Psychological Assessment of Candidates for Priesthood

Topics of Consideration


• Congregation for Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis* (2016)
Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood
I. The Church & the Discernment of a Vocation

• The Church, “begetter and formator of vocations,” has the duty of discerning a vocation and the suitability of candidates for the priestly ministry.

• The Church is moved by two concerns: to safeguard the good of her own mission and, at the same time, the good of the candidates.
2. The priestly ministry requires certain abilities

- The human dimension is the foundation of all formation.
- His personality (affective maturity and absence of mental disorder) should be a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ.
- The positive and stable sense of one's masculine identity
- The capacity to form relations in a mature way with individuals and groups of people
2. The priestly ministry requires certain abilities

- The freedom to be enthused by great ideals and a coherence in realizing them in everyday action
- The courage to take decisions and to stay faithful to them
- A knowledge of oneself, of one's talents and limitations, so as to integrate them within a self-esteem before God
- The capacity to correct oneself
- The appreciation for beauty
- The trust that is born from an esteem of the other person and that leads to acceptance
- The capacity of the candidate to integrate his sexuality in accordance with the Christian vision, including in consideration of the obligation of celibacy
II. Preparation of Formators

• 3. Every formator should have a good knowledge of the human person, his rhythms of growth; his potentials and weaknesses; and his way of living his relationship with God.

• Formators need to be adequately prepared to carry out a discernment
II. Preparation of Formators

Errors in discerning vocations are not rare, and in all too many cases psychological defects, sometimes of a pathological kind, reveal themselves only after ordination to the priesthood. Detecting defects earlier would help avoid many tragic experiences.
II. Preparation of Formators

Hence, the need for every formator to possess, in due measure, the sensitivity and psychological preparation that will allow him, to perceive the candidate's true motivations, to discern the barriers that stop him integrating human and Christian maturity, and to pick up on any psychopathic disturbances present in the candidate.
II. Preparation of Formators

The formator must know how to evaluate the person in his totality, not forgetting the gradual nature of development. He must see the candidate's strong and weak points, as well as the level of awareness that the candidate has of his own problems. Lastly, the formator must discern the candidate's capacity for controlling his own behavior in responsibility and freedom.
III. Contribution of Psychology to Vocational Discernment

These experts can offer formators an opinion regarding the diagnosis of – and, perhaps, therapy for – psychic disturbances. Moreover, by suggesting ways for favouring a vocational response that is more free, they can help support the development of the human (especially relational) qualities, which are required for the exercise of the ministry.
Manifold symptoms of the imbalance rooted in the heart of man:
• The contradictions between the ideal of self-giving to which the candidate consciously aspires, and the life he actually leads.
• Difficulties inherent in the gradual development of the moral virtues.
• In some cases, the development of these moral qualities can be blocked by certain psychological wounds of the past that have not yet been resolved.
III. Contribution of Psychology to Vocational Discernment

These wounds, unknown to the candidate in their real effects, are often erroneously attributed by him to causes outside himself, thus depriving him of the possibility of facing them adequately.

In exceptional cases recourse to experts in the psychological sciences, both before admission to the seminary and during the path of formation, can help the candidate overcome those psychological wounds.
III. Contribution of Psychology to Vocational Discernment

To arrive at a correct evaluation of the candidate's personality, the expert can have recourse to both interviews and tests. These must always be carried out with the previous, explicit, informed and free consent of the candidate.

In consideration of their particularly sensitive nature, the use of specialist psychological or psychotherapeutic techniques must be avoided by the formators.
III. Contribution of Psychology to Vocational Discernment

6. It is useful for the rector and other formators to be able to count on the co-operation of experts in the psychological sciences. Such experts, who cannot be part of the formation team, will have to have specific competence in the field of vocations, and unite the wisdom of the Spirit to their professional expertise. These experts, as well as being distinguished for their sound human and spiritual maturity, must be inspired by an anthropology that openly shares the Christian vision about the human person, sexuality, as well as vocation to the priesthood and to celibacy.
a) Initial Discernment

8. Nor must it be forgotten that there is a possible tendency of some candidates to minimize or deny their own weaknesses. In the phase of initial discernment, the help of experts in the psychological sciences can be necessary principally on the specifically diagnostic level, whenever there is a suspicion that psychic disturbances may be present. If it should be ascertained that the candidate needs therapy, this therapy should be carried out before he is admitted to the seminary or house of formation.
b) Subsequent Formation

9. During the period of formation, recourse to experts in the psychological sciences can respond to the needs born of any crises; but it can also be useful in supporting the candidate on his journey towards a more sure possession of the moral virtues. It can furnish the candidate with a deeper knowledge of his personality, and can contribute to overcoming, or rendering less rigid, his psychic resistances to what his formation is proposing.
b) Subsequent Formation

10. It is possible that the candidate – notwithstanding his own commitment and the support of the psychologist, or psychotherapy – could continue to show himself unable to face realistically his areas of grave immaturity – even given the gradual nature of all human growth. Such areas of immaturity would include strong affective dependencies; notable lack of freedom in relations; excessive rigidity of character; lack of loyalty; uncertain sexual identity; deep-seated homosexual tendencies; etc.
IV. Request for Specialist Evaluations and Respect for the Candidate's Privacy

Canon 1051, 1º of the Code of Canon Law foresees that, for the scrutiny of the qualities required in view of ordination, one should provide, inter al., for an evaluation of the state of the candidate's physical and psychic health.

Therefore, in cases of doubt concerning the candidate's suitability, admission to the seminary or house of formation will sometimes only be possible after a psychological evaluation of the candidate's personality.
IV. Request for Specialist Evaluations and Respect for the Candidate's Privacy

12. The formational institution has the right and the duty to acquire the knowledge necessary for a prudentially certain judgement regarding the candidate's suitability. But this must not harm the candidate's right to a good reputation, which any person enjoys, nor the right to defend his own privacy, as prescribed in canon 220 of the Code of Canon Law. This means that the candidate's psychological consultation can only proceed with his previous, explicit, informed and free consent.
IV. Request for Specialist Evaluations and Respect for the Candidate's Privacy

The candidate will be able freely to approach an expert who is either chosen from among those indicated by the formators, or chosen by the candidate himself and accepted by the formators.

According to the possibilities, the candidates should be guaranteed a free choice from among various experts who possess the requisites indicated.
IV. Request for Specialist Evaluations and Respect for the Candidate's Privacy

If the candidate, faced with a motivated request by the formators, should refuse to undergo a psychological consultation, the formators will not force his will in any way. Instead, they will prudently proceed in the work of discernment with the knowledge they already have, bearing in mind the aforementioned canon 1052 § 1.
V. The Relationship Between those Responsible for Formation and the Expert

a) Those Responsible in the External Forum

13. In a spirit of reciprocal trust and in co-operation with his own formation, the candidate can be invited freely to give his written consent so that the expert in the psychological sciences, who is bound by confidentiality, can communicate the results of the consultation to the formators indicated by the candidate himself.
b) Specific Character of Spiritual Direction

14. It is a firm principle that spiritual direction cannot, in any way, be interchanged with or substituted by forms of analysis or of psychological assistance.
V. The Relationship Between those Responsible for Formation and the Expert

The spiritual director can find that, in order to clear up any doubts that are otherwise irresolvable and to proceed with greater certainty in the discernment and in spiritual accompaniment, he needs to suggest to the candidate that he undergo a psychological consultation – without, however, ever demanding it.
VI. Persons Dismissed From, or Who Have Freely Left, Seminaries or Houses of Formation

The previous formators have the explicit duty of furnishing exact information to the new formators.

In the case of a transfer to another seminary or house of formation, the candidate must inform the new formators about any psychological consultation previously carried out. Only with the candidate's free, written consent can the new formators have access to the communication of the expert who carried out the consultation.
Guidelines on the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions

Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations

April 2015

“...to be used when developing policies on the use of psychological evaluations in seminary admissions.”
Webinar Recording

“Clinical & Ethical Considerations in the Psychological Assessment of Roman Catholic Seminary Candidates”

SLIconnect.org/assessment
The Purposes of a Psychological Evaluation for Seminary Admissions

Psychological assessments help the diocesan or eparchial bishop, the major superior, and the seminary rector gain a greater understanding of developmental, psychological, and other personal factors at work in the life of an applicant, and how these may strengthen or hinder an authentic vocational discernment.
Competence – USCCB

• Clinical experts are ethically bound to address only the areas in which they are properly educated, supervised, trained, experienced, and competent. They are to be outside consultants and not part of the formation team.

• If a clinician is not competent to work with someone from a foreign culture, he/she should seek appropriate supervision or training.
Confidentiality – USCCB

The findings of the entire admissions process, if the applicant is accepted by the bishop or major superior, are to be shared with the rector or director of formation and admissions team in a timely manner. They may decide to share this material, including the psychological evaluation report with the appropriate formation faculty.
Confidentiality – *USCCB*

This report or an abbreviated version thereof will contain significant elements gleaned from the full psychological assessment, but it avoids the most intimate details; it is appropriate that it include the assessor’s recommendations for the applicant to succeed in the seminary formation program.
Role of Psychological Information in Formation

The findings of the entire admissions process, if the applicant is accepted by the bishop or major superior, are to be shared with the rector and admission team of the seminary in a timely manner. The rector may decide to share this material, including the psychological evaluation report with the appropriate formation faculty.
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Creating a Good Working Relationship: Diocese-Clinician
A Good Working Relationship

• Assessing competency
• Knowledge of Catholic culture and religious charism
• Comfort in addressing issues unique to religious life: formation culture, celibacy, ministerial demands, role of authority
• Clear understanding of confidentiality, releases of information and multiple clients; *must have this discussion early*
Sample Evaluation Guidelines

Community X

Psychological Evaluation Guidelines Information for Vocation Directors and Evaluating Psychologists

(Assessments for application must have been completed within one year of application.)
Sample Evaluation Guidelines

I. Evaluation Process & Testing Instruments
   A. Behavioral Observations/Clinical Interview
   B. Objective Measures
   C. Projective Testing
   D. Intelligence Testing
Sample Evaluation Guidelines

II. Focus Issues for Psychological Report
   A. Overall assessment of level of psychological functioning
   B. Assessment of psychosocial maturity
   C. Assessment of psychosexual maturity
   D. Assessment of personal autonomy and attitude towards authority figures
   E. Assessment of flexibility and emotional resilience
   F. Assessment of authenticity of motivations for religious life and ability of applicant to complete studies
   G. Psychologist’s satisfaction that applicant responded in all significant areas honestly and thoroughly
   H. Specific recommendations for applicant’s continued growth and development when in formation
Sample Evaluation Guidelines

III. Results

A. The full report of the psychological evaluation should be mailed by the psychologist as soon as possible after the evaluation to the following: Brother X.

B. We will use your report in making decisions about admissions AND, upon admission, in guiding the candidate toward further growth counseling that he might decide to undertake during his formation. Please make every attempt to address all the focus issues identified in the above Section II.

C. We will treat your report with professional confidentiality. Only the Provincial, Vocation Director and the Director of Formation will have access to the report.

D. The report will be in the locked care of the Vocation Director.
Candidate Assessment Components
Candidate Assessment Components

• Psychosocial history
• Clinical interview
• Psychological testing
• Discussion and recommendations
Psychosocial History

- Family history (Mental Illness; Abuse; Neglect)
- Academic history (ADHD, Learning Disorder)
- Occupational history
- Vocational/ministerial experience (None)
- Psychosexual and relational history (Abuse, few relationships, overly active sexually)
- Additional considerations for multicultural assessments (Is assessment possible?)
Clinical Interview

• Structured mental health interview
• Significant personal/family mental health history
• Notable medical conditions (HIV; Certain Disabilities)
• Problematic behaviors; addictions; substance use/abuse history
• Treatment history (Extensive?)
Psychological Testing

• Intelligence measure (IQ <85) (IQ <95)
• Psychological testing
  – Objective personality measures
  – Projective personality measures
• Sample testing protocol to include:
  – Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-IV for college age applicants OR Brief Intelligence Screening measure for post-graduate applicants (WASI or Shipley)
  – MMPI-2 and NEO-PI-3 or 16PF
  – Rorschach Inkblot Test and Incomplete Sentence Blank or Thematic Apperception Test
Discussion & Recommendations

• Comprehensive written report accompanied by verbal feedback summary
• Recommendations geared towards:
  – The candidate’s formation and seminary experience
  – Addressing vulnerabilities that could inhibit ministry success
  – Tangible recommendations for formators
Discussion

Comprehensive written report accompanied by verbal feedback summary

• Overall assessment of level of psychological functioning
• Assessment of psychosocial maturity
• Assessment of psychosexual maturity
• Assessment of personal autonomy and attitude towards authority figures
• Assessment of flexibility and emotional resilience
• Assessment of authenticity of motivations for priesthood and ability of applicant to complete priesthood studies
Discussion

• Thought processing (Psychosis)
• Emotional functioning/affective maturity (Dysthymia, Major Depression, Bipolar Disorder, Severe OCD, Mild OCD, PTSD)
• Relational maturity (Strong Personality Traits; Personality Disorder; Sexual Addiction)
• Overall evaluation
Recommendations (PPF)

Ways in which the candidate assessment can be helpful to both the seminarian and the formation team include:

1. To identify the presence of fundamental markers of human maturity;
2. To highlight strengths and internal resources available for formation work and future pastoral ministry;
3. To identify vulnerabilities that need to be addressed in the course of formation;

(Caution – when the above are not identified.)
Recommendations

4. To confront the seminarian with reliable information about himself that he may be tempted to resist;

5. To note factors that will influence how formation staff can most effectively work with the seminarian and offer the support he needs; and

6. To help integrate the dimensions of seminary formation, especially in reference to human formation, such as the importance of affective maturity for intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral formation.
Overall Assessment of:

- Vulnerabilities contraindicated to priesthood
- Emotional and relational skills to navigate complicated ministerial demands and relationships
- Capacity to function successfully within an authority structure
- *Does the individual have the skills necessary to serve the church in a healthy, balanced and life-giving way?*
Contraindications

Number 51 of the PPF encourages admission personnel to articulate for psychologists those human traits and qualities that contradict an authentic vocation to the priesthood.

Without attempting an exhaustive list, the following contraindications are provided as a guide to psychologists as they write their report on the applicant’s suitability:
Contraindications

1. Inability to be formed (blocks to growth and conversion); rigidity or inflexibility that precludes openness to guidance and influence;

2. Psychopathology that cannot be managed easily with medication and that would disrupt or preclude healthy ministry;

3. Areas of serious emotional vulnerability, given the demands of responsibilities, celibacy, and life as a public figure and clergy;
4. **Personality traits and disorders** inconsistent with or compromising healthy ministry;

5. **Pervasive developmental disorders** that may lead to behaviors incompatible with the human formation traits and characteristics of healthy relationships and ministry;

6. **Relations with self or others** that are so damaged or shame-based that the person cannot relate or assume healthy leadership;
Contraindications

7. Significant troubles with addictive disorders or habits;
8. Activity or inclination toward sexual activity with a minor or other traits that might indicate the person could be a harm to minors;
9. Psycho-sexual disorders;
10. History of psychopathic deviance, criminality, and unethical, illegal, and unconscionable behavior;
Contraindications

11. **Multiple physical and medical concerns** that significantly impair the ability of the candidate to function responsibly;******

12. **Intellectual limitations** that would hinder either higher academic studies or the navigation of the complexities of leadership in parish life; and

13. **Severe learning disorders** and intellectual disability compounded with lack of intellectual curiosity.******
Contraindications

It may be discerned that an applicant is in need of some therapeutic services to address matters which are not entirely disqualifying for admission to the program.

The timely discernment of and attention to such problems that would hinder the vocational journey can only be of great benefit to the applicant as well as to the Church.
The Gift of the Priestly Vocation

Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis
A formation for interior life and communion

41. The future priest must seek to develop a balanced and mature capacity to enter into relationship with his neighbor . . . By overcoming every form of self-promotion or emotional dependency, (which) allows him to be a man of communion, of mission, and of dialogue.
42. By this intimate relationship with the Lord and by their fraternal communion, seminarians will be helped to recognize and correct “spiritual worldliness”: obsession with personal appearances, a presumed theological or disciplinary certainty, narcissism and authoritarianism, the attempt to dominate others, a merely external and ostentatious preoccupation with the liturgy, vainglory, individualism, the inability to listen to others, and every form of careerism.
A formation for interior life and communion

43. It is necessary to integrate one’s own personal situation and history into the spiritual life.
a.2. The Stage of Philosophical studies (or Discipleship)

63. This stage allows for systematic work on the personality of the seminarian. The lack of a well structured and balanced personality is a serious and objective hindrance to the continuation of formation for the priesthood.
Agents of Formation

f) Specialists

147. In the field of psychology, this contribution is valuable both for the formators and for the seminarians principally in two areas: in the assessment of personality, expressing an opinion as to the psychological health of the candidate; and in therapeutic accompaniment.
Criteria and Norms

b.2. Psychological Health

191. As a rule candidates will not be admitted to Seminary who suffer from any pathology, be it manifest or latent, . . . that could undermine the discretion of judgment of a person and, consequently, his ability to assume the obligations of the vocation and of ministry.
Criteria and Norms

b.2. Psychological Health

193. The aspiring seminarian is obliged to inform the Bishop and the Rector of the Seminary about any past psychological problems and any therapy received....It is appropriate to obtain a psychological evaluation, both at the time of admission to the Seminary, and subsequently, when it seems useful to the formators.
How does the Seminary Formator follow up on an evaluation?
Family of Origin Issues

- Relationships with parents
- Relationships with siblings
- Genograms
- Genetics
- Environment
- Faith history
- Current family issues
Sexual Development

- History *(Abuse, early activity)*
- Gender identity *(Poor sense of masculinity)*
- Relational history *(Few Relationships)*
- Sex education
- Understanding of celibate chastity
Mental Health Issues

Diagnoses

Old DSM System – 5 Axes

- Acute problems
- Chronic problems and personality issues
- Medical issues
- Social stressors
- Global assessment of functioning (GAF)
- Therapy history
Spiritual Growth

- Family faith experience
- Sacramental life
- Prayer life
- Spiritual traditions
- Seminary prayer life
- Experience of spiritual direction
Topics for Formation Sessions

- Sex education (individualized)
- Human qualities of the priestly candidate
- Capacity to relate to others
- Affective maturity
- Theology of the Body
- Development of virtues
- Human freedom

- Theology of priestly love – its conjugal nature
- Evangelical, spiritual, ecclesial charity
- Asceticism
- Education of the moral conscience
- Discipline & responsibility
Recommendations: Examples

• I recommend that David continue in formation for the Diocese of X.
• I recommend that David engage in a course of individual therapy to look at the various issues from his childhood and to further develop the ability to enter into empathic relationships with others.
Recommendations: Examples

• I recommend that George work with his formators, catechists, and spiritual directors on developing an appropriate sense of independence in which he is able to be assertive without resorting to anger and in which he is able to be more open about whatever concerns he has.

• It would also be important for George to continue to work on greater healing in his life from early experiences of attempted sexual abuse, the loss of his father, and any other experiences which seem to be contributing to his sense of being a victim. His spiritual director could help him to reflect on the scriptures, especially those which speak to this issue, e.g., Romans 6:3-11.
Recommendations: Examples

• I recommend that David’s formators be told that one of his goals would be to grow in empathy and a strong sense of pastoral charity. His formators should be advised of David’s history, as far as the fact that his parents were in a process of divorce between the time when he was five and nine years old. They need to understand that their style of “parenting” him will greatly affect his ability to develop as a spiritual father for others.

• I recommend that David be encouraged to share with his spiritual directors the basic content of this psychological evaluation and the recommendations and that he fully give himself to this process in order to achieve greater healing in his personal life.
QUESTIONS
Resources

• *Spiritual Direction for Priestly Celibacy*, 2012, David Songy, O.F.M. Cap.

• “Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions,” 2015 USCCB