

CASE STUDIES in FORMATION

Preliminary Considerations

Every candidate for seminary formation has one primary duty – to reveal himself. Rather than entering seminary with the burden of self-questioning: “Am I called to be a priest?” The man can now begin to ask: “Am I being honest and generous with the Church?” Because he has been accepted by his sponsoring diocese and the seminary, the man can confidently rest upon the fact that the Church sees the qualities of priesthood in him. He can be relieved of self-scrutiny and move into artful and appropriate self-revelation. In this way, the Church comes to know better the affective maturity of the man, his strengths and weaknesses.

Too many seminarians believe the formation advisor is looking for problems or “stuff” that might get in the way of being found suitable for Orders. “If too much “stuff” is revealed, then I may not be ordained,” can be the fearful position of too many in formation. This adversarial sensibility requires radical reorientation. When a formation advisor adopts a different attitudinal stance with this question: “Is the man letting God into all of his things?” and then, “Is he moving with God through them?” Suddenly, seminarian and formator are focused upon God’s initiative in the formative experiences of life.

4 Case Studies – Descriptive Exercise

These case studies all presume that a man has completed at least two years of pre-theology or up to four years of college seminary. Each of the four cases could be characterized by the honesty of “letting God into his life” and the generous courage of “moving with God” in and through his struggles. Match the letter which may best describe the seminarian in each Case Study.

- A. Seminarian letting God into his life
- B. Seminarian letting God into his life and moving with God
- C. Seminarian letting God into his life and not moving with God in his life
- D. Seminarian not letting God into his life

Case Study 1 – _____

The seminarian is asked to say more about his history of seminary formation up to this point (Theology I) and speak about what has been most formative. He has enjoyed learning how to pray the Liturgy of the Hours and has great interest in sacred music. The liturgy has been a source of comfort for him in the seminary, but there is a desire to see more in the parish liturgies. He is not sure that he could celebrate Masses like those he has seen in many diocesan parishes. When asked if he sees the priest as a liturgical presider or a father, a discussion ensues about fatherhood in his own life. “I see myself as a priest-father, but I have not seriously thought about being a father of a family. My mom saw me as a priest from a young age. She never forced anything, and my dad was ‘ok’ with it.” When asked if he believed that marriage and family could be a place of real happiness for him, he deflected the question: “God has been calling me to a supernatural call. The natural call to marriage and family has been assumed into it. What good would it do think about it? It would seem discouraging to me. Why would I want to go down a desolate or tempting path?”

Case Study 2 – _____

At the end of a formation meeting, three questions are typically asked of the seminarian:

Do you have any questions?

Is there any way I can assist you?

Is there anything you want me to know?

The last question prompts a new admission about some recent struggles with chastity: “Father, I have been working with my spiritual director on my experiences of loneliness. However, I want you to know what I am doing for accountability and limiting of my media use at this time. I have been avoiding Covenant Eyes by using various applications. This is a symptom of my hiding. I do not want to hide anymore.” He seeks accountability with a brother seminarian. Converts his phone to a “dumb phone” and begins work to examine the sources of his anxiety in counseling.

Case Study 3 – _____

During a formation session the man is asked about his experience of chastity. As the months pass, the man expresses increasing freedom to name his struggles and take up healthy habits. He leans less and less upon material restrictions and develops an increasing sense of self-mastery: “Father, my unchaste habits, always made me feel like a ‘boy.’ I spent plenty of time shaming myself and feeling sorry for myself, because I could not overcome these periodic episodes of self-soothing. Counseling and being honest in accountability have been helpful, but the taste of increasing freedom has unveiled the spirit of perfectionism and pride that truly undermines my relationship with God. I have an ability to work day-by-day without being ashamed of my feelings with God. I am so grateful for the spiritual freedom to be really honest with God about all the ways I think I am failing. I did not know there could be so much love for me in this area of my life.”

Case Study 4 – _____

The man has been initially honest about his struggles. With each month however, there is an increasing sense of sadness, and some anger is surfacing. The faculty has noted some lapses in class preparation and attentiveness. His affect is low. When asked “how he feels” there is little response or insight. He has switched from one accountability partner to another, because he felt the previous one to be “too intense.” When asked about prayer, the man declared that “It seems that God is not interested in making his growth very easy. It seems that nothing is ever simple. I am afraid that nothing is changing. All I do is try to keep up my prayer life, but it does not seem that God is keeping his promises.” Further questions reveal that he has harbored other sources of media and been shifting around his access to the internet. On a scale of 1 to 10, when asked about his desire to grow in virtue, especially chastity and self-mastery: “It is about a 6.5.”