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Seminary Screening Early Step for Healthy Priesthood

By Emilie Lemmons

Since the sexual abuse scandal unfolded dramatically in public view in 2002, Catholic seminaries have refined their admissions screening with more emphasis on attracting healthy candidates and keeping problematic ones out of the priesthood. Interviews examining candidates' sexual and dating histories are more common and thorough, for example, and diocesan vocations offices do a better job of filtering out men who don't make the grade before they even apply to the seminary.

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

The stronger emphasis is reflected in the newest version of the *Program of Priestly Formation*, released by the U.S. bishops in 2006, Msgr. McCarthy said. The program governs seminary formation in the United States.

Officials are quick to point out, however, that the church has been working to strengthen seminary screening and formation for more than a decade.

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, a psychologist who heads the St. Luke Institute, a Silver Spring, Maryland, residential treatment center for priests and religious with psychological problems, has seen a "modest increase in the amount of help" seminaries have requested since the early 2000s.

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

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

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

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

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

The clinician looks for a number of typical scenarios that might suggest a man is a higher risk for being a sexual abuser. Men who are emotionally regressed and immature raise a red flag. So do men who have been victims of abuse themselves and seem stuck in their victimhood. Compulsively sexual individuals, narcissists, and passive or dependent men who don’t have healthy peer relationships also warrant further scrutiny, he said.

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