

## **Seminary Formation for the Twenty-First Century**

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In light of the current media emphasis on the sexual abuse of minors by some priests, there has been a renewed focus on seminary formation. Questions are being asked: What are seminaries doing to prevent the ordination of priests who could later sexually abuse minors? What are seminaries doing to prepare their students for the challenges of clerical celibacy in a society that emphasizes genital expression of human sexuality? At the outset, it is important to note that the vast majority of the recently publicized cases of sexual abuse of minors have occurred in the 1970's and 1980's, and were perpetrated by individuals who went through the seminary system before and during the early 1970's.

Seminary formation has changed a great deal since then. But rather than describing how things were, I believe it is more valuable to talk about how things are now. It is important to realize that changes in seminary formation preceded the current publicity. The roots of these changes go back to the Second Vatican Council's *Decree on Priestly Formation* (1965) and the Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), which, in addition to emphasizing the traditional values of spiritual and intellectual formation of seminarians, began speaking the importance of pastoral and human formation as well. The Council Decree and the Revised Code of Canon Law also mandated that each Episcopal conference was to publish a Program of Priestly Formation that would set forth norms for the seminaries of that particular region. In the United States, we are presently governed by the *Program of Priestly Formation*, (Fourth Edition, November 1992). One additional Church document which has great importance for seminary formation is Pope John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "I Will Give You Shepherds" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*), published in March of 1992, which even more strongly emphasizes the importance of human formation.

Does the seminarian have the psychosexual maturity that will enable him to relate effectively and collaboratively with his future parishioners? Does he have sufficient integration of his human sexuality to live a life of pastoral service and spirituality according to the demands of clerical celibacy? Does his psychological profile give a reasonable assurance that there is no hidden psychological abnormality that will later inflict havoc on his parishioners? These questions, and many more, are asked by members of diocesan vocation offices when the individual begins the process of applying to the seminary. A thorough psychological assessment conducted by a clinical psychologist is a standard requirement, along with the prospective seminarian's autobiography, the completion of a vocation motivation questionnaire, letters of recommendation, and individual assessments by members of diocesan vocation offices. All this material becomes part of the prospective seminarian's application packet, which also includes his academic transcripts as well as a medical examination. The application packet is then reviewed by the seminary's own psychologist who gives his/her own recommendations, as well as the entire admission committee of the seminary. The individual is subsequently scheduled for the admissions interview process before three sub-committees of the admissions committee as well as the rector of the seminary. After the applicants are interviewed, the admissions committee reviews each applicant and votes on acceptance or rejection. If the applicant is accepted, the admissions committee then makes recommendations as to the areas of growth that have been identified for the candidate during his time at the seminary. These areas of growth provide the basis for the yearly review of each student under the guidance of a faculty formation advisor.

As a seminarian, the individual is expected to grow in the human qualities that will enable him to be an effective priest. The student is assisted in this endeavor by participating in the common life of the seminary, interacting with fellow students, faculty and staff. Specific courses in pastoral counseling and periodic workshops on specific areas of human interaction (e.g. workshops on ministerial boundaries) are also required. The seminarian also participates in the spiritual formation program of the seminary. This includes daily Eucharist, communal Morning and Evening Prayer from the Church's Liturgy of the Hours, frequent opportunities for the Sacrament of Penance, regular (at least monthly) meetings with a spiritual director, monthly days of recollection, an annual retreat, daily reading of the Scriptures, private prayer and devotions. The student is also invited to integrate his theological learning into his spirituality, not only to study the Scriptures, but also to pray them. For one month during the summer after the student's first year of theological studies and the summer after the student's parish internship assignment, he participates in the Intensive Period of Spiritual Formation, which deals with human and spiritual growth, especially in the spirituality of the priesthood. A very important aspect of the seminary experience that also combines the spiritual and human aspects of formation is the yearly three-day celibacy workshop for first year theology student. Tough questions are asked about celibacy and psychosexual maturity. The student is expected to continue this questioning and discernment with his spiritual director and faculty formation advisor. The spiritual formation program in the seminary is intended to help the student achieve the type of relationship with God so that he can face the challenges of priestly ministry and become a spiritual leader in his parish community.

The intellectual formation of the student takes place in a rigorous academic program leading to a Master of Divinity (M.Div.) degree. Students with additional academic ability and motivation can also receive an M.A. with an emphasis in one of the theological disciplines. But the academic program is not an end in itself; it is geared to assist the student in his own growth of faith and spirituality as well as to enable him to share the wealth of the Catholic Faith with his parishioners. Having the human qualities to minister effectively, achieving the spiritual depths to become a spiritual leader, being able to know and explain the faith, all these goals are tested and strengthened in the pastoral formation program of the seminary. The student is engaged in some form of ministry every spring semester. Depending on the dioceses or religious communities represented, most students have a two-semester, full-time parish placement under the supervision of a trained pastor-supervisor. The others have a one-semester parish placement. The extremely important pastoral skills of preaching and celebrating the Sacraments are acquired in the homiletics and liturgy classes.

The seminarian's progress in all the areas of formation is monitored by means of regular meetings with his formation advisor. Each year the seminarian completes an annual review before an Annual Review Board that examines the seminarian's strengths and areas of growth, and makes recommendation for the future.

The foregoing is an overview of the formation program at St. John's Seminary. Much time, effort, and great care, are expended to provide seminarians with the means to discern their vocations, and to acquire the necessary knowledge, attitudes and skills to be effective priests. The seminary formation program also enables the Church, in the person of the seminarian's bishop or religious superior, to call the seminarian to the Sacrament of Holy Orders with confidence and hope for the future of priestly ministry. And we have confidence that the God will assist all of us with the gift of the Spirit.