

Seminary Screening Early Step for Healthy Priesthood

By Emilie Lemmons



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Since the sexual abuse scandal unfolded dramatically in public view five years ago, Catholic seminaries have refined their admissions screening with more emphasis on attracting healthy candidates and keeping problematic ones out of the priesthood, according to church officials who work in seminary formation.

Interviews examining candidates’ sexual and dating histories are more common and thorough, for example, and diocesan vocations offices do a better job of filtering out men who don’t make the grade before they even apply to the seminary.

“Not only are seminaries conducting careful psychological assessments, including assessments of a candidate’s psychosexual maturity and capacity for chaste celibacy, but they are also providing an integrated program of formation in the area of human sexuality,” said Msgr. Jeremian McCarthy, director of accreditation and institutional evaluation for The Association of Theological Schools, based in Pittsburgh.

The stronger emphasis is reflected in the newest version of the Program of Priestly Formation, released by the U.S. bishops in 2006, Msgr. McCarthy said. The program governs seminary formation in the United States and incorporates stricter norms for screening applicants and more detail on formation in human sexuality.

Officials are quick to point out, however, that such changes represent refinements to ongoing improvements, rather than dramatic policy shifts. In fact, the church has been working to strengthen seminary screening and formation for more than a decade.

“I think the more pivotal point of departure was with “Pastores Dabo Vobis” (“I Will Give You Shepherds”), Pope John Paul II’s 1992 encyclical letter which stressed the importance of human development in training priesthood candidates, said Msgr. Edward Burns, executive director of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat for Vocations and Priestly Formation. “That’s when the bishops really started to look at human formation,” he said. He added that the church has gained a greater appreciation for aspects such as psychosexual maturity and a man’s capacity for celibacy.

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, a psychologist who heads the St. Luke Institute, a residential treatment center in Silver Spring, Md., for priests and religious with psychological problems, has seen a “modest increase in the amount of help” seminaries have requested since the early 2000s. The facility consults with seminaries on psychological formation issues and treats people for a variety of problems, including

sexual abuse.

“The notion that the church has done nothing until 2002 to deal with this problem is nonsense,” he said. “The fact is that the church has been working over the past 20 years improving its screening and formation.”

A trend noticed at the seminary level is that potential priesthood candidates are examined more thoroughly by diocesan vocations offices before they apply to the seminary.

“The dioceses that send us candidates are doing a much better job of screening before they come to see us,” said Sulpician Father Gerald Brown, who became rector of St. Patrick Seminary in Menlo Park, Calif., in 2004.

It’s an extra level of scrutiny that wasn’t there a few years ago, he said. “In the past, a diocese might say, ‘We’re not sure about this guy, but let’s send him, and the seminary can screen him out.’ Now, they don’t send him if they’re not sure about it.”

Those who work with seminaries hope to have a better picture of psychological testing and assessment practices by the end of 2008, when a study by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) is complete, according to Marianist Brother Bernard Stratman, who leads the NCEA’s Seminary Department.

Brother Stratman, who currently is seeking funds to implement the \$150,000 study, said researchers from the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University will work with a variety of advisors to shape the study and help determine the best testing strategies.

The study would result in a common set of criteria and greater consistency in psychological assessments in seminaries throughout the country, he said.

To be accepted into a seminary, all men seeking the priesthood must undergo a series of standard psychological tests, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory and the Rorschach inkblot test. But those don’t necessarily detect potential molesters, Msgr. Rossetti said.

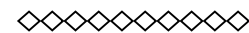
In his consultations with seminaries, he said, he encourages them to include a “full, in-depth psychosexual history.” A trained clinician sits down with each candidate and asks him about his sexual and relationship history. Questions range from queries about the man’s sexual orientation to his dating life.

“You pretty much leave no stone unturned,” Msgr. Rossetti said. The clinician looks for a number of typical scenarios that might suggest a man is a higher risk for being a sexual abuser. Men who are emotionally regressed and immature raise a red flag. So do men who have been victims of abuse themselves and seem stuck in their victimhood. Compulsively sexual individuals, narcissists and passive or dependent men who don’t have healthy peer relationships also warrant further scrutiny, he said.



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“There’s no silver bullet. There’s no one kind of offender,” he said. Initial research now suggests that homosexuality, while not a cause, can be associated with higher incidents of abuse, he said — although “most homosexuals do not molest minors.”

In fact, the new edition of the Program of Priestly Formation requires seminaries to adhere to the Vatican’s November 2005 statement that practicing homosexuals or men with what it called “deep-seated homosexual tendencies” may not be admitted.

Cultural differences add to the challenges of detecting a man’s potential for abuse, Father Brown, the seminary rector, said. Different groups sometimes require different approaches when it comes to screening.

That holds true at St. Patrick, where 70 percent of the candidates for the priesthood are international students, he said. For example, in some parts of the world, men don’t talk about their sexual experiences freely. Such candidates will need more encouragement to open up during the initial psychosexual screening process, as well as during seminary, when each student talks regularly about sexual and celibacy issues with a spiritual advisor as part of his ongoing formation.

“How do we encourage people ... that this is something you’ll have to share about?” Father Brown said.

In the end, Msgr. Rossetti said, no screening process is perfect.

“Everyone knows how difficult it is to deal with alcohol issues,” he said. “I would say it’s 10 times more difficult to deal with child abuse. It’s harder to detect, harder to confront and harder to screen out.”

On the plus side, seminaries are making improvements, he said: The 2003 study conducted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice “shows that the numbers of priest who perpetrate abuse is dropping markedly since the late 1980s and early 1990s.”