

Extracts pertaining to the use of psychology, psychological evaluations and role of psychologists from Program of Priestly Formation, 5th edition (USCCB)

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The Admissions Process

34. The purpose of the admissions process is to determine whether candidates have the requisite qualities to begin the process of formation and preparation for priestly ordination and ministry. In a global way, *Pastores dabo vobis* offers these criteria as a basis for admission to the seminary program: “a right intention, . . . a sufficiently broad knowledge of the doctrine of the faith, some introduction to the methods of prayer, and behavior in conformity with Christian tradition. They should also have attitudes proper to their regions, through which they can express their effort to find God and the faith” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, no. 62).

35. In forming a prudent judgment about the suitability of an applicant for priestly formation, the principle of gradualism should be used. According to the principle of gradualism, progressively higher levels of expectations should be sought as an applicant seeks admission to progressively higher levels of preparation, moving from the preparatory to the collegiate or pre-theologate, and finally to the theologate program. In short, the closer the program is to priestly ordination, the greater the applicant’s development of the requisite qualities ought to be. The principle of gradualism recognizes that it would be unrealistic to expect an applicant for admission to be fully mature in all areas.

36. The principle of gradualism, however, does not deny that a minimal level of development is necessary for admission to any level of priestly formation. The minimal qualities necessary for admission are properly understood as thresholds or foundations. All applicants need to have passed through certain thresholds of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development, which will serve as foundations for further development. For example, if a candidate has achieved a threshold of a basic capacity for empathy and communication, he would seem to have a foundation upon which pastoral formation could develop.

37. Candidates for admission, in other words, should have attained, at least in some measure, growth in those areas represented by the four pillars or in the integrated dimensions of formation identified in *Pastores dabo vobis*: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral. In trying to determine what is sufficient growth or development in these areas, seminaries ought to be clear and specific. For example, sufficient human formation for admission means not only an absence of serious pathology but also a proven capacity to function competently in ordinary human situations without need to do extensive therapeutic or remedial work to be fully functioning, a psychosexual maturity commensurate with chronological age, a genuine empathy that enables the applicant to connect well and personally with others, a capacity for growth or conversion, and a deep desire to be a man for others in the likeness of Christ. Sufficient spiritual formation means a well catechized person who prays daily, belongs to a parish, participates at least weekly in the Sunday Eucharist and regularly in the Sacrament of Penance, and is drawn to explore and deepen his spiritual life and share it with others. Sufficient intellectual formation means proven capacities for critical thinking, an ability to understand both abstract and practical questions, and the capacity to understand other persons and to communicate effectively with them in both oral and written form. Sufficient pastoral formation means having a fundamental sense of the Church’s mission and a generous willingness and enthusiasm to promote it and knowing how the ordained priesthood contributes to the mission; having a sensitivity to the needs of others and a desire to respond to them; and having a willingness to initiate action and assume a position of leadership for the good of individuals and communities. Finally, candidates should also have the right intention when they present themselves for admission to the seminary.

Their intention to pursue preparation for priestly ordination and ministry ought to correspond to the Church's understanding.

38. In contrast to previous generations, when a more homogenous population presented itself for entrance to the seminary, today's candidates represent a considerable diversity—not only of differing personal gifts and levels of maturity but also significant cultural differences—that must be taken into account. All those involved in the evaluation of applicants for priestly formation must appreciate cultural, generational, educational, and familial differences and be able to recognize which are gifts, which are liabilities, and which are simply indications of a need for fuller growth.

39. At the diocesan level, the primary responsibility for overseeing the admissions process belongs to the bishop. Ultimately, of course, it is the responsibility of the bishop or religious ordinary to decide whether or not to admit candidates to priestly formation, in accordance with the criteria which have been properly established.³³ The bishop or religious ordinary shares his responsibility with the vocation director or vocation team, perhaps also with a vocation board or commission, and with the local parishes. The admissions process requires sacramental records, autobiography, a review of the psychological and medical assessment (with due regard for CIC, c. 241, and Ratio fundamentalis, no. 39), observations of the potential candidates during the course of their visits to the seminary, interviews, transcripts, criminal background checks, and immigration documentation as well as letters of reference.³⁴ Bishops, religious superiors, and rectors must have moral certitude about the psychological and physical health of those they admit to the seminary. In particular, they should be assured that applicants have a requisite level of affective maturity and the capacity to live celibate chastity. They will determine the means necessary to arrive at such certitude, including, for example, their own interviews with applicants, the reliable testimony of those who have known the applicants, and psychological and physical assessments made by expert consultants. Whenever possible, the diocese and the seminary should conduct separate admission procedures to ensure the broadest and most objective screening possible, while avoiding a duplication of these efforts.

40. Although this process aims primarily at determining the fitness of an applicant for a seminary program, once an applicant is admitted to a seminary program, the results of the process contribute to the seminarian's personal agenda for priestly formation. Specifically, the observations and conclusions that emerge from the admissions process should serve as a significant resource for the seminarian's human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation within the seminary. The sharing of this information presumes a due respect for the rights of the seminarian and a prudent maintenance of confidentiality.

41. Without denying the importance of evaluating minimal thresholds in all areas of an applicant's development, high standards and strict vigilance are especially necessary in evaluating human thresholds pertaining to sexuality. "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the attitude for forming bonds of communion with others."³⁵ For the seminary applicant, thresholds pertaining to sexuality serve as the foundation for living a lifelong commitment to healthy, chaste celibacy. As we have recently seen so dramatically in the Church, when such foundations are lacking in priests, the consequent suffering and scandals are devastating.

Norms for the Admission of Candidates

42. Seminaries as well as dioceses must have clear written statements of admission policies, which are to be regularly reviewed and updated. These policies include behavioral criteria which place the burden of qualification for admission to the seminary on applicants. In cases in which the admission committee has reservations, caution should be taken and the benefit of the doubt given to the Church. It is also important that the admission procedure carefully weigh the potential impact of the admission of each individual on the whole seminary community.

43. Seminaries should specify thresholds or foundations in a way that permits those charged with admitting candidates to have clear criteria available. This approach to admissions assumes that the seminary formation program is not the place for long term therapy or remedial work, which should be completed prior to a decision concerning admission.

44. Applicants must give evidence of an overall personal balance, good moral character, a love for the truth, and proper motivation. This includes the requisite human, moral, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and psychological qualities for priestly ministry.³⁶

45. All applicants should give witness to their conviction that God has brought them to the seminary to discern whether or not they are really called to the priesthood, and they should commit themselves wholeheartedly to carrying out that discernment. They should be alert both to signs that seem to confirm that call and to counter-indications. As a seminarian moves from a high school seminary program to college seminary to the theologate, there should be a growing sense of confirmation of that call.

46. Applicants for pre-theology must follow a careful and thorough admissions process equivalent to entrance procedures for the theologate. This process may result in specific recommendations concerning the applicant's program.

47. Applicants must undergo a thorough screening process. Personal interviews with the applicants, evaluations from their pastors and teachers, records and evaluations from a previous seminary or religious community if applicable, academic records, standardized test scores, psychological evaluations, and criminal background checks are all components of an effective admission program and are weighed together with an assessment of the applicant's motivation. Those who do not fulfill these entrance requirements of the seminary must not be admitted.

48. It is the responsibility of the vocation director (or representative of the religious community) to provide the seminary in a timely and complete fashion the results of the screening process used by the diocese or religious community.

49. Applicants from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds should be given every encouragement. Seminaries are responsible to ensure the possession of adequate resources to serve the formative needs of such applicants. Academic requirements should not be lessened, but necessary adaptations may be made to enable admission into the regular course of study. Applicants must have an adequate command of the English language to begin intellectual formation in a seminary in which English is the language of instruction. English language studies may be undertaken in the seminary before admission into the full, regular courses of seminary study. It is also important that applicants from other countries receive special help in gaining the necessary understanding of the religious and cultural context for priestly ministry and life in the United States.

50. Theologates must require a bachelor's degree or its equivalent from an accredited institution. Sufficient education in philosophy, which the Code of Canon Law states as a biennium,³⁷ is understood in the United States to be at least 30 semester credit hours, plus the out-of-classroom work associated with each credit hour traditionally expected in American higher education. A minimum of 12 semester credit hours is required in appropriate courses of undergraduate theology. (The content of such courses is outlined in norms 178 and 179 under "Intellectual Formation— College Seminaries: Norms.")

51. Seminaries should draw up guidelines for psychologists and admission personnel and describe those human traits and qualities that are consonant with an authentic vocation to the priesthood as well as those counter-indications that would suggest that the applicant is not a suitable candidate.

Seminaries as well as dioceses and religious communities must be assured that those who conduct psychological evaluations for them are well versed in and supportive of the Church's expectations of candidates for the priesthood, especially expectations concerning celibacy and permanence of commitment.

52. A psychological assessment is an integral part of the admission procedure. Psychological assessments should be administered using methods that do not violate the applicant's right to privacy and confidentiality or do harm to the reputation of the applicant.³⁸ At the same time, the applicant should understand that the testing results will be shared with select seminary personnel in a way that permits a thorough review. Due care should be observed in correctly interpreting the results of psychological testing in light of the cultural background of applicants.

53. The admissions process ought to give sufficient attention to the emotional health of applicants. Special care and scrutiny should be given to those who manifest dysfunction or come from dysfunctional families. It is possible for some seminarians to address these issues in the course of a seminary program through counseling or other means. Their willingness, however, to confront these or other personal issues should be determined prior to the decision about admission. If long-term therapeutic work is indicated, this is best accomplished before the decision is made concerning entrance into the seminary. At times, the gravity of family or personal issues is such that, if the candidate has not yet adequately dealt with these issues, entrance into the seminary program should be denied.

54. The admissions procedure should include an open and frank discussion of the life experiences that applicants bring to the seminary. Their level of insight or self-knowledge and their willingness to address important human issues, such as their interpersonal abilities, evidence of sound peer relationships, their manner of dealing with authority, and their psychosexual development, can be important gauges of their readiness to enter a seminary program. If the applicant is unaware of or unresolved concerning significant human issues, the seminary is well advised to delay admission until greater clarity or resolution is evident. Concerning the capacity to live the charism of celibacy, the applicant should give evidence of having lived in continence for a sustained period of time, which would be for at least two years before entering a priestly formation program.

55. Any evidence of criminal sexual activity with a minor or an inclination toward such activity disqualifies the applicant from admission.³⁹

56. With regard to the admission of candidates with same-sex experiences and/or inclinations, the guidelines provided by the Holy See must be followed.

57. Concerning the results of psychological testing and other confidential materials, the seminary must observe all legal requirements, inform the applicant in writing of his specific rights to privacy and confidentiality, and utilize appropriate release forms.⁴⁰ Throughout the admission process and, if accepted, after entrance into the seminary, the candidate's right to privacy should be respected and the careful management of confidential materials is to be observed. This is especially true in the case of sharing confidential information with a team of formators, while at the same time ensuring that those charged with the candidate's growth and integration have the clear and specific information they need so that they can help the candidate achieve the growth necessary to become a "man of communion."⁴¹ The rector must observe a careful vigilance that protects the privacy and reputation of the seminarian in his relationship with the formation faculty. The traditional distinction between internal and external forum is to be maintained. Clear policies must be enunciated concerning who may have access to any of the admissions materials. Clear directives must be in place to determine any further use of psychological testing results or other admissions materials for formation or even counseling purposes.

58. In the admissions process, an evaluation should be made of a candidate's indebtedness, his ability

to handle finances (i.e., responsible record-keeping and payment of personal taxes), spending patterns, and a willingness to cover a portion of his seminary expenses. Candidates should demonstrate an aptitude for learning principles of good stewardship, avoiding any attitudes of entitlement. They should also show an openness to developing professional approaches to personal and church-related business matters.

59. The admissions process should be attentive to older, experienced applicants, who often bring a mature spirituality, experience in pastoral life, and other significant life experiences, but who might also be less susceptible to formation. The seminary admissions process must be no less rigorous, thorough, or comprehensive than it might be for other applicants.

60. Diocesan bishops, religious ordinaries, vocation directors, and seminaries should recognize that additional time will be necessary to prepare candidates without previous seminary formation for entrance into the theologate. If a person has no previous preparation in a formation program, then the pre-theology program should extend over a two-year calendar period. Pre-theology programs are designed to address all four pillars of formation, not simply to meet academic requirements.

61. If applicants have been in a seminary or formation program previously, dioceses, religious institutes or societies, and seminaries must consult all previous institutions about the past record of these applicants as prescribed in the Norms Concerning Applications for Priestly Formation from Those Previously Enrolled in a Formation Program.⁴² If such records indicate difficulties, before admitting the applicant, the seminary should proceed cautiously and ascertain whether problems have been resolved and sufficient positive growth has taken place.

62. If an applicant has been dismissed from a program of priestly formation or from an institute of consecrated life or society of apostolic life, no subsequent application will be considered in the two years following such dismissal. If the departure was other than a dismissal, sufficient time should be allotted to evaluate carefully his application and background.

(See Addendum A.)

63. Prior to admission, the diocese or religious community is obliged to ensure (and the seminary must verify) that recent Baptism and Confirmation certificates (CIC, c. 241§2, 1050, 1033; CCEO, c. 342§2, 769§1, 1°) have been obtained. Although a valid marriage certificate of the applicant's parents is no longer canonically required, the seminary may request it to gain further insight into the applicant's family background. The diocese must also obtain the following documentation from others: summaries of personal interviews with the applicant, evaluation from his pastor and teachers, academic records, standardized test scores, assessments by experienced formators of the applicant's motivation, and, if applicable, previous seminary evaluations. The seminary must verify the completion of all documentation before a candidate is admitted.

64. The seminary is also obligated to determine the freedom of the applicant from impediments to orders and from conditions that must be addressed prior to the reception of orders, namely: that sufficient time has passed for a neophyte (CIC, c. 1042, 3°; CCEO, c. 762§1, 8°); that the applicant does not hold a position forbidden to clerics (CIC, cc. 285-286, 289, 1042 2° and 3°; CCEO, cc. 762§1, 7° and 8°, 382-385); that the applicant does not "labor under some form of insanity or psychic defect" (CIC, c. 1041 1° and 2°; CCEO, cc. 172§1, 1°, 762§1, 1° and 2°); that he has not committed apostasy, heresy, or schism (CIC, c. 1041, 2°; CCEO, c. 762§1, 2°); that he has not committed homicide, cooperated in an abortion (CIC, c. 1041, 4°; CCEO, c. 762§1, 4°), mutilated himself or another, attempted suicide (CIC, c. 1041, 5°; CCEO, c. 762§1, 5°), or simulated an act reserved to priests or bishops (CIC, c. 1041, 6°; CCEO, c. 762§1, 6°). If any of these conditions exist, then prior to admission, appropriate dispensations or remedies must be obtained. It is also recommended that the seminary investigate whether the candidate is allergic to wheat, whether he is able to consume the Precious Blood, whether he is abusing alcohol or drugs, whether he has a criminal background,

whether he has ever been sexually abused as a minor, and whether any remedies would be appropriate.

65. The admission process by the diocese or religious community must include a thorough physical examination to ensure that applicants possess the good health necessary for seminary training and priestly ministry. This exam should include HIV and drug testing.

66. An applicant for the priesthood must testify that he is not married or, if he is married, he has the approval of the Holy See. If an Eastern Catholic candidate is married, a certificate of marriage is required along with the written consent of his wife (CCEO, c. 769§1, 2°) and the approval of the Apostolic See. Applicants who have received a declaration of matrimonial nullity should be carefully screened. Although these men may have canonical freedom to pursue the priesthood, it is important to ascertain if and how previous obstacles to a marriage commitment or possible scandal might affect their viability as candidates for the priesthood. Care must be taken to certify the canonical declaration of nullity by reviewing the Acta (official documentation and evidence for the canonical decision) to ensure that the reasons and circumstances that serve as warrants for the declaration of nullity are fully disclosed to the sponsoring bishop or religious ordinary, rector, and the seminary admissions committee. If a previously married person has responsibilities for his spouse, this factor is to be considered. If the candidate has responsibility for a minor child, acceptance should be deferred. All such cases should be carefully weighed.

67. Especially careful screening should also be given to applicants who are recent converts to the Catholic faith or who have lapsed in the practice of their faith and have recently returned. It is advisable that at least two years pass between their entry into the Church and their acceptance into a seminary program. A suitable period of time should pass before entrance into the seminary in cases of Catholics for whom a sudden conversion experience seems to precipitate a priestly vocation. Similarly, those who return to the practice of the faith after an extended period away from the Church should not enter the seminary directly.

The Candidate for Human Formation

87. Candidates bear the primary responsibility for their human formation. The role of the seminary is to assist them in achieving the aims of the Program of Priestly Formation.

88. The candidate's human formation in the seminary is very much affected by the character formation he has received in his family, cultural background, and society. Just as the seminary recognizes that the positive qualities of a seminarian's prior formation can both indicate a vocation and provide a solid foundation for further growth, it should also address possible deficiencies in the candidate's earlier formation and find means to address them.

89. Human formation programs in the seminary should begin with the assumption that the candidates have the potential to move from selfpreoccupation to an openness to transcendent values and a concern for the welfare of others; a history of sound and rewarding peer relationships; an ability to be honest with themselves and with others; and an ability to trust the Church and the agents of formation. Formation programs will not be very effective for those who manifest extreme inflexibility, narcissism, antisocial behavior or any other serious pathology, a lack of sexual integration, a deep and unresolved anger (especially against authority), a deep attachment to a materialist lifestyle, or compulsive behaviors or addictions.

93. To live fully an effective life of celibate chastity requires (a) a knowledge of one's sexuality and sexual desires; (b) an acceptance and valuing of one's sexuality as a good to be directed to God's service; (c) a lifelong commitment to growth, which means continuously integrating one's sexuality into a life and ministry shaped and expressed by celibate chastity. Certain habits or skills are necessary instruments on the path to effective and healthy celibate chastity, and these are to be encouraged in seminary programs. Among these habits and skills are appropriate self-disclosure, a cultivated

capacity for self-reflection, an ability to enter into peaceful solitude, ascetical practices that foster vigilance and self mastery over one's impulses and drives, and a habit of modesty. An especially important practice is holding all persons in the mystery of God, whether they are encountered in the course of formal ministry or ordinary life. This practice means viewing all persons in God, interceding for them before God, and claiming responsibility to direct them to God.

(Recommendations in PPF provided for assessment of candidates in seminary before ordination to diaconate)

280. The annual evaluation should include a well-founded judgment concerning the suitability of the seminarian for advancement to the next year of formation. The evaluation report should be detailed. The qualities listed in canon law as requirements for promotion to Orders should be considered at each stage of advancement: integral faith, right intention, requisite knowledge, good reputation, integral morals and proven virtues, and the requisite physical and psychological health.¹⁶⁶ The evaluation should provide a judgment of the seminarian's aptitude for priestly life and ministry as well as an estimation of his capacity to lead a chaste, celibate life. The stage or year in which the seminarian is currently in formation should be considered in assessing his readiness for advancement. The following issues in each area of formation are to be considered and are to be applied, according to the principle of gradualism, at each level of formation:

a. Human Formation:

- The human qualities of truthfulness, respect for others, justice, humility, integrity, affability, generosity, kindness, courtesy, integrity, and prudence
- The capacity to relate to others in a positive manner and the ability to get along with others and work with them in the community
- Good self-knowledge, self-discipline, and self-mastery, including emotional self-control
- Good physical and mental health
- A balanced lifestyle and balance in making judgments
- Affective maturity and healthy psychosexual development; clarity of male sexual identity; an ability to establish and maintain wholesome friendships; the capacity to maintain appropriate boundaries in relationships
- Skills for leadership and collaboration with women and men
- Capacity to receive and integrate constructive criticism
- Simplicity of life, stewardship of resources, and responsibility for financial obligations
- Mature respect for and cooperation with church authority
- Engagement in the community life of the seminary

d. Pastoral Formation:

- A missionary spirit, zeal for evangelization, and ecumenical commitment
- A spirit of pastoral charity, a quest for justice, and an openness to serve all people
- A special love for and commitment to the sick and suffering, the poor and outcasts, prisoners, immigrants, and refugees
- Demonstration of appropriate pastoral and administrative skills and competencies for ministry
- Ability to exercise pastoral leadership
- Ability to carry out pastoral work collaboratively with others and an appreciation for the different charisms and vocations within the Church
- The ability to work in a multicultural setting with people of different ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds
- A commitment to the proclamation, celebration, and service of the Gospel of life
- Energy and zeal for pastoral ministry

288. When there is doubt about the readiness of a seminarian for advancement, consideration can be given to a recommendation of a period of probation outside the seminary. The time period involved should be specified, not open-ended. The period of probation should have clearly identified goals and means to assess the achievement of goals. Likewise, appropriate supervision is necessary so that this period away would help bring about needed growth for a possible return to the seminary. If doubts remain after this period, the seminarian should not continue in formation.

Footnotes:

33 See Codex Iuris Canonici (CIC) (Code of Canon Law), c. 241§1; CCEO, c. 342§1.

34 See CIC, c. 241§2; CCEO, c. 342§2.

35 Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), no. 2332. Some subsequent citations appear in the text.

36 See CIC, c. 241§1; CCEO, c. 342§1.

37 See CIC, c. 250; CCEO, c. 348; Pastores dabo vobis, no. 56.

38 See CIC, c. 220; CCEO, c. 23.

39 See Essential Norms for Diocesan/Eparchial Policies Dealing with Allegations of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Priests or Deacons (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006), <http://www.nccbuscc.org/ocyp/2005EssentialNorms.pdf>.

40 See CIC, c. 220; CCEO, c. 23.

41 “Of special importance is the capacity to relate to others. This is truly fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a ‘man of communion.’ This demands that the priest not be arrogant or quarrelsome, but affable, hospitable, sincere in his words and heart, prudent and discreet, generous and ready to serve, capable of opening himself to clear and brotherly relationships and of encouraging the same in others and quick to understand, forgive, and console” (Pastores dabo vobis, no. 43).

42 See Norms Concerning Applications for Priestly Formation from Those Previously Enrolled in a Formation Program in Addendum A; CIC, c. 241§3; CCEO, c. 342§3.

Also see newly published: Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions: <http://ccc.usccb.org/flipbooks/cclv-guidelines-psychology-admissions/index.html#6>