

**NCDVD Workshop**  
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**Priestly Formation and the Psychological Sciences**

Rev. Melvin C. Blanchette, SS, PhD

**Introduction**

I am thankful to NCDVD for the invitation to present this workshop on the *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood*, issued in June of 2008 by the Congregation for Catholic Education under the signature of Cardinal Zenon Grocholewski, Prefect of the Congregation. As many of you know, my perspective on this document is threefold.

1. As a priest, seminary formator, and spiritual director over many years, I share an awareness of the intricate dynamics of the spiritual and human formation that comprises the discernment of vocations and the admission to ordination. I am happy to see in the document, for the most part, a great respect for the overall process, an awareness of its intricacies, and an affirmation of the process as a reflection of a person's response to a divine calling.
2. As a licensed clinical psychologist, who over many years has worked with a diverse number of priests and seminarians (both diocesan and religious) in a professional psychological capacity, I have experienced the many ways in which the psychological sciences can be of benefit to the discernment process for seminarians as well as to the healthy and holy growth of priests. I daresay that it was but twenty years ago, perhaps less, that numerous church officials seemed wary about the contribution of psychology in religious and seminary settings. These new guidelines make it very clear that psychology does have a valued contribution to make, even within the limits that are rightfully circumscribed by the congregation.

3. Finally, as a seminary rector (perhaps the only psychologist who is rector of a graduate theology formation house in the U.S.), I can understand keenly the care which the congregation has taken to ensure that any contribution of the psychological sciences is integrated properly to contribute not only to the life of individual candidates, but also to the formators, spiritual directors, and teachers, who play such a large role in the discernment and development of vocations to ministry.

My goal in this workshop will be to review the main components of the document, focusing on the first three sections, with a few words on the final three brief sections:

1. The Church and the Discernment of Vocations
2. Preparation of Formators
3. Contributions of Psychology to Discernment and Formation
4. Specialist Evaluations and Candidate Privacy
5. Relationship of Formators and Psychological Experts
6. Persons Dismissed or Who Have Freely Left

As I review them, I will also make some evaluative observations, not in order to sway your opinion, but more to leave you with some ongoing questions that I myself am considering. Perhaps a collaborative effort to address these questions will provide helpful in the near future/ I also want to mention that I am thankful to Drs. Gerald McGlone, Fernando Ortiz, and Donald Viglione, for the thoughts they have shared in Summer 2009 issue of *Human Development*, entitled "Cause for Hope and Concern."

## I. The Church and the Discernment of Vocations

The congregation begins its document by rightfully describing the admission and discernment process as a spiritual and ecclesial process, which, however, cannot be separated from its context. This context, in general, is the fullness of human life, and in particular, is the specific human personalities who present themselves for seminary formation and, subsequently, ordination.

The spiritual character of the process always takes priority because, "Each Christian vocation comes from God and is God's gift." At the same time, the ecclesial character holds a high place because; the Christian vocation "is never bestowed outside of or independently of the church." The primary persons responsible for discernment and formation, as the shepherd of the church remain the bishops. The bishops, of course, in turn, charge seminary personnel with the task of assisting them in this process. We are all well aware of the responsibilities enjoined upon us in this task.

There is nothing in the document that contradicts what we have heard many times about the process of formation being a wholly human process that is enlightened by the promptings of the Spirit in the life of an individual. The document recognizes and affirms that the development of human personality can be a manifestation of one's willingness to respond to God's call. On the other hand lays the recognition that obstacles (often called wounds) to mature human development can become barriers or obstacles to seminary admission or ordination, if those human obstacles are not properly addressed.

Throughout the process the church holds two primary concerns: "to safeguard the good of her own mission and, at the same time, the good of the candidates." These two concerns are not seen as opposing forces but rather converging ones, to the extent that formators are encouraged to keep both concerns in mind as they assist candidates in the process. The congregation calls this dynamic an interdependent one. I think all of us are very much aware of this interdependent

dynamic, both through our experience and the many other documents we have that assist us in our work.

At the same time, I think we must acknowledge that, as seminary personnel, we sometimes struggle with the interdependent nature of this dynamic when we face some of the tensions seminarians experience when they are unable to see the compatibility of these two ends, the good of the church and the good of the seminarian. Perhaps this very awareness, among others, of course, is one of the reasons for issuing this letter in the first place.

As I mentioned earlier, the congregation situates this process in the human arena. The document underscores the observation from *Pastores dabo vobis* that, while formation is human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral, the foundation for all formation is the human one.

With this note, the congregation attempts to describe the kind of personality that is required of a priest. In my mind, its first definition seems to fall flat and to be rather limiting. The document notes:

The specific understanding of *personality* in this document refers to affective maturity and absence of mental disorder.

Fortunately, the sole focus on affective maturity and the defining of personality in terms of a negative (**absence** of mental disorder) becomes overshadowed when the congregation provides a list of traits to explain what is meant by this definition. I think these traits are worth noting verbatim:

- the positive and stable sense of one's masculine identity and the capacity to form relations in a mature way with individuals and groups of people (My note: This, for example, demands not only affective maturity, but also spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral [or relational] maturity.)

- a solid sense of belonging which is the basis for future communion with the presbyterate and of a responsible collaboration in the ministry of the bishop
- the freedom to be enthused by great ideals and a coherence in realizing them in everyday action
- the courage to make decisions and to stay with them
- a knowledge of oneself and one's talents and limitations so as to integrate them within a self-esteem before God (My note: This needs some work to understand what is meant.)
- the capacity to correct oneself
- the appreciation of beauty in the sense of "splendor of the truth," as well as the art of recognizing it
- the trust that is born from an esteem of the other person and that leads to acceptance (My note: Of the trusting person or the trusted person?)
- the capacity of the candidate to integrate his sexuality in accordance with the Christian vision, including in consideration of the obligation of celibacy.

The congregation names these as **some** of the interior dispositions that need to be developed in the years of formation. They caution that formators always need to leave room for growth. They also note how the development of these traits involves an integration of Christian virtue, human development traits, and God's grace. They call this "an extraordinary and demanding synergy of human and spiritual dynamics."

They go on to note how this integrated view of the human personality informs both seminary formators and the way psychologists contribute to the formation process.

## II. Preparation of Formators

I am pleased that the guidelines urge formators to be fully versed in human development issues and that they encourage bishops to ensure that formators have opportunities to develop their knowledge and skills in these areas of human formation. My pleasure is increased, as you probably know, by the role the Sulpicians have played in this by conducting their bi-annual institute for seminary formators. We have just completed our ninth institute and I suspect that some of you have had the opportunity to benefit from those sessions.

While urging this awareness of human pedagogy, as they call it, the guidelines also insist, rightfully so, that formators be fully immersed in the overall vision that was spelled out in part 1 of the document. While the discernment process for ordination is founded on human development, it remains a spiritual and ecclesial process. For this reason formators are asked to carry out discernment in light of the doctrine of the church and with a respect for the ways that God's grace acts uniquely in each individual.

The discernment of candidates must also include opportunities for development in theological and moral virtue. While this theological and moral development is tied closely to human development, the congregation insists that the psychological sciences by themselves could not adequately assist candidates in this growth. (In the next section I will address how the congregation asks psychological experts to be in tune with this moral, spiritual and ecclesial development).

At the same time, the congregation stresses how important it is for formators to have this awareness of the character of human development. For one, they note that even though mistakes in discernment are rare, such knowledge could be helpful in ascertaining human defects that are not consonant with ordination to priesthood. They say, "Detecting defects earlier would help avoid many tragic experiences."

I think it is appropriate, again, to quote those traits which the guidelines ask of formators:

Hence the need for every formator to possess in due measure the sensitivity and psychological preparation that will allow him, insofar as possible, to perceive the candidate's true motivations, to discern the barriers that stop him integrating human and Christian maturity, and to pick up any psychopathic disturbances in the candidate. The formator must accurately and very prudently evaluate the candidate's history.

That being said, the congregation continues to insist that these psychological traits cannot alone suffice for either admission to orders or dismissal from the seminary. They must be integrated with the range of spiritual and ecclesial understanding that are the underpinning for being a priest in the Catholic Church. They must also be integrated with a deep respect for the freedom of each candidate to engage in the discernment process.

The guidelines conclude by noting the great demands placed on formators. "To that end, much advantage can be derived from meeting experts in the psychological sciences, to compare notes and obtain clarification on specific issues.

### **III. Contributions of Psychology to Discernment and Formation**

If section one of the guidelines can be called the foundation, section three, with its 29 paragraphs forms the heart of the message (only 7 paragraphs in section 2). The congregation begins by noting that vocational discernment lies outside of the scope and competence of psychology. Yet, there are times, the guidelines admit, when it is necessary to consult with psychologists for evaluation and when it is necessary for them to play a role in helping candidates in the discernment process.

Not only should seminary formators seek psychologists who are competent in their profession, but these “experts” should be versed in a general knowledge of the ways of vocational discernment and supportive of what the church teaches and professes about the call to priestly ministry. Recourse to psychologists “can allow a more sure evaluation of the candidate’s psychic state; it can help evaluate his human dispositions for responding to the divine call and it can provide some extra assistance for the candidate’s human growth.” Such experts can offer suggestions for both diagnosis and therapy.

Choosing experts in psychology relies on professionals who can be coherent with a candidate’s moral and spiritual formation. They should be persons of a “sound human and spiritual maturity that is inspired by an anthropology that openly shares the Christian vision about the human person, sexuality, as well as vocation to the priesthood and celibacy” (no. 6).

This reliance on such experts stems from an awareness of the human condition, with its fragility, with the tensions people face in life, and with the experiences of woundedness that many must face in life. “Even formation to the priesthood must face up to the manifold symptoms of the imbalance rooted in the heart of man.”

Though spiritual directors serve to assist candidates in many of the struggles they face, the guidelines admit that certain conditions of psychological woundedness require the assistance of professional experts. Though these conditions are not specifically named, the guidelines point to the experience of seminarians and the ways in which they may be unduly influenced by some aspects of culture, e.g., consumerism, family instability, relativism, “erroneous” visions of sexuality, etc.

At times, candidates are unaware themselves that these wounds lie at the heart of some of their behaviors and attitudes. The process of formation seeks for candidates to grow in a healthy awareness of their hurts so that they may find

healing through God's grace working in tandem with the overall process of formation on every level.

The document call those moments when recourse to psychological professionals is necessary "exceptional cases" (no. 5). This is one of those statements in the document that I believe needs continued exploration. It seems that up to this point, the guidelines express openness to such consultation, especially considering the range of behaviors and character traits that are discussed. Perhaps use of the word "exceptional" serves as a reminder that the primary character for the entire process remains spiritual and ecclesial.

Psychological experts may be called upon both during the process for admission to the seminary and during the process of formation for priesthood. In every case, and no matter what kind of consultation is offered, it "must always be carried out with the previous, explicit, informed and free consent of the candidate." This stipulation is noted frequently throughout the document as a way of showing respect for the freedom of the candidate. It pertains also to any kind of evaluations or assessments that a psychological expert provides.

Seminary formators themselves are asked to avoid using "specialist psychological or psychotherapeutic techniques." Likewise, although formators should be able to count on the cooperation of psychological experts, these experts "cannot be part of the formation team." How I deal with that is another presentation.

### **Initial Discernment**

Seminary formators are asked to have ways of determining a candidate's potential for joining in the seminary formation process. This may at times require the use of psychological experts to assist in the assessment, especially with seminarians who hare not aware of difficulties they face, who tend to deny those difficulties, or who tend to ever emphasize them. Some examples offered include:

- excessive affective dependency

- disproportionate aggression
- insufficient capacity to be faithful to obligations
- insufficient capacity for establishing serene relationships of openness, trust, and fraternal collaboration as well as collaboration with authority (My note: what does "serene" mean?)
- a sexual identity that is confused or not yet well-defined

The guidelines note that experts can be especially helpful in the diagnosis of psychological disturbances. Sometimes, for those seeking admission, it may also be necessary for candidates to undergo some therapy before they are admitted.

### **Subsequent Formation**

Once a candidate has been admitted to a seminary or house of formation, the help of psychological experts can also be helpful, especially when seminary personnel perceive suspicious symptoms that may signal some kind of psychological imbalance. These experts can be helpful in charting out a course of formation that is tailored to a candidate's specific needs and circumstances and they may also "useful in supporting the candidate on his journey toward a more sure possession of the moral virtues." By helping candidates to have a better awareness of their own personalities, experts enable candidates to be attentive to God with greater awareness and freedom.

Although experts may be helpful to candidates in attaining greater "Christian and vocational maturity," the guidelines also recognizes that such maturity cannot ever be totally free of tensions and struggles. These kinds of tensions and struggle require "interior discipline, a spirit of sacrifice, acceptance of struggle and of the cross, and the entrusting of oneself to the irreplaceable assistance of grace."

The guidelines admit that, in some cases, even psychological experts will not be able to help in the development of maturity, and suggests that formation may

need to be interrupted when signs of grave immaturity are evident, such as these:

- strong affective dependencies
- notable lack of freedom in relations
- excessive rigidity of character
- lack of loyalty
- uncertain sexual identity
- deep-seated homosexual tendencies, etc.

The interruption of formation is also suggested when candidates have difficulty embracing a chastity as party of the celibate life.

#### **IV - VI. The Final Three Sections**

The final three sections include "The Request for Specialist Evaluations and Respect for Candidate Privacy," "Relationship of Formators and Psychological Experts," and "Persons Dismissed from or Who Have Freely Left Seminaries or Houses of Formation."

A major focus, repeated throughout the document, is respect for a candidate's privacy. All psychological consultations and evaluations may only be carried out with a candidate's "previous, explicit, informed and free consent." In cases where such consent is not given, formators are responsible to help candidates in some other way (though the guidelines do not suggest the alternatives to which formators might have recourse.

It is up to the formators, however, to create an atmosphere of trust and openness so that candidates will be open and willing to participate in the discernment and formation process with the methods that will best suit their

needs and help them grow in Christian and vocational maturity. The guidelines suggest that formators should also have good motivation and ways for suggesting psychological consultation to candidates. The motivation and ways of suggesting help, coupled with an atmosphere of openness and transparency, can help to overcome misunderstanding between a candidate and the formators.

Formators are asked to respect a candidate's privacy with respect to any reports they may receive as a result of psychological consultation. This respect is evidenced by the prudence that formators show by ensuring that access to any kind of documentation is limited to those who are responsible for formation. Because psychologists are bound by confidentiality (which the document recognizes), candidates must also give their consent for such reports prior to their being handed over.

The formators will make use of any information thus acquired to sketch out a general picture of the candidate's personality and to make appropriate indication for the candidate's further path for formation or for his admission to ordination.

The difficult role of spiritual directors is also noted. When a spiritual director believes that some kind of psychological evaluation or help is need, it is most helpful when the candidate share this request with those in the external forum. However, even if the candidate does not do this and the information will be conveyed only to the spiritual director, the guidelines for respecting the candidate's privacy and freedom must always be followed, as with those in the external forum. It is an important principle that "spiritual direction cannot in any way be interchanged with or substituted by forms of analysis or psychological assistance."

With regard to formators, experts may provide, always with the candidate's consent, suggestions for pathways of formation, continued psychological support, and/or foreseeable possibilities for a candidate's growth.

The final, sixth section of the document addresses persons who are dismissed or who freely leave seminaries or houses of formation. Church guidelines already prohibit seminaries or houses of formation from admitting candidates who have been dismissed without being aware of the circumstances that led to the dismissal. Formators have the responsibility of providing a new seminary or house of formation into which a candidate seeks admission with exact information regarding the dismissal. Formators are also asked to be alert to candidates who choose to leave a seminary when they suspect or know that a request for psychological assistance is forthcoming.

### **Conclusion**

As I noted at the beginning, the very good news about this document is how supportive the Congregation for Education has been in drawing on the experience and expertise of psychologists in the context for the admission and formation of candidates for the priesthood. In the way they have integrated Christian anthropology, vocational spirituality, ecclesiology, and psychological sciences, they have dispelled the fear or wariness that exists in some about the use of psychology in formation.

By being open to assistance from professionals in the psychological sciences, they free formators from trying to interact with candidates in ways that are beyond their competence. In fact, formators are asked not to refrain from the practice of psychology with students so that they may more appropriately focus on the discernment issues that stem from spirituality and ecclesiology. Formators need an awareness of psychology, but they may freely have recourse to the experts.

Admittedly, the document raises some concerns and issues that will need to be addressed. McGlone, Ortiz, and Viglione point some of these out:

- To what degree can the “measures” employed by psychologists be used to measure such things as being Christ-like or being in a Christian and ecclesial relationship?
- Do psychologists have to take on a new role in order to “investigate” a candidate’s readiness for priesthood?
- Can professional arrangements be made with psychologists so that, with a candidate’s consent, psychological information can be shared without asking psychologists to step beyond ethical or professional standards?
- Is there any conflict or blurriness between the way these guidelines describe personality and personality disorders and the way they are described in the professional psychological society (e.g., “affective” dependency vs. “interpersonal” dependency; the meaning of “serene” relationships, etc.)?

In spite of questions like these, both my experience and now this document suggest that the psychological sciences can provide a unique benefit to the process of admission and formation. For this I give thanks as we continue to move ahead in helping to prepare candidates to share in the ministry of the Church as ordained priests.