in the theology of the church. They are exemplary in the way in which they carried out their theological activity. They are authoritative sources and irreplaceable witnesses through their reflection and meditation to the revealed data.

⁴⁷ *Adv. Haer.*, 2, 28, 6: PG, 7, 809.

⁴⁸ *De Divinis Nominibus*, II, 9: PG, 3, 674; cf. 648; quoted by St. Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*. II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

⁴⁹ *S. Th.* II-II, 2, 45, a. 2.

⁵⁰ Augustine, *Ep.* 120, 3, 13: PL, 33, 459.

⁵¹ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 2, 9: PG, 8, 975-982.

⁵² Augustine, *De Div.*, qq. LXXXIII, q. 35, 2: PL, 40, 24.

⁵³ *Ep.* 118, 32: PL, 33, 448.

⁵⁴ *De Trin.*, 1, 1, 1: PL, 42, 819.

3. Cultural, Spiritual and Apostolic Wealth

In addition to their theological profundity, the patristic writings are also distinguished for the great cultural, spiritual and pastoral values they contain. Therefore, after Sacred Scripture, they are one of the principal sources of priestly formation and a “fruitful nourishment” that accompanies priests for their whole lives, as is recommended in the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (No. 19).

a) In addition to contributing to the literary heritage of their respective nations, the Latin, Greek, Syriac and Armenian fathers, although each in a different way and to a different degree, are classics of Christian culture. They founded and built upon that culture, and it bears the indelible mark of their paternity forever. Different from national literatures that express and mold the genius of individual peoples, the cultural heritage of the fathers is truly “catholic,” universal, because it teaches us how to become and behave like righteous men and women and authentic Christians. Due to their lively sense of the supernatural and their discernment of human values in relation to that which is specifically Christian, their works have been in past centuries an excellent instrument in the formation of entire generations of priests and remain indispensable for the church today.

b) It is very noteworthy that many fathers had an excellent preparation in the disciplines of ancient Greek and Roman culture. From it they borrowed lofty civil and spiritual values and enriched their treatises, catecheses and preaching with them. By imprinting the Christian stamp on the ancient, classical *humanitas*, they were the first to make a bridge between the Gospel and secular culture, thus outlining for the church a rich and engaging cultural program that profoundly influenced subsequent ages and, in particular, the whole spiritual, intellectual and social life of the Middle Ages.⁵⁵ Thanks to their teaching, many Christians during the first centuries had access to the various spheres of public life (schools, administration, politics). Christianity could also make the best use of what was valid in the ancient world, purify what was less perfect and contribute to the creation of a new culture and civilization inspired by the Gospel. Therefore, for future priests, going back to the fathers means nourishing themselves from the very roots of Christian culture and understanding better their own cultural tasks in today’s world.

c) With regard to the spirituality of the fathers, it has already been pointed out in a preceding paragraph how their entire theology was eminently religious, a real “sacred science” which, while it enlightens the mind, edifies and warms the heart. In addition to theological elements and aspects as such, it is appropriate to emphasize the moral behavior and attitudes that result from their works. They are like fundamental coefficients of the progressive and often silent rising of evangelical leaven in pagan society, which later remained impressed forever on the mind and very countenance of the church. Many of the fathers were “converts”: The sense of newness of Christian life was joined to the certainty of the faith in them. From this, in the

⁵⁵ Two works in particular of St. Augustine exercised a great influence in this regard: *De Civitate Dei* and *De Doctrina Christiana*.

Christian communities of their times, sprang an “explosive vitality,” a missionary fervor and a climate of love that inspired souls to the heroism of daily personal and social life, especially through the practice of works of mercy, almsgiving, care of the sick, widows, orphans, respect for women and every human person, the education of their children, respect for life in its origins, conjugal fidelity, respect and generosity in the treatment of slaves, freedom and responsibility before the public powers, defense and support of the poor and oppressed, and with all the forms of evangelical witness required by the circumstances of time and place, even to the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom. Through their conduct inspired by the teachings of the fathers, Christians distinguished themselves from the surrounding pagan world and expressed their new life sprung forth from Christ by embracing the ascetic ideals of virginity *propter regnum coelorum*, detachment from earthly goods, penance, hermit or community monastic life, along the lines of the “evangelical counsels,” and in vigilant expectation of Christ’s coming. Also many forms of private devotion (such as family prayer, daily prayers, the practice of fasting) and community devotion (e.g., celebration of Sunday and the principal liturgical feasts such as participation in the saving events, veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary, vigils, agape, etc.), date back to the patristic era and obtain their precise theological-spiritual meaning from the teaching of the fathers.

Therefore, it is clear that (for) seminarians, regular familiarity with the work of the fathers can only strengthen their spiritual and liturgical life by shedding a particular light on their vocation and rooting it in the long tradition of the church bringing it into direct communication with its origins in their wealth and purity. At the same time, it will help them to discover the unity and totality of the human person: to recognize and follow that higher ideal of humanity that is unified and integrated into the harmonious development of natural and supernatural values, which is the model of Christian anthropology.

d) Another reason for the fascination with and interest in the work of the fathers is that they are very pastoral: that is, they were composed for pastoral purposes. Their writings are either catecheses and homilies, rebuttals of heresy, responses to inquiries, spiritual exhortations or manuals for instructing the faithful. From this it can be seen how the fathers felt involved in the pastoral problems of their times. They exercised their office as teachers and pastors and sought first of all to keep the people of God united in the faith, in divine worship, morals and discipline. Many times they proceeded in a collegial way, exchanging back and forth letters of a doctrinal and pastoral nature for the purpose of promoting a common line of conduct. They were concerned with the spiritual good not only of their particular churches, but of the whole church. Some of them became defenders of orthodoxy and points of reference for other bishops in the Catholic world (e.g. Athanasius in the anti-Arian struggles, Augustine against the Pelagians) thus personifying in some way the living mind of the church.

e) Furthermore, in their pastoral action the fathers offered observers as broad range of the most varied cultural and social subject matter of their times, but always framed their thoughts in entirely supernatural coordinates. They are interested in the integrity of the faith, the basis of justification, so that it will flourish in charity, bond of perfection, and so that charity will create

the new man and the new history. Everything in their pastoral action and teaching is brought back to charity, and charity to Christ, the universal way of salvation.⁵⁶ All of them refer to Christ, the recapitulation of all things (Irenaeus), our deifier (Athanasius), founder and king of the city of God, which is the company of the elect (Augustine). In their historical, theological and eschatological perspective, the church is *Christus totus* that “runs along and in running makes her pilgrimage amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations from God, from the time of Abel, the first just one killed by his wicked brother, until the consummation of time.”⁵⁷

If we want to summarize the reasons that lead to studying the works of the fathers, we can say that they have been, after the apostles, as St. Augustine rightly said, the planters, irrigators, builders, pastors, feeders of the church, which has been able to grow due to their vigilant and tireless service.⁵⁸ In order for the church to continue growing, it is necessary to know their doctrine and works thoroughly. They are distinguished by being both pastoral and theological, catechetical and cultural, spiritual and social in an excellent and unique way in relation to what has taken place in other historical ages. It is precisely this organic unity of the various aspects of the life and mission of the church that makes the fathers so relevant and fecund for us too.

III. HOW TO STUDY THE FATHERS

From the preceding reflections on the current situation and the reasons for patristic studies, the question spontaneously arises as to the nature, objectives and method to be followed in promoting their quality. Both for professors and students, numerous tasks become necessary in this regard which must be further clarified and explained so that a solid formative effort can be made that responds to the needs of the desired renewal promoted on the basis of the directives of the Second Vatican Council.

1. The Nature of Patristic Studies and Their Objectives

a) It is very important that this area of ecclesiastical studies be clearly defined in conformity with its nature and purpose, and be inserted organically into the context of the theological disciplines. This is specified in two interconnecting spheres that involve the same object under different aspects: on the one hand, *patristics*, that deals with the theological thought of the fathers and, on the other, *patrology*, the object of which is the life and writings of the fathers. Whereas the first is of a doctrinal character and has many relationships with dogmatics (but also with moral theology, spiritual theology, Sacred Scripture and liturgy), the second is found more on the level of historical investigation and biographical and literary information, and has a natural connection with the history of the ancient church. Due to their theological character, patristics and patrology are different from ancient Christian literature, a non-

⁵⁶ Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, 10, 32, 1-3: PL, 41, 312ff.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, *De Civ. Dei*, 18, 51, 2: PL, 41, 61; cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

⁵⁸ *Contra Iul.*, 2, 10, 34: PL, 44, 698.

theological and literary discipline that studies the stylistic and philological aspects of the ancient Christian writers.

b) In dealing with patristic studies, the autonomy of patristics-patrology must be taken into consideration first of all as a discipline in itself with its method in the framework of the *corpus* of disciplines which are the object of theological teaching. The student must come to understand its autonomy as an area of theology in which the principles of the historical-critical method are applied rigorously.

c) In particular, in patrology a good overview of the fathers and their works should be presented, indicating their individual characteristics, situating their literary and pastoral activity in its historical context. Given its informative-historical character, the collaboration of a professor of ecclesiastic history may be necessary in order to make the best use of the time available or when there is a scarcity of professors. If necessary, greater space can also be reserved for students' private study by directing them to consult good manuals, dictionaries and other bibliographical aids.

d) In order to carry out its tasks satisfactorily, patristics must appear as a discipline in itself and be promoted in close collaboration with dogmatics. In fact the decree *Optatam Totius* (No. 16) calls upon both disciplines to aid and enrich one another on the condition, however, that they remain autonomous and faithful to their specific methods. Dogma carries out a service of unity, drawing all theological disciplines, including patristics, into the unifying perspective of the faith. It helps to systemize partial results and points the way to research and the teacher's didactic activity. The service rendered by patristics to dogmatics consists in outlining and specifying the mediation of God's revelation carried out by the fathers in the church and in the world of their times. It is a matter of describing, with full respect for the specificity of the historical-critical method, the picture of theology and Christian life during the patristic age in its historical reality. For this reason, the teaching of patristics, as stated in "The Theological Formation of Future Priests," must aim, among other things, "to give a sense of the continuity of theology which corresponds to fundamental data, and of its relative nature, which corresponds to its particular aspects and applications" (No. 87).

2. The Method

a) The study of patrology and patristics, in its first informative phase, implies recourse to manuals and other bibliographical aids. When, however, it goes on to deal with the delicate and complex problems of patristic theology, none of these aids can substitute for direct contact with the texts of the fathers. It is in fact through the professor's and the student's direct contact with the sources, particularly at an academic level and in special courses, that patristics must be taught and learned. Given the difficulties which students often meet, bilingual texts of editions that are known for their scientific seriousness should be made available to them.

b) The scientific study of the texts through the historical-critical method is analogous to the way in which that method is applied in the biblical sciences. In the use of this method, however, its limits must also be pointed out, and it must be integrated prudently with the

methods of modern literary analysis and hermeneutics with an adequate *manuductio* of the student in order to understand, evaluate and make use of them. Being a theological discipline that proceeds *ad lumen fidei* in all its phases, freedom of research must not reduce its object of investigation to the sphere of pure philology or historical criticism. Indeed, positive theology must recognize as a first presupposition the supernatural character of its object and the need to make reference to the magisterium. Students must therefore become aware that the rigor of the method, which is indispensable for the objective validity of any patristic research, does not exclude a previous programming of the research nor does it impede the active participation of the believing researcher who, in conformity with his *sensus fidei*, places himself and proceeds in a climate of faith.

c) The purity of the above-mentioned method requires further that both the researcher and the student be free from prejudices and preconceptions. In the field of patristics these are usually manifested in two tendencies: becoming woodenly tied to the writings of the fathers, belittling the living tradition of the church, thus considering the post-patristic church down to the present in progressive decline; instrumentalizing historical data into an arbitrary updating which does not take the legitimate progress and objectivity of the situation into consideration.

d) Didactic and practical problems such as a more rational use of time suggest the usefulness of collaboration between the disciplines more directly involved with the fathers. Interdisciplinary contact has its primary *locus* in dogmatics where the synthesis takes place, but many other disciplines can also benefit from it (moral theology, spiritual theology, liturgy and, in a special way, Sacred Scripture) which need to be enriched and renewed through recourse to the patristic sources. The concrete ways of this collaboration will vary according to circumstances. There are other possibilities on the level of foundation courses and others in the academic courses of greater specialization.

3. Presentation of the Material

a) The material which is the object of the patristics-patrolology course is what is codified by scholastic procedure and dealt with by the classic textbooks: the life, writings and doctrine of the fathers and of the ecclesiastical writers of Christian antiquity. In other words, it is the biographical profile of the fathers and the literary, historical and doctrinal presentation of their writings. The vastness of the material, however, requires limiting its scope and making some choices.

b) First of all, the professors will have to communicate to the students their love of the fathers and not only their knowledge of them. In order to do this, it will not be as necessary to insist on biography and bibliography as on contact with the sources. For this purpose, a choice will have to be made among the various ways of presenting the material. There are substantially the four following ways:

1) Analytical, which implies studying the individual fathers. This way is almost impossible given the number of fathers and the necessarily limited time reserved for this teaching.

2) Panoramic, which proposes to take an overall look at the patristics era and its representatives. It is useful for an initial introduction, but not for a contact with the sources and their deeper understanding.

3) Monographic, which emphasizes some of the more representative fathers. This is particularly suited to teaching the students how to approach the fathers and how to enter in depth into their thinking.

4) Last, thematic, which examines some basic topics and follows their development through the patristic works.

c) Once this first choice is made, there will have to be another: the texts to be read, examined and explained. At first, it is preferable to choose texts that deal largely with theological, spiritual, pastoral, catechetical or social questions which are generally more attractive and easier. The doctrinal texts, which are more difficult, can be left for later. These texts are to be studied thoroughly during the ongoing meetings between professor and student in lessons, colloquies and seminars. In this way that familiarity with the fathers will be achieved that is the best fruit of teaching. The real crowning of the formative task is reached, however, only when the student comes to make some friends among the fathers and assimilates their spirit.

d) Patristic studies cannot do without a solid knowledge of church history that makes possible a unifying view of problems, events, experiences and doctrinal, spiritual, pastoral and social development in the various ages. In this way one becomes aware of the fact that Christian thought, if it begins with the fathers, does not end with them. It follows that the study of patristics and patrology cannot do without the later tradition, including the scholastic, in particular with regard to the presence of the fathers in this tradition. Only in this way can the unity and development in tradition be seen and the meaning of recourse to the past be understood. Then it will not appear to be a useless archaeologism, but a creative study that helps us to know our times better and prepare for the future.

IV. PRACTICAL PROVISIONS

Patristic studies, then, constitute an essential stimulating part of theology and of the formation of priests. It thus becomes necessary to make the proper provisions to promote these studies in seminaries and theological faculties so that they will occupy a place that corresponds to their importance.

1. Since these studies touch directly on the end of theological teaching, they must be considered as a principal discipline to be taught separately with the method and material that is proper to them. Except for what was stated earlier with regard to “patrology” (No. 51), this subject cannot be identical either with church history nor with the history of dogma, much less with ancient Christian literature.

2. Sufficient attention is to be dedicated to patrology-patristics in “The Fundamental Principles of Priestly Formation” and in the related programs of study, defining its content and methods accurately and assigning a sufficient number of hours per week to it. As a minimum, teaching at least three semesters with two hours per week does not seem to be too much.

3. In the theological faculties, in addition to the regular foundation courses of the first cycle, seminars are to be organized and appropriate exercises and written work on patristic themes are to be encouraged. In the second cycle of specialization, attention must be given to stimulating the students' scientific interest through special courses and exercises whereby they may acquire an in-depth knowledge of various methodological and doctrinal subjects and prepare themselves for the future task of teaching. These qualities can be further perfected in the third cycle through the preparation of theses on patristic subjects.

4. In centers of priestly formation, persons who have obtained a specialization in this subject at institutes created for this purpose (e.g. the Augustinian Patristics Institute in Rome) are to be assigned to teaching patrology-patristics. The professor should have the skill to cope with primary sources and a proper method in making a complete and balanced presentation of the fathers' thought. The professor should be able to judge the published works of other professors and have the human and religious qualities that are the fruit of familiarity with the fathers and be able to communicate them to others.

5. It must be noted that this specialization is not only valid for teaching patrology-patristics. The wisdom and ethical-spiritual equilibrium of the fathers is also very useful in teaching dogmatic theology and for carrying out catechetical, spiritual and liturgical action effectively.

6. It is obvious that the study of the fathers also requires adequate instruments and aids such as a well-equipped library from the patristic viewpoint (collections, monographs, reviews, dictionaries), as well as knowledge of classical and modern languages. Given the well-known deficiencies in the humanities in today's schools, everything possible will have to be done to strengthen the study of Greek and Latin in centers of priestly formation.

Conclusion

In echoing the voice of the council and of the supreme pontiffs, this congregation has wished to call the attention of bishops and religious superiors to a subject of great importance for a solid formation of priests, the seriousness of theological study and the effectiveness of pastoral action in today's world. It entrusts these considerations and provisions to them so that in their great love for the church they will take steps to implement the content of this instruction and improve the quality of priestly formation. Last, it expresses its hope that a more careful study of the fathers will lead everyone to a greater assimilation of the word of God and to a renewed youth of the church that had and has in the fathers her teachers and models.

Rome, Nov. 10, 1989, feast of St. Leo the Great, pope and doctor of the church.

Cardinal William Baum
Prefect
Archbishop Jose Saraiva Martins
Secretary