



A Proposal of the Integral Maturity Competency Framework for Seminarians: A Case Study in Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

Major seminaries, also called seminaries, are responsible for training priests based on prescribed programs and contents. However, it's essential that the competence of seminarians or future priests be researched and proposed in accordance with each training stage and specific historical contexts. This study utilized the document analysis method to suggest a specification of the integral maturity competency framework for seminarians in Vietnam. The proposed competency framework comprises four component competencies, including 15 standards and 40 specified criteria. Accordingly, major seminaries, priestly formators, priests, and seminarians can research and reflect in order to take appropriate actions in formation according to the stated instructions and fulfill the targeted criteria of the framework.

1. INTRODUCTION

The priestly formation of the Vietnamese church aims to create leaders for Catholic communities and parishes in Vietnam. They must be leaders with moral character and capacities to benefit the community. The Vietnamese Catholic Bishops' Conference asserts that the production of priests with moral character and capacities for community service are important objectives of formation in the major seminary of the Catholic Church (The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, 2012). Thanks to these capacities, priests will be able to integrate into the parish community and the social community (The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, 2012). This is also the view of the Congregation for the Clergy, the supreme dicastery of the Catholic Church for priestly formation. The Congregation for the Clergy points out that the formation of the churches must make "priestly candidates not lose their cultural roots"[33]; In other words, trained priests must be able to integrate into the cultural environment in which they live and serve (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Therefore, it is necessary to pay more attention to environmental impacts from Vietnamese society in the formation of priests.

The Major Seminary plays an important role in the formation of seminarians, i.e. the future priests of the Catholic Church., not only in developing seminarians' knowledge and capacities, but also in the formation of their personalities and lifestyles. This process helps each seminarian deepen his knowledge, train his abilities, and cultivate his social character and spiritual life to become mature priests and serve people (Strange, 2015).

How can seminary educators measure the priestly formation process of the church in general and of the Vietnamese church in particular? What are the criteria for evaluating the moral qualities and capacity of priests to serve? This study proposes an integral maturity framework (IMF) for seminarians, i.e. future priests, and for major seminaries in Vietnam. The IMF gives major seminaries concrete data for evaluating training progress. At the same time, this IMF is also a set of standards for seminarians to reflect and self-evaluate in the formation process. As a result, the IMF helps the Church produce priests with moral qualities and the capacity to serve in order to adapt to the community and society. Therefore, it is also important to pay attention to the environmental impact on formation activities.

This study comprises the following main parts: (1) An introduction of the reasons for the development of this study; (2) A literature review to highlight the importance of training in moral character and service competence, (3) Research methods and research materials; (4) Findings, discussions, and limitations of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

With the emphasis on the role of priests in the Catholic Church, O'Meara (1999) underlines the importance of major seminaries in the process of priestly formation. He states that major seminaries provide an educational environment and facilitate seminarians - priest candidates, in developing necessary qualities and skills for their parochial mission.

According to O'Collins and Jones (2010), priestly formation at Catholic major seminaries comprises three compulsory stages focusing on spirituality, philosophy and theology. The authors emphasize the importance of these stages with the priest's mission in serving the parishes and people in their future career (Dao, 2015; Mark, 2018).

Ippolito et al. (2008) recommend that it is necessary to introduce an IMF for priests so that seminaries are able to evaluate and adjust their training programs. Additionally, the proposed framework can support seminarians in their self-training based on the accessible integral maturity standards, as Pope John Paul II remarked "all formation, priestly formation included, is ultimately a self-formation" (John, 1992).

The direction of the Catholic Church on major seminaries' priest formation, as stated in the paper "Pastores Dabo Vobis: On the Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day" by John (1992) and the "Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis: the Gift of the Priestly Vocation" by the Congregation for the Clergy (2016), highlights four dimensions of priest training, namely human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral (related to a priest's services). Each of these four dimensions, as attended specifically during the training process, can form, develop and create characteristic features in the priest formation, which can be categorized into six following attributes of a priest: (1) Having proper and mature human qualities: honesty and love; right judgment; fairness in material and communication; being responsible for themselves and others; moderation and balance in behavior, self-control and sexual abstinence; having the ability to live together; harmony and maturity in relations with others. (2) Having strong mental or spiritual qualities; deep introspection; capable of revival and silence; faithful in prayer and spiritual activities; staying in true intimacy with Jesus Christ, whom they believe in, and knowing how to imitate the example of Jesus Christ, the ideal leader of the priest. (3) Having strong intellectual ability; understanding various fields of knowledge, especially in philosophy and theology; the ability and research skills in independent self-study; having the ability and skills to teach and interpret knowledge to others; the ability to perceive the beauty and aesthetics of the surroundings and the world. (4) Having ability and skill in serving others; communicating and collaborating with others; empathizing with the circumstances of others; recognizing the needs of those around them; always being dedicated, willing to serve selflessly for others, even sacrificing one's own life. (5) Having ability to combine human qualities with service work; ability to combine mental and spiritual qualities with service work; knowing how to combine knowledge abilities and skills with service work in practical circumstances. (6) Having ability and skills in management and leadership; having a serene, empathetic and loving outlook for collaborators and others; ability to open up and listen to others; Guiding and leading, having right judgment and objective awareness of people and events.

The documents on priest formation guidelines of Pope Paul VI entitled "Decree on the Ministry and life of Priests" (1965) and "Decree on Priestly Training" (1965) identify the purposes and responsibilities of a priest. These are the basis to determine the characteristics of a priest, namely 1) human qualities; 2) capacity to maintain celibacy; 3) capacity to maintain brotherhood with other priests; 4) competence of communicating; 5) strong mental and spiritual faith; 6) competence of teaching and coaching; 7) capacity to collaborate; 8) competence of caring and comforting; 9) leadership competencies; 10) selfless service spirit.

The directive "Pastores Dabo Vobis: On the Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day" by Pope John Paul II (1992) emphasizes the importance of long-term priestly formation in the contemporary context of the society. This is the first official document presenting the approach to comprehensive priestly formation through four training dimensions, namely 1) human capacities and virtues; 2) mental or spiritual capacities and virtues; 3) intellectual capacities and virtues; 4) service-related and pastoral capacities and virtues.

The directive “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis: the Gift of the Priestly Vocation” by the Congregation for the Clergy (2016) updates, supplements and systematizes the standards based on two documents “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis: Basic Norms for Priestly Formation” (1970) and “Pastores Dabo Vobis: On the Formation of Priest in Circumstances of the Present Day” by Pope John Paul II (1992). The document of version 2016 specifies the standards on practical competencies and human qualities among the four dimensions: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. Meanwhile, the document “Priestly Formation: Directions and Guidelines” (The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam, 2012), also based on the two aforementioned references, presents the standards according to the four above dimensions in the context of Vietnam.

Based on the document analysis above, the authors would propose the integral maturity competencies for seminarians in the following sections.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study basically drew on the document analysis method with the aim to identify the structure of integral maturity competencies for priests (in the case of Vietnam). Specifically, the documents analyzed includes “Decree on the Ministry and life of Priests” (Paul VI, 1965), “Decree on Priestly Formation” (Paul VI, 1965); “Pastores Dabo Vobis: On the Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day” (Paul II, 1992); “Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis: the Gift of the Priestly Vocation” by the Congregation for the Clergy (2016) and “Priestly Formation: Directions and Guidelines” (the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam, 2012).

In addition, international documents related to seminarian training were also searched for and analyzed to introduce or interpret certain criteria of the proposed IMF, such as O’Collins and Jones (2010), Porter et. al. (2019).

Moreover, the development of an IMF is necessarily based on the authentic feedback from practical training at Catholic major seminaries and community leadership of parish priests. Several parish priests and seminary lecturers were consulted to specify the proposed standards and criteria for modification of the IMF. For instance, the issues related to community leadership of parish priests were discussed to supplement and accomplish the necessary standards of the IMF.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Proposing an ideal competency framework or an IMF

Based on the theoretical background and the above research approach, especially the factors of characteristics of Catholic priests, guiding and regulating documents for formation at major seminaries of the Catholic Church, training practice at those major Catholic seminaries and community leadership in parishes as well as the impacts of environment on formation at major seminaries in Vietnam, the researchers would propose an IMF for priestly formation at major seminaries in Vietnam.

First and foremost, this IMF comprises standards which satisfy two following requirements: 1) These standards are also the targets of the four dimensions of priestly formation at major Catholic seminaries; 2) These standards satisfy the factors of integral maturity namely moral qualities (human and spiritual qualities), intellectuality, leadership competencies, and service spirit. Specifically, the standards are described as follows:

Table 1. Four dimensions (groups) of standards of integral maturity

Human qualities (individual and community)	Spiritual or mental qualities (developing spiritual qualities)	Intellectuality (knowledge and research competence)	Pastoral qualities (leadership competencies and service spirit)
<input type="checkbox"/> Wisdom <input type="checkbox"/> Moderation <input type="checkbox"/> Courage <input type="checkbox"/> Fairness <input type="checkbox"/> Community spirit	<input type="checkbox"/> Faith <input type="checkbox"/> Hope <input type="checkbox"/> Love	<input type="checkbox"/> Knowledge <input type="checkbox"/> Competence of studying and researching <input type="checkbox"/> Competence of self-study and self-research	<input type="checkbox"/> Teaching and Coaching <input type="checkbox"/> Performing rituals <input type="checkbox"/> Community leading <input type="checkbox"/> Service spirit

The following table specifies the criteria of the above mentioned standards:

Table 2. The proposed IMF for priests

Standards	Criteria	Description
Human qualities (forming and developing individual- and community-oriented attributes)		
Wisdom	<i>C1: Identify truth</i>	Being able to discover and identify truths; being able to distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors in a priest's lifestyle; being able to predict events based on sound natural laws and rational doctrine of the Catholic Church.
	<i>C2: Perceive beauty</i>	Having a sense and ability to appreciate beauty, being able to recognise the beauty of art and surroundings; being able to recognise the beauty of the priestly life; being able to recognise the good traits of others.
Moderation	<i>C3: Order and discipline</i>	Maintaining order and discipline in time management (do the activities as scheduled) following the training schedule of the whole major seminaries; and in life, being tidy and clean.
	<i>C4: Table manner, outfits, language, behavior</i>	Being moderate in eating and drinking, not overindulging in or even being addicted to alcohol; being moderate and serious in outfits, not wearing flamboyant outfits in an objectionable manner, being moderate in language and behavior.
	<i>C5: Sexual Self-control</i>	Having knowledge about sexuality; having tendency to express sexuality in the healthy way, without inappropriate and extreme behavior; maintaining proper sexual interaction with others
	<i>C6: Celibacy</i>	Being able to commit celibacy not only in physical life but also in the mind, having no desire to marry to others, not having any thoughts related to sexuality with others.
Courage	<i>C7: Physical well-being</i>	Being able to participate in sporting activities to train physical wellbeing; being able to design a personal appropriate agenda to keep fit.
	<i>C8: Balanced mentality</i>	Having a stable mentality with balanced thoughts and no paranoia, no distorted or excessive psychological expressions.
	<i>C9: Persistence and strength in the priestly life</i>	Being able to pursue and live the truth; being able to observe and willingly and fearlessly live what is appropriate with the priestly life; being able to reject what is contrary to the priestly life.
Fairness	<i>C10: Freedom, responsibility</i>	Having a sense of freedom and responsibilities with oneself and community in services. Dare to take responsibilities in public life.
	<i>C11: Respect to basic rights</i>	Respect and maintain fairness in interactions at major seminaries; being able to preserve and protect public facilities and properties, etc. of major seminaries and others.
Community spirit	<i>C12: Solidarity, Love</i>	Being able to communicate and collaborate in daily life activities at major seminaries; being tolerant and willing to devote to shared tasks at the seminary; being able to share and support those in need.
	<i>C13: Open-Mindedness, Obedience</i>	Being open-minded and welcoming with formation; showing obedience towards the superior and accepting arrangements according to demands anticipated by the superior.

<i>Spiritual or mental qualities (developing spiritual qualities)</i>		
Faith	<i>C 14: Engagement in the common pious activities</i>	Strictly observing the timetable and participating in all the pious activities at the seminary including worship, prayer, praying sessions with the community; fulfill service duties in the common rituals at the seminaries.
	<i>C 15: Engagement in the personal pious time</i>	Having a sense of connection with Jesus Christ through personal activities; being able to arrange and prioritize personal pious time; setting time for life reflection every day.
	<i>C 16: Pious attitude</i>	Being aware of Jesus Christ's presence in life and rituals; Participating in pious activities with enthusiasm; having enthusiastic and solemn manner and attitude when engaging in services
	<i>C 17: Silence</i>	Being able to observe the holy hour; spending silent time before and after the pious ritual.
Hope	<i>C 18: Having hope in Jesus Christ</i>	Having trust and hope in Jesus Christ despite hardship in life; making choices and solutions with the hope in and based on the model of Jesus Christ.
	<i>C 19: Relying on Our Lady Mary and the Saints</i>	Seeking for support through prayers to Our Lady Maria and the Saints; making choices and decisions based on the role models of Our Lady Maria and The Saints.
Love	<i>C 20: Love for Jesus Christ</i>	Practicing visiting Jesus Christ every day; practicing virtues and showing love for the Eucharistic Jesus Christ.
	<i>C 21: Devotion for Our Lady Maria and the Saints</i>	Having love and devotion for Our Lady Maria and the Saints; showing expressions of love for Our Lady Maria and the Saints; frequently reading pious books; promoting the devotion for virtue models of Our Lady Maria and the Saints.
<i>Intellectuality (Knowledge and research competence, self-study and self-researching competency)</i>		
Knowledge	<i>C 22: General knowledge</i>	Having general knowledge of culture, history, politics and society; being able to identify and analyze economic, politic, and social events with scientific basis.
	<i>C 23: Specialized knowledge</i>	Having profound knowledge of philosophy and theology; being capable of interpreting and analyzing scientifically with philosophical basis; being capable of interpreting incidents and events from a theological perspective.
Competence of studying and researching	<i>C 24: Inquisitiveness in study and research</i>	Having inquisitiveness in exchanging and adjusting received knowledge; having the spirit of seeking and deepening knowledge; having a desire to discover and apply learnt knowledge.
	<i>C 25: Synthesizing and Reflection</i>	Being able to reason, synthesize and reflect about the learnt knowledge during the process of knowledge accumulation.
	<i>C 26: Group researching</i>	Being competent in exchanging information, collaborating and co-researching in groups; being able to defend personal opinions and identify limitations in group research.

Competence of self-studying and self-researching	<i>C 27: Self-study and self-research</i>	Being competent in making arrangements and developing personal self-studying programs and timetables; being able to devise their own effective self-study and self-research methods.
	<i>C 28: Utilizing libraries and resources</i>	Having a plan to utilize research resources in libraries; be able to exploit digital and online resources, etc; being able to arrange and systemize resources for research.
<i>Pastoral qualities (leadership competencies and service spirit)</i>		
Teaching and Coaching	<i>C 29: Educating truths</i>	Being able to educate philosophy and theology in accordance with the doctrine of the Catholic Church; being capable of explaining truths practically, bringing about benefits to human life.
	<i>C30: Coaching teaching facilitators</i>	Being capable of training individuals or communities under one's responsibilities; being capable of training collaborators for the cause of promulgating religious truths to others.
Performing rituals	<i>C 31: Conducting rituals</i>	Being able to perform and conduct Catholic rituals according to the Catholic Church; having appropriate manner and attitude in conducting the ritual to support and bring about benefits to the community.
	<i>C32: coaching supporters in services</i>	Be able to create favorable conditions for the faithful to actively engage in the rituals with knowledge; be capable of training supporter groups in performing the rituals;
Community leading	<i>C 33: Sensitivity in services</i>	Being sensitive and able to recognise the needs of others, the community and society; being able to sympathize with others' difficulties without their explicit confessions.
	<i>C 34: Credibility in leadership</i>	Being present and knowledgeable of the community; being sincere and trustworthy in attitude, language and actions; being able to confront the challenges and difficulties of the community; being constantly active and creative in problem solving; being capable of connecting members of the community.
	<i>C 35: Scientific executive Organization</i>	Creating a united community; setting up departments and units with transparent and scientific division of roles and management positions; being competent in motivating and encouraging collaborators in executive tasks.
	<i>C 36: Opening up the community to the society</i>	Being competent in helping the community to open up to the society, avoiding the risk of extreme localization or excessive attitude; being able to cooperate to build a better society; opening your heart and sharing hardship with others through charity and social volunteering work.
Service spirit	<i>C 37: Creating favorable conditions for others</i>	Being considerate of others and creating favorable conditions for others in services; paying attention and efforts to find convenient and simple methods of management and leadership to provide prompt, convenient and effective services.
	<i>C 38: Supporting others</i>	Being able to comfort and motivate others when facing difficulties; being willing to help others when needed; caring about their benefits and living conditions.

	<i>C 39: Serving others selflessly</i>	Serving others with delightful and loving spirit; always seeking the best ways to serve and benefit others; being capable of putting others' interests before their own.
	<i>C 40: Sacrificing life for others</i>	Being willing to serve others in a disadvantaged time for oneself; being able to accept losses for oneself while serving, even sacrificing their own life to benefit people, society and the world.

4.2. Discussions

According to the IMF, the core qualities of a Catholic priest that seminarians are expected to form include: wisdom to discover truths; ability to appreciate the beauty of priestly life; moderation in eating and drinking, outfits and sexuality; self-control in daily activities; love for priestly celibacy and competence to live the celibacy; a balanced state of physical, psychological, mental, and spiritual things. The formation process can produce priests with these competencies only if the formation at the major seminary gets a good quality input. To gain this input, the examination needs to be serious and strict in accordance with the regulations of the Catholic Church in Vietnam.

The IMF in this study was developed to measure progress in priestly formation. However, it is not only a measure of the development of seminarians, i.e. future priests or leaders in the field of religion, this framework is also an important set of criteria for all those who wish to become leaders in the fields of education, economy, etc.

This IMF is also important for educators to evaluate their formation process. At the same time, it helps educators to recognize the development of their trainees.

4.3. Limitations

This IMF is the result of the researcher's formation experience based on the analysis and synthesis of priestly formation documents of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. However, certain limitations are inevitable, which calls for practical feedback to increase the level of reliability.

The material of this framework is largely based on the religious documents of the Catholic Church. Therefore, this framework is a set of effective measures for the Catholic Church. To expand this framework to other religions or social fields such as education, economics, politics, etc., it is necessary to use additional sources of materials from other religions or related social fields.

5. CONCLUSION

The IMF is important for the process of priestly formation at major seminaries in Vietnam. It helps trainers and trainees to evaluate and self-evaluate formation results. As a result, timely adjustments and appropriate solutions can be made for the process of priestly formation.

For seminarians, i.e. future priests, they must be self-conscious from the beginning of accumulating for themselves the qualities necessary for priestly life if they are to pursue their priestly vocation and mission.

With trainers, they are required to meet conditions including solid intellectual ability; effective leadership, resolution and service skills; the virtues of humanity, spirituality and relationship with others. The absolute maturity of the formators and teachers vividly concretizes the Jesus model for seminarians. These stereotypes play an important and decisive role in training and self-training towards holistic maturity.

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