



DO YOU KNOW THEM *to be* WORTHY?

Twelve Proposals for Bishops, Rectors,
Seminary Formation Teams, and Mental Health Professionals
in Assessing the Suitability of Men for Holy Orders



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Foreword

Dear Friends,

The scandal over clerical sexual abuse is one of the gravest crises in Church life in our time. It broke with renewed outcry in August, 2018 with the allegations of abuse of seminarians by then Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, seemingly one of the staunchest pillars of the American Catholic Church. It is now a crisis of global dimensions. Nor is there sign of its abatement in the midst of multi-million-dollar settlements that exhaust the patience of lay Catholics who watch the monies they donated siphoned away, and in the midst of ongoing controversies over Rev. Mark Rupnik, to name two examples among many. These scandals are a blight on Church life, weakening the power of the Church to evangelize, diverting scarce resources of time, talent and treasure, discouraging the faithful, discrediting ecclesiastical authority in the eyes of many, and, most of all, inflicting enduring harms on vulnerable persons both minors and adults.

The McGrath Institute for Church Life, dedicated as it is to reaching out from the resources of the University to participate in building up of Church life, has, since 2018, laid out a course of action intended to make good use of the educational and research opportunities proper to a University to contribute to mitigating this crisis. We want to address it proactively so as to make progress over time, rather than simply to react to flare-ups of the scandal, only to subside into inactivity until the next eruption. This has, too often, been the pattern of response.

Accordingly we have, since 2018, devoted our attention to contributing to the renewal of seminary culture which had already been underway since the Apostolic visitations of 2005-06. Our 2019 study, “Sexual Harassment and Catholic Seminary Culture” was the first ever sociological survey of seminarians regarding the prevalence (or lack thereof) of sexual harassment in seminaries, as well as what procedures were in place for reporting and what formation was available. This study became the basis for the 2021 Benchmarks for best practices in reporting structures and education, formulated by a Study Group convened by the McGrath Institute. These Benchmarks were publicly endorsed by twenty-eight prominent U.S. seminaries leaders who pledged to enact them.

Further building on needs revealed by the 2019 study, the McGrath Institute published, in 2023, the white paper “Fully Equipped for Every Good Work: A Proposal of Twelve Core Competencies in Ministering to Survivors of Sexual Abuse for Seminary Formation Programs.” Taking seriously that the highest priority in mitigating the abuse crisis was developing an ecclesial culture of responsiveness to victims of sexual abuse, clerical and otherwise, the report presents pastoral paths of healing in the ministry of priests properly trained in seminary in the competencies necessary for effective ministry. The report also had recommendations for the ongoing formation of clergy in these competencies.

We now add to these contributions yet another, presented herewith, which also arose from needs identified in the 2019 study, namely, the need for better screening of candidates for the seminary and, eventually, for the priesthood. In 2024, we commissioned Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) to do a second study on how seminaries and dioceses assess seminarians' suitability for ordination. As a follow-up to this study, we convened a working group of experts in seminary formation to discuss the study drawing from their own considerable experience, in order to formulate a series of recommendations for bishops.

The result is this report, "Do You Know Them to be Worthy? Twelve Proposals for Bishops, Rectors, Seminary Formation Teams, and Mental Health Professionals in Assessing the Suitability of Men for Holy Orders," authored by Rev. Thomas Berg, Ph.D. (McGrath Institute, University of Notre Dame) and Timothy G. Lock, Ph.D. (St. Joseph's Seminary, Dunwoodie and Goretti Center for Healing and Forgiveness).

It turns out that "screening" is too narrow a term for what is needed. Instruments and strategies of assessment are indeed intended to eliminate candidates judged unsuitable for ordination. But they are also intended to contribute to creating a formation program tailored to a particular candidate's growth in readiness for ordination. Therefore, precise strategies of readiness assessment are an indispensable element in a comprehensive and effective formation program.

The CARA study generated an inventory of areas where improvement is needed in the cultures of formation in seminaries. The authors, reflecting the wisdom of the study group gathered at Notre Dame in September of 2025, have produced twelve proposals, together with an explanation of the rationale of each, grouped in three categories:

- ◆ Proposals aimed at a more effective use of psychological services in the formation process
- ◆ Proposed best practices regarding candidates with special needs
- ◆ Proposals aimed at supporting chastity and celibacy formation

The emphasis throughout has been on resisting pressure, arising from the need for greater numbers of priests, to admit candidates who are poorly suited to existing seminary formation programs. Our emphasis, instead, is on renewing the presbyterate by identifying men with a genuine vocation and the capacity for priestly formation, while ensuring that formation itself is responsive to their individual needs. It is such men who can engender healing, preach the Gospel both in word and deed, and thereby inspire vocations in similarly highly qualified men. Ultimately, this will create an ecclesial culture where sexual abuse is less likely to occur and where, when it does, its consequences for victims and for the whole People of God are addressed in a timely and pastorally effective way.

Together in hope,



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Abbreviations

ADHD	Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
APA	American Psychological Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CARA	Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
CIC	Code of Canon Law
CPA	Catholic Psychotherapy Association
DPS	Director of Psychological Services
DS-SSA	Deep-Seated Same-Sex Attraction
HIPAA	Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act
NACTS	National Association of Catholic Theological Schools
OCD	Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder
PDV	Pastores Dabo Vobis
PPF5	Program of Priestly Formation, 5th edition
PPF6	Program of Priestly Formation, 6th edition
SSA	Same-Sex Attraction
SFC	Seminary Formation Council
T-SSA	Transitory Same-Sex Attraction
USCCB	United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

Introduction

In the rite of priestly ordination, when the candidates have taken their places before the bishop, a priest designated by the bishop says: “Most reverend Father, holy mother Church asks you to ordain these men, our brothers, to the responsibility of the priesthood.” The bishop responds by asking: “Do you know them to be worthy?” The priest responds: “After inquiry among the Christian people, and upon recommendation of those responsible, I testify that they have been found worthy.”

By the time a seminarian reaches the transitional diaconate, a lengthy process of discernment and accompaniment must culminate in a judgment about his suitability for Orders—a determination to which multiple stakeholders in that candidate’s formation process will contribute:

A judgment concerning the suitability of a candidate to receive the diaconate as a transitional step to priesthood includes a judgment concerning his suitability for priestly ministry. It is not possible to admit a candidate to the diaconate in the face of doubts concerning his suitability for the priesthood. For this reason, the judgment reached by the scrutiny undertaken with a view to ordination to the diaconate is decisive. If this judgment is positive, it should be changed only in the light of new and grave information in the course of the next scrutiny prior to priestly ordination.¹

No one entrusted with accompanying men in preparation for the priesthood—whether formators, rectors, or bishops ultimately responsible for calling men to Orders—wants to err in a final recommendation regarding a candidate’s suitability. The stakes for the Church and for the candidate himself are simply too high. Accordingly, that judgment is not merely procedural, but a solemn and irrevocable act of pastoral responsibility, undertaken for the good of the candidate, the faithful, and the integrity of the priesthood itself.

“The judgment regarding a candidate’s suitability is not merely procedural, but a solemn and irrevocable act of pastoral responsibility undertaken for the good of the candidate, the faithful, and the integrity of the priesthood itself.”

"Having spent nearly four decades combined in priestly formation, we believe several interrelated concerns regarding how formation teams, rectors, and bishops reach final judgments on candidates' suitability for Orders deserve closer scrutiny."

Obviously, that judgment rests on years of evaluations (scrutinies) including psychological evaluations, on experiencing the man in multiple settings, and on personal accompaniment by a team of seminary formators. Yet, especially as the Configuration Stage comes to a close, and diaconal ordination nears, a final judgment and recommendation of suitability—based on a series of prior recommendations for advancement to subsequent stages of formation—must be made. For a seminary formator, a spiritual director, a psychological counselor, a vocation director or diocesan director of seminarians, for a rector, for a bishop, what are the key questions today that must be answered in arriving at that judgment, and how do these stakeholders go about making those determinations?

The present authors wanted to take a closer look. They believed that doing so would constitute a great help to all those involved. The authors are well aware that there have obviously been profoundly fruitful advances in seminary formation over the past two decades.² They are also aware by personal experience that seminary formation today is by no means foolproof, by no means perfect. Having spent nearly four decades combined in priestly formation, we believe several interrelated concerns regarding how formation teams, rectors, and bishops reach final judgments on candidates' suitability for Orders deserve closer scrutiny. Hence, the present study.

In the summer of 2024, the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame commissioned a study with the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University on how seminaries and dioceses assess seminarians' suitability for ordination. Under the authors' supervision, CARA developed five surveys for key U.S. constituencies directly involved in that process: diocesan Ordinaries, vocation directors, seminary rectors, formators and spiritual directors, and mental health professionals who assist seminaries. Interviews were also conducted with representatives of each group. In September of 2025, CARA published its findings in *Evaluating the Church's Practices in Assessing the Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders* (hereafter, the CARA study), authored by Jonathon Wiggins, Ph.D., Barnabé Hounguevou, S.J., M.A., and Thomas P. Gaunt, S.J., Ph.D.³

As a follow-up to that study, the McGrath Institute convened a series of experts in formation for a three-day summit to discuss a series of questions generated by the results of the CARA study with the aim of formulating a series of recommendations for bishops. That gathering, held September 8–11, 2025 on the campus of the University of Notre Dame, brought together an invitation-only group of seasoned formators, seminary rectors, psychologists working in priestly formation, vocation directors, and one bishop.⁴ Over the course of that meeting, participants

(hereafter, summit participants) engaged in sustained discussion aimed at evaluating current practices for assessing suitability for seminary advancement and ordination, and at formulating concrete recommendations to strengthen seminary formation programs in the Church.

Between the CARA study and the formation summit and the generation of the present report, these are some of the salient concerns that motivated our endeavor and which will be reflected in the recommendations contained in the pages that follow:

- ◆ The mental health needs of society are on the increase. The American Psychological Association 2025 report indicates a staggering percentage of adults experiencing isolation (54%), experiencing at least one physical symptom of stress (66%), and needing more emotional support than they received (69%).⁵
- ◆ Seminary formation programs are often underserved by the psychological sciences, particularly in an era when, at least in the U.S., the Church benefits tremendously from a growing network of Catholic therapists.
- ◆ Assessments of suitability are often fragmented; formators can have blind spots, and different stakeholders frequently operate with only partial knowledge and according to differing standards and motivations.
- ◆ It is evident that rectors and formators fail to take full advantage of the initial psychological evaluation of candidates.
- ◆ Candidates sometimes advance through successive stages of formation without having attained necessary thresholds, especially in the area of psychosexual maturity.
- ◆ Significant uncertainties persist regarding a candidate's capacity for celibate chastity, affective integration, and healthy relational functioning.
- ◆ Sexual compulsivity, unresolved trauma, immature dependency, boundary issues, or deep-seated psychosexual confusion are not always adequately surfaced or addressed during the formation process, or not early enough.
- ◆ Seminary formation programs at times fail to lead men to the genuine interior freedom, stability, and self-knowledge necessary for a life of priestly continence and pastoral responsibility.
- ◆ Seminaries and dioceses sometimes lack consistently reliable mechanisms for identifying serious risk factors before ordination, and institutional pressures—such as the need for vocations, financial constraints, or deference to external evaluators—can contribute to premature advancement.

"It is our hope that these recommendations will assist bishops in exercising their grave responsibility to discern wisely and well the men whom they call to sacred Orders."

In what follows, the authors make a series of recommendations especially directed to the body of bishops who are ultimately responsible for seminary admission and formation for the priesthood.⁶ These recommendations are applicable as well for men in formation for religious communities and addressed to those responsible for their formation and advancement to Orders.

Where the authors sensed broad agreement from summit participants on particular recommendations, they indicate this. In other instances, the recommendations reflect the authors' considered interpretation of the summit discussions. At points,

the conclusions presented here represent not a simple synthesis of participant opinion, but the authors' own prudential judgment, shaped by — yet not reducible to — the perspectives offered at our summit gathering. In as far as possible, the recommendations also reflect both the quantitative and qualitative findings of the CARA study.⁷

It is our hope that these recommendations, grounded especially in the hard-won experience of those who have devoted years to the demanding and grace-filled work of priestly formation, will assist bishops in exercising their grave responsibility to discern wisely and well the men whom they call to sacred Orders.



Section One

Proposals aimed at a more effective use of psychological services in the formation process

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1 Two psychological evaluations should ordinarily be incorporated into the course of seminary formation: an initial evaluation during the diocesan application process, and a second evaluation before or during the early part of the Configuration Stage.

Most psychologists will agree that the shelf life of a psychological evaluation is, at maximum, three years. Applicants undergo a first comprehensive psychological evaluation when they are applying to the formation program but there is rarely follow up to explore progress, as seen by improvement in his testing. The path of formation has recently been increased to at least seven years with the addition of the Propaedeutic Stage in PPF6. Therefore, by the time the individual concludes his minimum of one year in Propaedeutic Stage and two years in Discipleship Stage, the utility and relevance of his initial psychological evaluation has expired. By the end of Discipleship Stage or the beginning of Configuration Stage, the seminarian should receive a second comprehensive evaluation that should be compared with his first evaluation. The CARA study suggested meaningful support among bishops, rectors, and vocation directors for a second comprehensive psychological evaluation later in formation, particularly as a means of assessing growth, identifying emerging concerns, and confirming readiness for ordination. This second evaluation is also supported by the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (hereafter, Ratio)⁸. The findings of the

second evaluation, in addition to the rector's annual progress reports, allows the seminarian to receive additional support in Configuration Stage that will assist him in reaching his benchmarks and formation goals.

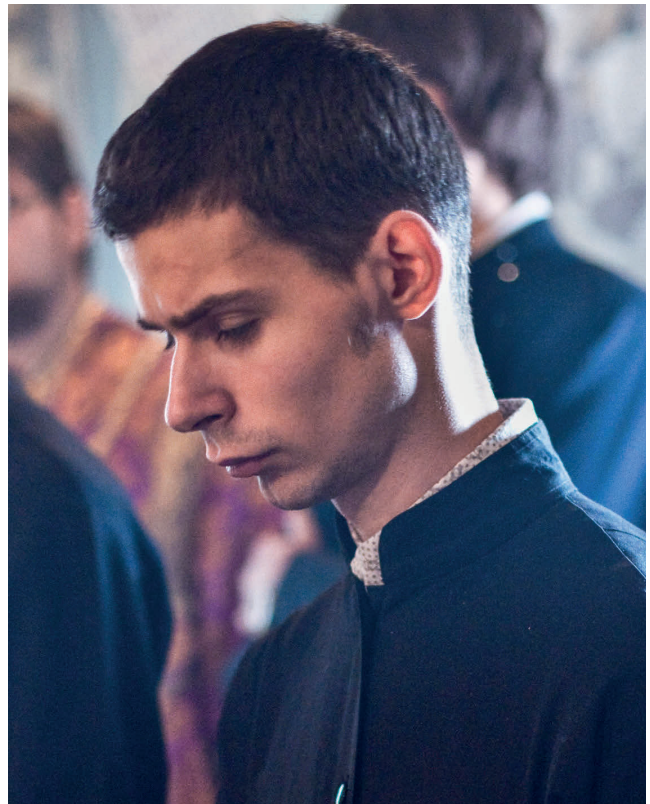


2 Because the report of the initial psychological evaluation can serve as a rich tool for a candidate's personal growth, it should be available to the seminarian's formation advisor.

"The psychological evaluation must be understood not merely as a screening instrument, but as a tool for growth and ongoing formation."

As a tool for growth, the psychological evaluation can "contribute to the seminarian's personal plan for priestly formation."¹¹ This "personal plan for priestly formation" is to be developed with information obtained in the psychological evaluation.¹² Because the formation advisor "is responsible for personalizing the work of seminary formation for an individual seminarian,"¹³ personalized accompaniment cannot be reduced to a superficial monitoring of a seminarian's external comportment. Even in the external forum of advisement, formation dialogue, if it is to be fruitful, must go deeper. Consequently, it is reasonable that the seminarian's formation advisor should have access to the report of the man's initial psychological evaluation.¹⁴ With due respect for the rights of the seminarian and a strict maintenance of confidentiality, the seminarian should be invited to sign a written consent form acknowledging his informed and free consent for that report to be shared with his formation advisor.¹⁵

The psychological evaluation has been falsely seen as something that the applicant passes or fails. This check-the-box mentality has been common among vocation directors and seminary rectors.⁹ The CARA study suggests that many vocation directors, rectors, formators, and bishops increasingly view the psychological evaluation not merely as a screening instrument, but as a tool for growth and ongoing formation.¹⁰ The CARA study found that 100% of responding rectors and 94% of formators/spiritual directors viewed the initial psychological evaluation as a necessary tool for identifying areas of needed growth. It also found that 68% of bishops and 81% of vocation directors regarded the initial psychological evaluation as one of the most effective, or the most effective, tools for identifying issues related to a candidate's suitability for formation. From this perspective, the psychological evaluation offers insights on the candidate that can help to provide greater clarity and a fuller understanding of the man.



3 Seminaries should appoint a full-time in-house director of psychological services who serves as counselor/psychotherapist for seminarians and reviews each seminarian's initial psychological evaluation with him, even when it has already been reviewed by the assessing psychologist.

The Director of Psychological Services (DPS), also referred to as the Director of Counseling Services,¹⁶ at a Catholic seminary typically provides counseling to seminarians; reviews psychological evaluations with them; consults with seminary faculty on psychological matters, including individual cases when proper consent is given; offers formation conferences; and assists the admissions team as a non-voting member in interviewing applicants. The DPS may also provide continuing education and training for seminary formators.

In moderately sized seminaries, and even in some smaller seminaries, it makes sense to have a full-time DPS. According to the CARA study, nearly three in five mental health professionals (57%) agree that there have been men at their seminary who were initially

referred for counseling, but who ultimately ended up receiving little or none at all. The presence of a mental health professional in this full-time capacity might help to counter the troubling frequency with which seminarians receive inadequate mental health support or none at all when such support had been recommended based on the initial intake evaluation.

In addition, the review of the psychological evaluation with the DPS is considered imperative.¹⁷ While it is considered a best practice for the assessing psychologist to provide feedback to the individual tested, the CARA study, and other research, indicate that the frequency of seminarians receiving feedback is low.¹⁸ Although the CARA surveys did not quantify how many seminarians receive feedback on their initial psychological evaluation, the report repeatedly identified deficiencies in feedback sessions, follow-up discussions, and practical use of evaluation results, suggesting that many seminarians do not receive a consistent or meaningful review of their assessments.

"In moderately sized seminaries, and even in some smaller seminaries, it makes sense to have a full-time director of psychological services."

Further, only 48% of rectors and 51% of formators report that the initial psychological evaluation is actually used to design a personalized formation plan for each seminarian, a figure that drops to 36% among mental health professionals, suggesting that evaluation results are not consistently integrated into formation planning. This prevents the psychological evaluation from being a tool for growth as almost all bishops, and most vocation directors, rectors, seminary formators, and seminary psychologists believe it should be, as noted in the CARA study.¹⁹ As one seminary psychologist put it in a follow up interview, "I believe a good practice is [for the psychologist] to meet with the man, his formation advisor, and spiritual director together to review the psychological. When everyone

comes together, there are no secrets and all can be a part of an effective plan for formation.”

As noted, the psychological evaluation is primarily seen as a tool for growth by these same constituencies. However, the evaluation cannot be used as a tool if one is never told what was included in the report. Even if the psychologist who wrote the report has the opportunity to sit down with the seminarian to discuss it, seminarians can experience difficulty understanding and remembering all of the points covered in such a feedback session. This may be due in part to nervousness

or simply to an overload of information. The seminarian might experience such a session as drinking from a firehose. Therefore, the DPS reviewing the report can choose a more congenial time to offer the seminarian an opportunity to learn more about himself and to integrate the recommendations and conclusions of the report into his “personal plan for priestly formation.”²⁰ For example, this could be some period of time after the seminarian has been admitted and is in a better frame of mind for feedback.



4 **The meaning and appropriate use of therapy in the context of seminary admissions and formation requires clarification. Recognizing that many seminarians already receive clinically meaningful therapeutic support under the concept of growth counseling, seminary formation programs and official formation documents should distinguish ordinary, periodic psychotherapy that can appropriately support formation from more intensive treatment needs that require a man to not be admitted to seminary, or to pause formation, and pursue care outside the seminary.**

Given the needs of many men now entering formation, psychotherapy is often clinically warranted during seminary formation, at times on a regular weekly basis for a sustained period. And weekly psychotherapy is currently a best practice at many seminaries. It runs contrary, however, to indications in PPF6.²¹ This tension between official guidelines and best practice needs to be addressed. Experience shows that significant psychological struggles frequently emerge or become more evident only within the demands of seminary life. Restricting therapeutic care to short-term growth counseling aimed solely at ordinary developmental concerns curtails the possibility of therapy necessary to focus on psychiatric symptomatology.²² Providing access to appropriate psychotherapy within the formation process more fully serves the seminarian, promotes genuine human freedom, and increases the likelihood of lasting growth and symptom resolution. It is only in cases where more intensive psychotherapy is warranted (such as multiple times a week or for severe psychological concerns) that a man should be asked to step aside from formation to pursue that therapy outside the formation program.

PPF6 explicitly cautions against “extensive psychotherapy” or “in-depth therapy.” These terms, however, are not defined in the documents and are not standard in the mental health literature. Likewise, “deeply entrenched personal issues,” which PPF6 also references, is not a standard clinical term. As these documents are revised, we recommend consulting mental health professionals grounded in a Catholic anthropology to provide more precise psychological language.

It is the collective experience and opinion of many psychologists who collaborate in seminary formation that men with such “deeply entrenched personal issues” are in fact being admitted to seminaries in the United States, particularly into the Propaedeutic Stage. These men are often accepted with the condition that they will meet with a psychotherapist. Consequently, this reality should either (a) adjust the expectations of superiors and convince them to provide the appropriate level of psychotherapeutic services for these men during formation or (b) trigger a re-evaluation of the acceptance criterion. It is also the collective experience of such psychologists that many seminaries are not currently equipped to provide psychotherapeutic services for these men, and many require additional staff to manage the psychotherapeutic needs.

“Providing access to appropriate psychotherapy within the formation process more fully serves the seminarian, promotes genuine human freedom, and increases the likelihood of lasting growth.”

5 Given that the candidate has the obligation to disclose himself to the Church and that the Church has the right to know the man, a goal of seminary counseling/psychotherapy and spiritual direction ought to be to help the seminarian bring *into the external forum* those personal issues known *in the internal forum* which bear on his own formation and on a judgment pertaining to his suitability for Orders.

The requirement of self-disclosure in formation is more than a mere expectation on the part of the Church. It is the just and necessary response to the Church's responsibility to discern the presence of a genuine vocation in the candidate, to judge his suitability for orders, and thus protect both the good of the candidate himself and the good of the Church. These goods are not in tension with each other; on the contrary they are complementary.²³ More crucially, however, the seminarian must discover the requirement of self-disclosure as an internal exigency of love for the Church. Previous research notes that fully 23% of recently ordained priests admitted that, when in seminary, they concealed realities about themselves that "I should have made known to my formators in the external forum."²⁴

The positive moral obligation of self-disclosure incumbent upon men seeking ordination to the priesthood corresponds to the Church's right, and the bishop's duty, to know the men who are presented for Orders. According to *CIC* 1052.1, a bishop may only proceed to ordain a man when, in light of the investigations prescribed by law, it has been established with positive arguments that he is suitable.

While traditional notions of internal and external forum are still applicable here, some appropriate distinctions require more sustained attention. Seminary spiritual directors play a particularly important role in creating an environment in which the seminarian feels that it is safe to trust, and to expose the deepest thoughts and movements in his heart. The safety provided by the internal forum supports his courage.

This internal-external forum distinction does not apply to psychotherapy and counseling. Many will lump psychotherapy and counseling under the umbrella of the internal forum because there are similarities with the notions of privacy and confidentiality. There are, however, substantial and important differences.

Mental health professionals are bound to follow the ethics of their profession along with state and federal laws (e.g., HIPAA) that bind them to secrecy under the notion of confidentiality. Privacy is automatically maintained but there are conditions under which the mental health professional is allowed to speak to formators, whether they are in the internal forum or external forum. Those conditions are determined by the therapist in dialogue with the seminarian, and with the

"Seminaries in the United States generally employ one of three models to guide psychotherapists in navigating the issue of confidentiality."

seminarian's consent obtained in writing. There are also conditions under which the mental health professional is obliged to break confidentiality: when the individual is imminently suicidal or planning to harm another; when there is disclosure of abuse of a child or vulnerable person; or if a court of law demands records.

It is important to note that seminaries in the United States generally employ one of three models to guide psychotherapists in navigating confidentiality.²⁵ In the first model, as described above, the psychotherapist maintains strict confidentiality and does not disclose information without a signed release of information. Such a release is typically obtained when a specific concern arises or when formators request feedback. In the second model, the psychotherapist requests all seminarians, at the outset of treatment, to sign a release form acknowledging that session content will remain

confidential except in cases where the seminarian reports behavior that is egregious or inconsistent with the expectations of priestly formation. This framework permits the psychotherapist to communicate such concerns to the rector when warranted. In the third model, the degree of disclosure evolves over time as the seminarian progresses through formation. During the first year of therapy, confidentiality is fully maintained. In the second year, the seminarian is encouraged to self-disclose any concerning behaviors to the external forum. By the third year, the seminarian provides consent for the psychotherapist to share a summary report with the formation advisor (i.e., in the external forum). Each model carries distinct advantages and limitations. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each seminary to determine the approach that best aligns with its formation goals and institutional values.

6 Bishops and vocation directors are urged to work with seminaries nationally to assure uniform quality of psychological evaluations. In particular, the psychologists providing these evaluations should receive, where necessary, specialized training in conducting the psychosexual history assessment. Further, it is recommended that the USCCB collaborate with psychology experts in revising the 2015 Guidelines document.

Anyone working within a seminary system—or serving as a vocation director—who reviews applicants' psychological evaluations quickly recognizes the wide variation in their quality. Some reports provide detailed descriptions and a sound understanding of a candidate's psychological functioning yet fail to analyze sufficiently areas critical for a man seeking to live a life of chaste celibacy. Others offer only a superficial overview of personality, without meaningful clinical insight, praising the candidate's desire to dedicate his life to the Lord. Still others do not articulate clear, personality-informed recommendations that would help formators develop a personalized program of priestly formation.²⁶ At times, the psychologists preparing these evaluations are Catholic; more often, they are not.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2015 document, *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions*, outlines seven core components of a psychological assessment.²⁷ While these elements are typically—though not consistently—addressed in evaluation reports, the depth and rigor given to each domain are often insufficient. The Catholic Psychotherapy Association has expanded upon the USCCB document and developed its own guidelines for assessing men applying for seminary formation.²⁸ Nevertheless, the experience of the CPA's Seminary Psychology and Assessment Special Interest Group underscores the need for specialized training both in conducting these evaluations and in integrating findings in ways most useful to seminary formators.²⁹

"We encourage the identification and development of training opportunities to equip clinicians with the specialized competencies necessary to conduct assessments of seminarians effectively."

The psychological evaluation must include a thorough psychosexual history. As seminary applicants become increasingly adept with technology, the range and complexity of sexual experiences and behaviors continue to expand. Behaviors once relatively uncommon have, in many cases, become more prevalent. Our experience also indicates that applicants may not spontaneously disclose patterns of unhealthy sexual behavior during seminary interviews; however, when such areas are addressed directly and appropriately, they are often willing to provide candid and relevant information.

The CARA study revealed that mental health professionals are looking to the Church for feedback regarding the quality and utility of their reports. Typically, no feedback is given to the psychologist conducting the evaluations.³⁰ Therefore, we recommend that bishops and vocation directors, in collaboration with seminary rectors and formators, establish clearer and more comprehensive requirements for psychological evaluations. In addition, we encourage the identification and development of training opportunities to equip clinicians with the specialized competencies necessary to conduct these assessments effectively.³¹ Finally, we recommend that seminary formators and psychologists work together to develop a method for providing feedback to one another to remedy shortcomings and replicate successes.

Finally, the USCCB's 2015 document was developed alongside PPF5. With the advent of the PPF6, some seminaries are developing their own guidelines that are more specific and current. We recommend that the USCCB 2015 document be updated to include important considerations from PPF6, such as the distinct benchmarks appropriate for an applicant to the Propaedeutic Stage compared with a man entering the Configuration Stage. In addition, we recommend that the USCCB engage psychologists with expertise in seminary formation for this revision process.



Section Two

Proposed best practices regarding candidates with special needs

7 We encourage the ongoing exploration and development of resources to support seminarians with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and related disorders—including those diagnosed with a clinically significant deficit in cognitive empathy.

The prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has increased from 0.5 per 1000 children in the 1960-1970s (or 1 in 2000 children) to 32.2 per 1000 children in 2022 (or 1 in 31 children).³² This increase in prevalence has yielded an increase in seminarians presenting with symptoms of ASD. The CARA report indicates that 57% of Bishops are concerned about

"A task force has been formed at the McGrath Institute for Church Life to address more fully the subject of autistic candidates and seminary formation."

advancing a candidate who is high functioning on the autism spectrum, and 20% noted that alone would disqualify the man from being ordained. Seminary formators have identified several characteristics associated with ASD and related disorders that present challenges including reduced empathy, difficulty with social cues, cognitive and emotional rigidity and impairments in executive functioning among others. Here it is important to acknowledge that *these traits can appear in any given candidate, not just those on the ASD spectrums*. Despite these apparent challenges, some within the formation community have noted that with appropriate resources, seminarians with ASD can nonetheless fruitfully benefit from formation and prove themselves to be suitable candidates for Orders. Priests with ASD attest to the potential for men with these struggles to have a fruitful priesthood.

These considerations underscore the urgent need for further research and the development of resources necessary for candidacy assessment and for the sustained accompaniment of seminarians and newly ordained priests with ASD. To this end, a task force, under the leadership of the McGrath Institute for Church Life at the University of Notre Dame, has been formed to address more fully the subject of autistic candidates and seminary formation.³³

8 Medications for attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) that are proven to help the man can coexist with priestly ministry and should not be considered an impediment to ordination even though he will have to continue to take these medications after ordination (and possibly throughout the rest of his life).

Certain psychiatric diagnoses, including ADHD and OCD, have evidence-based treatment approaches that can allow the individual to live with, and experience symptom relief from, their condition. In fact, sometimes, individuals with ADHD and OCD can sufficiently address their symptoms therapeutically so that they are minimally impacted by their symptoms and are able to fully engage in ministry. In some situations, however, psychotherapy is unable to help the individual achieve sufficient relief and the person is left with the symptom constellation.

In these situations, the mental health treatment of ADHD and OCD includes psychotherapeutic *and* psychopharmacological interventions. With these approaches, symptoms can significantly decrease and in some cases completely remit. When the impact of psychotherapy reaches a limit, medication is the most important intervention needed to keep the symptoms

stable. With stable symptoms, the individual can learn how to navigate the pastoral demands of priestly ministry in a healthy manner. If the individual relies on medication for symptom remission, this is not seen as a treatment failure. Rather, it is seen as a healthy resolution to a mental health condition. If the medications were to stop working, most cases of ADHD or OCD would evidence an increase in symptoms, but the individual typically has good insight and is able to note that increase. These can be addressed through alternative medications, though this may temporarily impact treatment. In short, individuals with these conditions may be able to engage priestly ministry even though they will remain on medication after ordination. Collectively, we are aware of many cases of priests who were on medication for ADHD and/or OCD in seminary and continued into their priestly life in a healthy manner.



9 Seminaries must prioritize securing the resources necessary to address significant formative deficits in admitted candidates.

The CARA study suggests that, in some settings, institutional pressure to maintain high numbers of seminarians may at times overshadow the necessary attention to the quality and readiness of candidates for priestly formation. Experience has shown that the majority of applicants have significant deficits in human formation and require a specialized response. Once a candidate is admitted, seminaries and sponsoring dioceses assume a serious responsibility to provide the resources reasonably

Men admitted with persistent struggles involving pornography use or masturbation may likewise require substantial therapeutic and formative support. Other examples could be added. Whatever the specific need, applicants will often benefit from psychotherapeutic care (individual and group), along with additional supports such as twelve-step programs, workshops, and other targeted interventions. In some cases, obtaining these resources may require collaboration beyond the

"Securing the resources necessary to address the special needs of seminarians must be treated as an essential component of responsible priestly formation and prudent vocational discernment."

necessary to address those deficits and to assist the candidate in human growth and maturation. PPF6 addresses this point: "Propaedeutic programs and seminaries are *responsible for ensuring the possession of adequate resources to serve the formative needs of ... applicants.*"³⁴

The present study has explored two prominent examples. Men admitted with significant deficits in cognitive empathy may require specialized mentoring and psychotherapy to help them develop the relational capacities necessary for ministry.

seminary itself and may entail significant financial or institutional commitment. Nevertheless, if a seminary or sponsoring diocese judges a candidate suitable for admission despite serious deficits, then securing the resources necessary to address those deficits must not be regarded as optional or secondary. It should be treated as an essential component of responsible priestly formation and prudent vocational discernment.

Section Three

Proposals aimed at supporting chastity and celibacy formation

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10 When men enter first Configuration, they should have already been sexually continent for a sustained period of time of at least several months without a lapse; similarly, prior to being called to the diaconate, seminarians should have been living in continence for a longer period, typically twelve months or more, without lapsing.³⁵

Here we understand *continence* to mean the *absence of sexual indulgence and activity*. We understand *lapse* to mean an instance of seeking to indulge a sexual urge (by use of pornography, masturbation, etc.) whether deliberate, semi-deliberate, or by compulsion. Seminarians are preparing themselves to observe life-long continence.³⁶ That life commitment means abstaining permanently from genital sexual activity and pleasure for the sake of the Kingdom of God. It is protected and

aided by the virtue of chastity which can be defined as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”³⁷ Taken together, this means a life of habituated regulation of sexual desire and urge, and the virtuous and overall serene integration of chastity within himself in his embodied, psychosexual reality.

Consequently, the formation objective here is that a candidate for Configuration Stage should have a well-founded hope that he will be able to pursue and live the commitment to perpetual continence with interior freedom—particularly freedom from any habitual or compulsive sexual behavior that he might have still been dealing with as he began the propaedeutic stage. And to be more precise, the goal is not simply for the seminarian to grit it out, as it were, by sheer willpower. As the *Ratio* notes importantly:

It would be gravely imprudent to admit to the sacrament of Orders a seminarian who does not enjoy free and serene affective maturity. He must be faithful to celibate chastity through the exercise of human and priestly virtues, understood as openness to the action of grace, *rather than the mere achievement of continence by will power alone*.³⁸

“The virtue of chastity can be defined as the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.”

This requires a formation program structured around accompanying a seminarian to achieve ever deeper interior freedom from habituated tendencies to seek gratification, particularly by pornography and masturbation, and ever more serene and stable integration and regulation of sexual desire. This entails formation in virtue, not merely in willpower, as well as human formation in healthy emotions and coping skills.

"A candidate for the Configuration Stage should have a well-founded hope that he will be able to pursue and live the commitment to perpetual continence with interior freedom."

It would appear obvious that advancing a man to Orders who has not been able to sustain continence for lengthy stretches of time or who is still habitually or compulsively lapsing into unchaste behavior is problematic. This is quite simply borne out by experience. The persistent gap between one's professed commitment to celibacy and one's habitual behavior, especially in the first years of priesthood, creates a cognitive dissonance that subjects the man to the corrosive power of shame, to an unhealthy and persistent psychological tension, inducing him potentially to rationalization, or concealment. The upshot of course is that the man can become fatalistically accustomed to living essentially a double life, thus debilitating him and leaving him vulnerable to the

temptation to engage in ever more risky sexual behaviors. And given the fairly common experience among priests of having to weather periodic challenges in chastity at various points in their priesthood, it is most helpful for them to be able to recall an earlier period in their lives when they were able to live for lengthy stretches of time in stable continence.

Given their own ample experiences of accompanying men in the formation process, summit participants expressed concern that seminaries are in practice accepting into formation and recommending for ordination men who have significant deficits in the regulation of sexual behavior, who might even qualify as sexually addicted, or who otherwise have been unsuccessful at living in complete sexual continence for a lengthy period of time. Although there was no consensus on this point, some participants insisted that the requirement should be stronger, namely that a candidate should be held to live continence *for a full year without lapse prior to commencing configuration, and two full years prior to diaconate*.

The CARA study offers evidence to support some kind of stronger requirement in this direction. Above all, we find a startling disconnect between the confidence expressed by bishops, vocation directors, rectors and formators and the lack of confidence by psychological service professionals when asked if they believe seminaries are adequately forming seminarians for sexual maturity. Combining "very confident" and "confident," the results were as follows:

Bishops: 85%

Vocation directors: 72%

Rectors: 84%

Formators / spiritual directors: 81%

Mental health professionals: 35%

And of mental health professionals surveyed, only 14% say they are "very confident" about the adequacy of formation for sexual maturity. (As it turns out, only 8% of rectors and 27% of formators and spiritual directors were able to respond that they were "very confident" about the same.)

“Participants in our summit were unanimous
and insistent that seminaries must establish clearer
benchmarks for continence prior to advancing candidates
to further stages of formation.”

This disconnect should be alarming. Mental health professionals who work with seminarians often have the clearest understanding of a seminarian’s real struggles—and of his progress, or lack of progress—in overcoming habits of pornography use and masturbation. These are areas that seminarians may conceal in the external forum and about which, experience has shown us, they may not be fully transparent even with their spiritual directors. Participants in our summit were unanimous and insistent that seminaries that have not already done so must establish clearer benchmarks for continence prior to advancement to further stages of formation and recommendation for diaconate. Likewise, seminaries should develop their own programs in chaste celibacy formation.³⁹ These programs should include education in a proper psychological and theological understanding of chastity. Additional resources should be provided, for example: filtering software and/or safeguards on institution internet and Wi-Fi, access to accountability partners in peer-to-peer support, and access to twelve-step programs and support groups.

For the purposes of articulating such benchmarks for continence, however, and with respect to our colleagues who might disagree, the present authors recommend that formation programs *avoid* adopting a strictly binary or “reset-based” model of behavioral tracking, such as is sometimes found in twelve-step frameworks.

While such approaches can offer clarity and accountability, they risk oversimplifying the dynamics of behavioral change and may inadvertently foster discouragement or shame particularly in otherwise committed candidates.

A more adequate approach—one which is both clinically sound and pastorally realistic—recognizes the distinction between an *isolated lapse* and a true *relapse*; it evaluates progress over time rather than by an uninterrupted sequence of days. Clinically and pastorally, a more accurate formulation would be as follows: *a sustained pattern of continence (absence of sexual indulgence and activity), with increasing stability, and rapid recovery from any lapses*. In practical terms, candidates are here aiming at a twelve-month period, for example, with few if any lapses. The more frequently any lapses might occur, the more candidate and formators would have to re-evaluate whether or not the proposed goal is being achieved. Such an approach preserves the seriousness of the moral and ascetical task while also reflecting a realistic anthropology—one that acknowledges both the gradual strengthening of virtue and the possibility of setbacks that do not, in themselves, negate genuine progress toward freedom and integration.

“Seminaries must create an environment in which discussion of a given man’s progress in continence can move serenely and honestly from the internal forum to the external forum.”

Finally, it is imperative that bishops, vocation directors, seminary rectors, and formation teams embrace the reality that pornography addiction and other semi-compulsive addictive behaviors are an everyday challenge and reality for seminarians in formation. The very fact that authors of the CARA study felt it necessary to include “cyclical semi-compulsive behaviors” as a potential factor bearing on discernment is indicative of this.⁴⁰

Seminaries must create an environment in which discussion of a given man’s progress in continence can move serenely and honestly from the internal forum to the external forum. It is possible to accomplish this with all involved supporting the seminarian as he exercises appropriate self-disclosure and assuring him of the corresponding degree of discretion and confidentiality with regard to the sharing and use of that knowledge. Formation teams are encouraged to consult mental health professionals who could assist them in

formulating questions regarding a seminarian’s current progress in chastity, while respecting the freedom of the seminarian in the revelation of conscience.⁴¹

The goal of helping men achieve interior freedom from pornography use and masturbation needs to be given paramount importance in formation programs as habitual struggles here can undermine every other formational objective in any other dimension of formation. The goal is not merely to stop the behavior, but to help the seminarian achieve deeper sexual integration and understand why he might turn to pornography or masturbation as coping mechanisms for loneliness, stress, or other challenges in the celibate life. Experience has taught us that when a man is able to live chastity in peace, he is much more able to benefit from the formation offered to him by his seminary. The formation team needs to discuss this and related issues openly, the seminary needs to count on the use of chastity support groups, and rectors need to address the issue head on in formation conferences. In a word, this needs to be recognized as a reality, talked about serenely, and dealt with openly. It cannot simply be entrusted to the realm of spiritual direction. And progress will undoubtedly need to be supported in most cases by psychological counseling.

“The goal is not merely to stop the behavior, but to help the seminarian achieve deeper sexual integration.”

11 **We urge bishops to foster and actively engage in the necessary conversations— theologically and pastorally—regarding the admission to Orders of candidates who experience same-sex attraction (SSA).**

During our formation summit, participants engaged in a frank and admittedly difficult conversation on this issue. It is a difficult topic given both the complexity of same-sex attraction itself, and the multiple layers of discourse—theological, pastoral, psychological—in which this topic necessarily comes packaged. Participants began by acknowledging just how difficult and challenging this conversation can be. And we were honest about the fact that if such conversations are hard and uncomfortable, it is also because many of us know brother priests who in fact experience SSA—brothers we love, with whom we minister, and who in fact have so often ministered to us, have baptized our children and witnessed our marriages and walked with us in the saddest moments of our lives, and some of whom have even played decisive roles in our own vocational discernment. To raise questions about admitting men to Orders who experience SSA

“We urge bishops to foster and actively engage in the necessary conversations that will move the Church toward a more unified discernment of how the Holy Spirit is guiding us on this question.”

seems to implicitly question the value of our ordained brothers’ vocations and the worth of their ministry. While we do not call into question the legitimacy of the priestly ministry of clergy who experience SSA, we note the clarity presented in the Vatican’s 2005 document, “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies,” (hereafter, Vatican 2005) that explicitly excludes individuals with SSA from Orders.⁴²

While universally acknowledging the complexity and fraught nature of the issue, there seemed nonetheless to be an emerging consensus specifically around the prospect of recommending to the bishops that seminarians who manifest a stable SSA should not be accepted into the configuration stage. The present authors, while endorsing that position, also recognize that there exists often sharp disagreement on this issue among key constituencies who play a role in judging the suitability of such candidates. Namely:

- ◆ Almost one in four bishops (22%) surveyed “agree” or “strongly agree” that they are “comfortable ordaining a man who experiences deep-seated same-sex attraction, provided he is firmly committed to celibacy.”
- ◆ Those same bishops (22%) are about twice as likely as vocation directors (9%) to agree that they are comfortable promoting these men to ordination.
- ◆ By comparison, only 17% of mental health professionals, 16% of rectors, and 12% of formators/spiritual directors agree that they are comfortable recommending (or encouraging) these men to pursue ordination.⁴³

While the data indicates that a majority of bishops are not comfortable ordaining these men, there remains nonetheless a notable disparity of judgment in the body of bishops. That disparity is even larger between bishops willing to ordain these men and rectors, only one in six of whom are typically disposed to recommend these men for Orders. Many of us who have worked in formation for many years can attest to instances in which undue pressure has been placed on a rector and members of the formation team to advance such candidates against their own judgment.

In light of the very evident disagreement on this issue at the level of the many stakeholders in the decision-making process and especially among the bishops, the present authors recommend first and foremost that bishops foster and actively engage in the necessary conversations that will move the Church toward a more unified discernment of how the Holy Spirit is guiding us on this question. Those conversations should also take place in frank and honest dialogue at the level of seminary rectors and formation teams with the bishops of their sending dioceses.

In the following section, we will discuss the utility of the 2005 document's conceptualization of SSA into two categories, "transitory same-sex attraction" (T-SSA) and "deep-seated same-sex attraction" (DS-SSA), in discerning the situation of each candidate individually. Here let us emphasize, and we cannot stress enough, that it is *each man whose unique situation and story* need to be taken into careful discernment notwithstanding whatever might become the most broadly supported best practice on this question. Case by case thorough discernment regarding admission or promotion will be especially necessary when a candidate's sexual history includes having acted out sexually on SSA, engaged in sexual experimentation, promiscuity, long-term relationships or promotion of the gay lifestyle, even when he has repented of these behaviors.⁴⁴ If it is discerned that a man's stable SSA seems to indicate the inadvisability of pursuing a life of celibate priesthood,

this discernment and recommendation, while made for the good of the Church, must also be made—and indeed should be expressed with exquisite charity and kindness—for the good of the man in question.⁴⁵

"Celibacy as the Church's tradition understands it is surely about more than just a commitment to remain single and chaste."

Whatever policy individual bishops endorse on this matter with regard to candidates in their own dioceses, it would seem that policy must be informed by robust theological and anthropological considerations:

- ◆ Is not celibacy as the Church's tradition understands it surely about more than just a commitment to remain single and chaste?
- ◆ How ought the theology of spiritual fatherhood, self-sacrificing love, and spousal self-gift to the Church that undergirds her theology of celibacy inform the Church's discernment of the suitability for ordination of one experiencing stable SSA?
- ◆ Can a man with stable same-sex attraction live celibacy in a way that is honest, interiorly integrated, and theologically coherent?

These are challenging questions that demand to be openly addressed by bishops, theologians and seasoned seminary formators and spiritual directors. Further, the opinions of the lay faithful must also be heard.

The present authors cannot help but wonder whether there is, in fact, broader agreement—suggested indirectly by the CARA study—that a seminarian’s stable SSA will often constitute a strong reason, at minimum, to pause formation. Such a pause would allow for assessment of how the man understands his identity, the nature of a call to celibacy, his capacity for self-gift in a spousal way to the Church, and his prospects for successfully navigating a celibate life as this attraction shapes his longings and relationships.

Most of us, even as we know brother priests with SSA, often also know just how painful and problematic their road in life has been, attempting to wed that attraction with a celibate lifestyle.⁴⁶ Such a pause in formation may, more often than not, lead to a decision not to advance a candidate; but more fundamentally, it corresponds to the weight of the questions at hand and to the candidate’s need for deeper personal and spiritual integration, particularly in coming to a more mature understanding of his own affective life and vocation.



12 We propose a more meaningful way of defining “transitory same-sex attraction” (T-SSA) and “deep-seated same-sex attraction” (DS-SSA) for use in seminary formation programs.

According to the CARA study, fully 68% of bishops, 68% of rectors, 63% of formators and spiritual directors, and 57% of vocation directors “agree” or “strongly agree” that they find the Vatican 2005 instruction on the discernment of vocations in the case of men with SSA to be useful. In contrast, only a third of mental health professionals (36%) “agree” that it is. Based on interviews conducted as part of the study, while mental health professionals appreciate the distinction between the two categories of individuals with SSA, they also suggested that the terms “transitory” and “deep-seated” same-sex attraction need to be better defined.

“The Church must articulate with greater clarity just how we are to understand and differentiate these two categories.”

Those terms were in fact developed within ecclesial documents.⁴⁷ They do not emerge from the mental health profession. Hence, while this distinction has been largely well received in the sphere of seminary formation and is considered helpful by most, the Church nevertheless must articulate with greater precision

particularly how one differentiates transitory from deep-seated. This point was made a number of times in the CARA survey follow-up interviews by bishops, rectors, vocation directors, and formators and spiritual directors.

Broadly speaking, the current manner of articulating the distinction is focused on the relative magnitude of the candidate’s experience of SSA: Is the attraction “deep within the person’s psyche” (i.e., deep-seated or permanent) or is it superficial and likely to change (i.e., transitory)? While this attempt to classify the condition has been helpful, it has been found lacking in that some who present with allegedly superficial same-sex attraction, continue to experience these attractions years later.⁴⁸ Cases have also been known of individuals who originally present with a robust experience of same-sex attractions, but later found that these attractions diminished and substantial opposite-sex attractions emerged and persisted.⁴⁹

Consequently, a best practice emerging among Catholic mental health professionals is to understand the two categories for the purpose of assessing suitability for ordination not in terms of magnitude alone, but also and especially in terms of temporal duration. That is, if the duration of the same-sex attractions persists for longer than five years (unless there is evidence to suggest that the issue is beginning to resolve), the diagnosis changes from transitory to deep-seated, no matter how superficial the SSA may appear.⁵⁰

Following this new definition, when any candidate discloses that he experiences SSA, a memo should be added to his file indicating that he disclosed his experience of SSA on that particular date. This date stamp will allow vocation directors, rectors, and bishops to follow the seminarian over time and provide him with the appropriate means to work toward overcoming his SSA if it is indeed transitory.⁵¹

Section Four

Some concluding recommendations

The authors wish to offer two final recommendations which were wholeheartedly shared by all summit participants. They concern two conditions essential to sound priestly formation: due respect for the informed judgment of those entrusted with the formation of candidates, and the Church's responsibility to assure the ongoing formation and professional preparation of those charged with that formation.

Ordinarily, bishops should accept the considered judgment of the rector and formation team regarding admission to seminary and promotion to successive stages of formation, unless the bishop possesses moral certitude that the seminary's assessment is substantially mistaken.⁵²

The judgment of the seminary formation team, based on the daily experience of accompanying the seminarian, must be considered a primary source of those "positive arguments" (cf. *CIC* 1052.1) for the presence of a genuine vocation to priesthood or lack thereof, and of a man's present suitability to pursue and live that vocation. As the *Ratio* would seem to imply, only for very grave reasons (and positive knowledge to the contrary) would bishops reject the recommendation of the rector (and, by implication, of the formation team) as to whether a seminarian should advance or not toward ordination:

As is known, the bishop has the ultimate and definitive canonical responsibility for the call to Holy Orders. However, he has the moral obligation to consider with the greatest attention the final assessment of the community of formators, formulated by the Rector, who draws together the fruits of what has been experienced

over the course of several years of formation. Experience has shown that when Ordinaries have not accepted the negative judgment of the community of formators, it has been the cause of great suffering in many cases, both for the candidates themselves and for the local churches.⁵³

The CARA study unfortunately lent support for the broad perception among seminary formators that too many bishops are still willing to prioritize numbers over quality when it comes to advancing candidates to ordination.⁵⁴ The longer one spends engaged in the work of priestly formation, the more likely we are to have to endure the excruciating experience of watching a man be ordained who, in one's strong judgment, should not be. For the good of all involved, the seminarian included, we must move beyond a fixation on numbers and insist on the quality of the men being called.

"For the good of all involved, the seminarian included, we must move beyond a fixation on numbers and insist on the quality of the men being selected."

"Formators themselves must be renewed and prepared for their mission."

Judging a man's suitability for Orders cannot be based on a single interview or one bishop's impressions. It depends upon sustained observation in community, repeated evaluations over time, and the integrated assessment of his academic, spiritual, pastoral, and human formation by multiple formators and professionals. It also requires evidence of growth, maturity, and consistency. For that reason, presumptive weight should be given to the judgment of the rector and formation team, who possess the fullest evidentiary picture. In many dioceses, bishops know candidates only episodically, while rectors and faculty accompany them continuously; to override those best placed to judge without grave reason risks weaker discernment.

Finally, there remains a continual need for the adequate preparation and ongoing formation of seminary formators. We strongly recommend that bishops who are in a position to do so foster seminary policies requiring an initial preparation for priests newly appointed to seminary formation faculty.

The immensely fruitful work of the Seminary Formation Council⁵⁵ is an outstanding example of what is needed. SFC exists to strengthen the Church by equipping those who form future priests. Through comprehensive certificate programs, practical tools, spiritual renewal, and fraternal support, it serves bishops, seminary faculty, vocation directors, pastors, and other leaders entrusted with priestly formation. Rooted in the Church's vision of integrated human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development, SFC emphasizes accompaniment, collaboration, and fidelity to the Magisterium so that formators themselves are renewed and prepared for their mission. Seminaries that have not already done so are urged to adopt a robust and universal requirement that all incoming formators enroll in this program. And to the extent necessary, we strongly urge the development of similar programs across the United States.



Conclusion

The authors invite candid and constructive dialogue regarding these proposals, especially from those who may disagree with some of our conclusions. In offering these recommendations, we also wish to express our profound gratitude to all the men and women who selflessly undertake the demanding work of accompanying men discerning a call to Holy Orders. Their labor is often carried out quietly,

with little recognition, yet their dedication has an enormous impact on the life of the whole Church. We make these proposals in a spirit of respect for their mission and with confidence that the Lord continues to guide and sustain His Church through the abiding assistance of the Holy Spirit in this transcendent work of forming shepherds for his people.



About the Authors



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Timothy G. Lock, Ph.D., is a father, husband, Franciscan tertiary, and licensed psychologist. Since 2019, he has served as the Director of Psychological Services at St. Joseph's Seminary (Dunwoodie) of the Archdiocese of New York. He is the founder and director of the Goretti Center for Healing and Forgiveness where he has been treating clients since 2001. Lock has treated childhood and adult victims of clergy abuse as well as clergy who admitted to perpetrating abuse on both children and adults – and even clergy who were falsely accused. His passion for healing in the Church has led him to apply his clinical experience to the formation of seminarians and priests.

Endnotes

Introduction

1 Program of Priestly Formation, 6th edition, n. 175 (hereafter, PPF6; the previous and 5th edition is hereafter denoted PPF5). See Circular Letter to the Most Reverend Diocesan Bishops and Other Ordinaries with Canonical Faculties to Admit to Sacred Orders Concerning Scrutinies Regarding the Suitability of Candidates for Orders (Vatican City: Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, November 10, 1997), n. 11.

2 The Editors, “A Seminary Renaissance,” *National Catholic Register*, July 20, 2025.

3 A downloadable pdf of the study is available at <https://bit.ly/42QnfCt>.

4 Participants included: Rev. Thomas Berg, Ph.D. (McGrath Institute), Rev. Steve Borello (Vocation Director, Diocese of Joliet), Prof. John Cavadini (McGrath Institute), Rev. Shane Deman (Vice Rector, Kenrick-Glennon Seminary), Rev. Mark Doherty (Rector, St. Patrick’s Seminary, Menlo Park), Bishop Earl Fernandes (Diocese of Columbus), Rev. John Floeder (Director of Human Formation, St. Paul Seminary, St. Paul and Minneapolis), Rev. Jim Gallagher (Rector, Moreau Seminary), Mark Glafke, Ph.D. (North American College), Rev. Alfredo Hernández (Rector, St. Vincent de Paul Seminary), Rev. Paul Hoelsing (Rector, Kenrick-Glennon Seminary), Cynthia Hunt, Ph.D. (St. Patrick’s Seminary, Menlo Park), Anthony Isacco, Ph.D. (St. Mary’s University of Minnesota), Rev. John Kartje (Rector, St. Mary of the Lake, Mundelein), Deacon James Keating (Spiritual Director, Kenrick-Glennon Seminary), Rev. Sean Kilcawley (Director of Human Formation, St. Patrick’s Seminary, Menlo Park), Timothy G. Lock, Ph.D. (St. Joseph’s Seminary – Dunwoodie and Goretti Center for Healing and Forgiveness), Shannon Mullen, Ph.D. (Mosaic Psychological Services; Past-President, Catholic Psychotherapy Association), Paul Ruff (St. Paul Seminary, St. Paul and Minneapolis), Rev. Justin Ryan (Vocation Director, Archdiocese of Seattle), and Jonathon Wiggins, Ph.D. (CARA).

5 American Psychological Association, *Stress in America™ 2025: A Crisis of Connection* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2025).

6 Cf. PPF6, 97 *CIC* c.259 §§1–2.

7 Summit participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on this report prior to publication.

Section One - Proposal 1

8 “In any case, 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.” (*Ratio*, 193).

Section One - Proposal 2

9 Anthony Isacco, “Using the Psychological Evaluation as a ‘Tool for Growth’ for Clergy Candidates in the Catholic Church (Part 4 of 4),” continuing education workshop, Catholic Psychotherapy Association, December 2024. His research is available through the Catholic Psychotherapy Association CE Workshops.

10 The “box to check” versus “tool for growth” distinction was captured by Dr. Anthony Isacco (2024) in his research on the clinical utility of seminary applicant evaluations. See also Anthony Isacco, “Psychological Evaluations Are a Hidden Key to the Seminary Renaissance,” *National Catholic Register*, July 2025.

11 PPF6, 57.

12 Cf. PPF6, 57; see also nn.115 and 127.

13 PPF6, 99.

14 “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. This report or an abbreviated version thereof may contain significant elements gleaned from the full psychological assessment but should avoid the most intimate details; it is appropriate that it include the assessor’s recommendations

for the applicant to succeed in the seminary formation program” (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), 8–9). Available at: <https://bit.ly/4nhpMiF>.

15 Cf. PPF6, 57; *Ratio*, 194.

Section One - Proposal 3

16 The distinction in titles reflects professional credentials: “Psychologist” is a protected title reserved for those holding a doctoral degree in psychology, whereas “Director of Counseling Services” is more appropriate for individuals serving in the same role without a doctorate. Regardless of title, the responsibilities are synonymous.

17 Cf. *American Psychological Association Guidelines* (2015), 3 (7). It should be noted that a feedback session is consistent with the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017).

18 The feedback session is part of an evidence-based acceptable standard in the field of psychology as it increases patient satisfaction, increases perceptions that the assessment was helpful, improves retention of information, and increases adherence to recommendations (see Isacco, “Using the Psychological Evaluation,” December 2024).

19 100% of rectors and 94% of formators and spiritual directors affirm that the initial psychological evaluation is a necessary tool for identifying areas of needed growth. 68% of bishops and 81% of vocation directors regard the psychological evaluation as one of the most effective—or the most effective—tools for identifying issues related to a candidate’s suitability. See also Isacco, “Psychological Evaluations Are a Hidden Key,” July 2025.

20 Cf. PPF6, 57, 115 and 127.

Section One - Proposal 4

21 “This kind of counseling or consultation is distinguished from extensive psychotherapy, which may be needed to address deeply entrenched personal issues that impede full functioning of the person. The seminarian already completed psychological testing as part of the application process. At that time, if extensive and in-depth therapy was necessary, it took place outside of the seminary

context prior to the decision concerning admission. It can also be the case that the necessity for such extensive therapy emerges after admission. In the latter case the seminarian is to withdraw from the program and pursue the therapy before being considered for readmission to the seminary and resuming his advancement to Holy Orders (PPF6, n.188e).”

22 Several Church documents acknowledge that candidates and seminarians have experienced significant “wounds,” and that these wounds warrant assistance from the psychological sciences (cf. Congregation for Catholic Education, “Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood,” June 28, 2008, n.5, hereafter CCE, 2008). The English translation of the terms used to describe this type of assistance range from “psychological accompaniment” (*Ratio*, 63) to “psychological counseling” (PPF6, n.188e) to “psychotherapy” (CCE, 2008), although colloquially the other common label often given to this type of assistance is “growth counseling”.

Section One - Proposal 5

23 “Therefore, the good of the Church and that of the candidate are not in opposition but rather converge. Those responsible for formation work at harmonizing these two goods, by always considering both simultaneously in their interdependent dynamic. This is an essential aspect of the great responsibility they bear in their service to the Church and to individuals” (CCE 2008,1).

24 Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Enter by the Narrow Gate: Satisfaction and Challenges among Recently Ordained U.S. Priests* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 2020), 126. Available at: <https://bit.ly/48SY5qp>.

25 Timothy G. Lock, “Growth Counseling in Priestly Formation: How Much Should We Know?” paper presented at the National Association of College Seminaries Annual Conference, Kenrick-Glennon Seminary, May 2025.

Section One - Proposal 6

26 Cf. PPF6, §§57, 115, 127.

27 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops,

Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations, *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2015), 2-3. Available at: <https://bit.ly/4nhpMiF>.

28 Dowdell, E., Gudan, E., Mullen, S., Sodergren, A.J., Songy, F.D., Morrow, K., & Hannahan, B. (2024). CPA Guidelines for Best Practices in Seminary and Religious Assessment. *Integratus*, 2(4), 320–345. <https://doi.org/10.1521/intg.2024.2.4.320>.

29 See Anthony Isacco et al., “Psychological Evaluations of Seminary Applicants: Moving from Common to Best Practices,” continuing education workshop, Catholic Psychotherapy Association, October 2020.

30 See Isacco, “Using the Psychological Evaluation,” December 2024.

31 The Catholic Psychotherapy Association has been developing trainings to equip psychologists to competently conduct these evaluations.

Section Two - Proposal 7

32 Kelly A. Shaw et al., “Prevalence and Early Identification of Autism Spectrum Disorder Among Children Aged 4 and 8 Years — Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, 16 Sites, United States, 2022,” *MMWR Surveillance Summaries* 74, no. 2 (April 16, 2025): 1–34.

Section Two - Proposal 8

33 This group is composed of priests involved in seminary admissions and formation, priests with autism, psychologists, and other experts in autism. The group’s mission is to support the discernment of the Church in regard to the vocational call of men with autism to the priesthood. After a projected two-year timeline, involving further prayer, study, and consultation, the task force will offer guidance on best practices for seminary admission, formation, and ongoing support for autistic candidates. During this period, trainings and other resources will be developed to facilitate implementation of these guidelines. The statement and corresponding resources will be offered to the USCCB and others involved in seminary formation.

Section Two - Proposal 9

34 PPF6, 68, emphasis added.

Section Three - Proposal 10

35 With regard to any expectancy of continence, the *Program of Priestly Formation* stipulates only a requirement *prior to beginning* formation. In other words, it establishes a criterion for the admissions process. PPF5 used this language:

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. (PPF5, 54).

PPF6 places that requirement in the context of the Propaedeutic Phase:

Concerning the capacity to live the charism of celibacy, the applicant is to have lived in continence for a sustained period of time before entering the propaedeutic stage of priestly formation, so that he may give a strong indication to the vocation director and formators of his capacity for continence and self-possession. In discerning the minimal length of this sustained period of time, indicators in the applicant himself—such as age, life experiences, and capacity for growth in psychosexual maturity—should be considered by admissions personnel (PPF6, 72).

From PPF5 to PPF6 the language of “at least two years” was edited out, and the language of “a sustained period of time” was nuanced in significant ways. It is almost certainly the case that the previous “two-year” requirement of “continence” for a man prior to beginning formation was interpreted in practice to mean abstinence from engaging in sexual activity with another (i.e., living the single life, not dating, etc.). The language of PPF6 would seem to have in mind a more extensive understanding of sexual continence. While the present report does not include a specific proposal regarding continence for men commencing the propaedeutic phase, it would certainly be imprudent to accept men into formation who are struggling with compulsive sexual behavior often referred as a “sexual addiction” or who have shortly before entering,

engaged in sexual behavior with a woman. In such cases, admission should be deferred until the applicant is able to demonstrate that sufficient therapeutic progress has been made or has moved past any previous sexual relationships.

36 Cf. *CIC* 277 §1.

37 *CCC*, 2337.

38 *Ratio*, 110 emphasis added.

39 “Let the bishops together with the rectors and spiritual directors of the seminaries establish principles, offer criteria and give assistance for discernment in this matter. Of the greatest importance for formation for chastity in celibacy are the bishop's concern and fraternal life among priests. In the seminary, that is, in the program of formation, celibacy should be presented clearly, without any ambiguities and in a positive fashion” (*PDV*, 50).

40 To understand the prevalence of pornography consumption and addiction in the seminarian population, one can look analogously at a survey of a university that is noted for its conservative Catholicism, the Franciscan University of Steubenville. A 2021 survey of the student body identified that among the men, 48% reported viewing pornography within the last month (the breakdown is as follows: pornography was viewed within the past month for 17.0%, within the past week for 25.6%, and within the past day for 5.5%). According to the study's assessment of compulsive sexual behavior, 16.6% of respondents displayed problematic pornography use, and 40.4% of respondents displayed addictive pornography use. Only 12.4% of the men reported that they had never viewed pornography. Despite these high numbers in the men at Franciscan University of Steubenville, they are still less than samples of the general population of men. (C. Camilleri, J. T. Perry, and S. Sammut, “Compulsive Internet Pornography Use and Mental Health: A Cross-Sectional Study in a Sample of University Students in the United States,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 11 (2021): 613244, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.613244>.) A comparable secular sample of men showed 46% viewed pornography in the past week, compared to the Steubenville sample which showed 31.1% of male students viewed pornography within the past week. A comparable secular sample of men showed 91% viewed pornography in the past month, compared with the

Steubenville sample which showed 48% of male students viewed pornography within the past month.

41 The second author (Timothy G. Lock, Ph.D.), in consultation with mental health professionals, moral theologians, and canon lawyers, has developed one such tool to inquire about sexual behavior during the admissions interview while respecting the conscience of the candidate. His questionnaire is available at www.goretticenter.com/formation.

Section Three - Proposal 11

42 Congregation for Catholic Education, “Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations with regard to Persons with Homosexual Tendencies in view of Their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders,” November 4, 2005. Available at: <https://bit.ly/4ucuSiw>.

43 Between a third and half of mental health professionals (47%), rectors (42%), and formators/spiritual directors (33%) agree that they know of sending bishops who are comfortable ordaining a man who experiences a deep-seated same-sex attraction, as long as the seminarian is firmly committed to celibacy. When asked how a candidate's dominant attraction to those of the same sex would impact their judgment of his suitability for Orders, 48% of bishops stated they would consider it “worrisome, but not by itself disqualifying;” 45% stated they would consider it “alone disqualifying;” 5% stated they were unsure how it would impact their judgment. On the same question, rectors were evenly divided, 46% stating they considered it “worrisome, but not by itself disqualifying;” 46% stating it would be “alone disqualifying.”

44 A second psychological evaluation before or at the beginning of configuration should be required in such cases and include an extensive psychosexual evaluation to assess his sexual development during his time in seminary.

45 At the same time, we have noticed sometimes a candidate with SSA will be admitted to seminary formation and progress through the stages of seminary formation without showing a diminishment of their SSA; nevertheless, at a certain point we have witnessed seminary formators, vocation directors, and bishops mute their typical stance against ordaining individuals with

SSA and, due to fondness for the individual or misplaced compassion, ordain them anyway.

46 As one priest-client expressed to the second author, “Tell [bishops] if they ordain a guy with same-sex attraction, they’re only setting him up for more difficulties as a priest: feelings of loneliness and alienation from other men.”

Section Three - Proposal 12

47 Cf. CCC, 2358.

48 In the second author’s private practice, approximately ten cases following this trajectory have been identified and followed for a period of approximately seven to twelve years.

49 See Daniel Altmeter’s description of his journey from same-sex attraction to opposite sex attraction in Felipe J. Estévez and Andrew H. Cozzens, eds., *Spiritual Husbands, Spiritual Fathers: Priestly Formation for the 21st Century* (St. Louis: En Route Books and Media, 2020, 183-207).

50 This categorization is similar to the clinical diagnosis of Acute Stress Disorder compared with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; the symptoms of the condition are the same, and the difference occurs in the duration of the symptoms (ASD is the diagnosis when the symptoms are present less than one month; PTSD is the diagnosis when the symptoms are present beyond one month).

51 Here, the notion of “overcoming” SSA emerges from the language used in the Vatican 2005 Instruction, section 2, where it indicates that “such tendencies must be clearly overcome at least three years before ordination to the diaconate” (emphasis added).

Section Four

52 Arguably, the vast majority of bishops do in fact accept the seminary’s informed judgment on these crucial questions. Yet, according to the CARA study, 94% of mental health professionals, 76% of formators/spiritual directors, and 61% of rectors say that at least once in the past ten years a sending bishop has disagreed with a *negative* recommendation of their seminary.

53 *Ratio*, 206.

54 65% of mental health professionals, 48% of rectors, and 44% of formators/spiritual directors agreed that, in some dioceses, the quantity of candidates seems to be prioritized over quality.

55 <https://seminaryformation.org>

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