Introduction to the Symposium

On December 8, 2025, Pope Leo XIV issued the Apostolic Letter *A Fidelity That Generates the Future,* marking the sixtieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Vatican II Decree on Priestly Formation, *Optatam totius,* and the Decree on Priestly Life and Ministry, *Presbyterorum ordinis.* In that letter, Pope Leo urged Christian communities, particularly seminaries, to keep reading these texts and studying them in the light of the challenge of mission, communion, and synodality. In response to this call, St. Mary's Seminary & University, through its Center for Continuing Formation, held an academic symposium focused on these two conciliar documents on March 11-12, 2026.

The Center for Continuing Formation at St. Mary's provides opportunities for the ongoing formation of bishops, priests, deacons, and lay ecclesial ministers in the areas of intellectual, human, spiritual, pastoral development. The Center extends, through its ongoing formation opportunities, the ministry of initial formation of seminarians for the priesthood which has been at the heart of St. Mary's contribution to the Church since its founding in 1791. The Center for Continuing Formation is proud to have been able to gather a total of over 30 formators from various seminaries around the country for this two-day symposium.

The keynote speaker for the symposium was Bishop James Massa, auxiliary bishop of Brooklyn and rector of St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie, New York. His address was entitled: "The Challenges for Priestly Formation Today." *Presbyterorum ordinis* identifies three crucial relationships for priests, the relationship to their bishop, the relationship to other priests in the presbyterate, and the relationship to the lay faithful they serve in the Church. Taking those relationships as his starting point, Bishop Massa developed how the relationship between the bishop and his priests has been harmed, as recent studies have pointed out, by mistrust over the Church's response to the sexual abuse crisis. He pointed out how the relationship among priests can be harmed by retreat into loneliness in the face of discouragement or fatigue. Finally, the priest's relationship with the faithful can harmed by the cultural polarization which makes itself felt even in parish life.

Father Lawrence Terrien, PSS, former superior general of the Society of St. Sulpice, presented examples from several conciliar documents which indicate a close correspondence between those texts and the key principles of the French School of Spirituality. He noted how the insistence of the French School on pastoral charity as the ideal of the priest has become one of the defining marks of priestly formation since Vatican II

Father Denis Robinson, OSB, rector of St. Meinrad Seminary, offered insights into the elements which could constitute the best practices for seminaries and dioceses to adopt in promoting the initial and ongoing formation of seminarians and priest. In particular, he stressed the importance of spiritual direction for the seminarian and the priest himself.

Fr. Hy Nguyen, PSS, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology and Vice-Rector at St. Mary's, explored the bond between Christ and the Church as described in *Lumen gentium* and *Optatam totius*, and how this bond shapes the identity of the priest through a special configuration to Christ.

Finally, Fr. Gladstone Stevens, PSS, rector of Theological College, Washington, DC, presented important insights on the operative Christologies at work in the sixth edition of the *Program for Priestly Formation* in the light of the conciliar documents *Presbyterorum ordinis* and *Optatam totius.*

This symposium was an occasion to take stock of the renewal of priestly formation over the past sixty years as called for by the Second Vatican Council. Today, in the light of the urgent challenges of mission, communion, and synodality, seminary formators are called to identify how each of their institutions can form the men of our time in the best way possible after the Heart of Christ.

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