

CAUSE FOR HOPE AND CONCERN

A Commentary on the Vatican Statement, "Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood."

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The recent Vatican document entitled, "Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood" (hereafter, Guidelines) approved by Pope Benedict XVI and signed by Cardinal Zeon Grocholewski, Archbishop Jean-Louis Brugues, O.P., and Fr. Carlo Bresciani offers vocation directors, formators, seminary administrators, and psychologists clear hope and direction, as well as some challenging and rather perplexing dilemmas. The press coverage of this document failed to mention the extraordinary nature of its content. The role that psychology can rightfully claim in the admission and formation process of seminarians in the Roman Catholic church was not addressed.

In this commentary, we hope to point out aspects of the document that we find hopeful and to explore what they might mean. We will also attempt to point out some dilemmas or questions that face the candidates, seminarians, admission committees, formation team/faculty, and bishops. The document attempts to draw clearer boundaries for the proper use of psychology, and we add our perspective as a director of an assessment and treatment center for clergy and religious, and as psychologists.

A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION

Publication of the Guidelines by the Vatican is noteworthy and important. The Guidelines themselves clearly recognize the need for psychology, a critically important step in the right direction. The document rightly affirms that a vocation and its formation is not primarily a "psychological" task. Without question, the document sees seminary training, the discernment process, the decision to ordain a candidate and the formation process itself as essentially spiritual tasks. This point is clearly stated as "the importance of divine grace in the formation of candidates to the priesthood."

However, the Guidelines require formators to understand and apply psychology in a “proper” way. It also extols the merit of psychologists appreciating and understanding the uniqueness of Catholic anthropology and the “socio-cultural” context from which the candidate comes, as well as the one he is about to enter. This contextual drama, properly understood, underlies the admission process and seminary formation today. It points out the interdisciplinary nature of the task at hand. At the same time, the Guidelines point to the particular and sometimes necessary role of psychology in the formation process today. This is an extraordinary and exceptionally important point for formators. The Guidelines expect an interdisciplinary, mutual and ongoing dialogue between formators and expert psychologists (Par. 4-6, 7a, 9).

Thus, every formator must be prepared, including by means of specific courses, to understand profoundly the human person as well as the demands of his formation to the ordained ministry. To that end, much advantage can be derived from meeting experts in the psychological sciences, to compare notes and obtain clarification on some specific issues (Par. 4).

Inasmuch as it is the fruit of a particular gift of God, the vocation to the priesthood and its discernment lie outside the strict competence of psychology. Nevertheless, in some cases recourse to experts in the psychological sciences can be useful. It can allow a more sure evaluation of the candidate’s psychic state; it can help evaluate his human dispositions for responding to the divine call; and it can provide some extra assistance for the candidate’s human growth (Par. 5).

Who could have imagined the Vatican extolling the merits of psychology when one considers the long

history of antipathy between religion and psychology? Additionally, who could have imagined the more recent explosion of psychological research on the benefits of a healthy spirituality? These realities point to a new and possibly dynamic era of constructive dialogue.

The overarching emphasis of the initial text in the Guidelines is quite philosophical and theological. This might need some translation for psychologists unfamiliar with its Catholic context and culture. It clearly indicts a society and culture that does not value spirituality, relationships, celibacy, a chaste life, the centrality of service and the work of justice. Individualism, materialism and relativism are specifically indicted. The influence of these factors on any prospective candidate needs further elaboration and explanation if any psychological assessment is to be culturally significant, as this document requires. Many assessment psychologists who might potentially assist in the evaluation of candidates and their formation might neither understand nor appreciate the Catholic culture and context.

The document suggests that the candidate turn away from the cultural self-centeredness of individualism, materialism and relativism, and urges him to explore healthier “Christ-like” or more Christian interpersonal relationships within Catholicism’s unique anthropological framework. The psychologist often uses very different “measures” that do not address these issues. Nevertheless, many conceptualizations and measures of interpersonal relationships and the concept of self and other in psychology incorporate many of the positive virtues valued by the church.

Additionally, we believe the Guidelines ascribe a new task to psychology: investigating in a more profound way whether and to what degree the candidate has attained the special interpersonal skills and sensitivity necessary to be a priest. Does the candidate have the capacity “to love chastely, to form relationships appropriately, a sense of freedom; does the person possess a sense of belonging and collaboration?” These are some of the capacities the document mentions. If we interpret the Guidelines correctly, standard assessments might require much more collateral data from multiple sources so that these interpersonal and affective capacities can be judged, and in this way addressing the critical

‘socio-cultural’ concern and context. Psychology does have measures that evaluate empathy as well as altruism, understanding others, maturity, emotional intelligence, and techniques that help to clarify self-image, aspirations, and input from others. The optimal application of these assessment tools entails using them in a prescriptive manner. By identifying and communicating potential weaknesses and self-defeating characteristics to the seminarian, he can focus on them in his self-development during preparation for the priesthood.

The Guidelines are definitely a positive step because they delineate some of the parameters for the interface between seminary formators and psychological experts. The document is to be commended for acknowledging the crucial role that the psychological and social sciences play in the discernment and formation of candidates to the priesthood. It provides specific and practical guidelines for this type of interdisciplinary collaboration and consultation. It has a stunningly integrative and holistic focus that should not be lost or diminished.

Some aspects of the clear use of psychology include the following:

1. Assessment is recommended for candidates seeking admission to the seminary and ordination (citing canon #1029-31).
2. Use of an expert psychologist and therapy in the seminary process when the need is demonstrated.
3. The need to separate a spiritual director’s role from a therapist’s role.
4. Citing *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the ‘human dimension’ underlies all of the pillars of formation and is the foundation of all formation: “the formators must know how to evaluate the person in his totality, not forgetting the gradual nature of development” (Par. 3). Human development and the importance of understanding is

central to formation in the Guidelines. Dialogue is also encouraged with experts in the psychological sciences.

5. The document even recommends that there be no psychologists on the formation staff to avoid confusion of the roles of the faculty and staff from that of a therapist.

RELATED TO THE SPIRIT OF THE TIMES

We believe that the Guidelines relate to the spirit of the times and the contemporary climate of crisis in the church. They come at a time when the church clearly *needs and seeks* the expertise of the social sciences. Psychology, and especially personality assessment, has developed some sophisticated models, theories, and measurement instruments that can be creatively and suitably used by vocation directors and seminary formators. The document calls for the examination of psychological theories and models to see how grounded they are in a Christian anthropology. It is necessary for the psychologist to grasp that anthropology is rooted in an ecclesiology. Vocations exist and are derived “from” the church and her mediation, find fulfillment “in” the church, and in fundamental service to God, as a service “to” the Church” (c.f. Par. 1). This view is an ecclesial and communal view that warrants insight, grace, and “protection” in the same community. Assessments are necessary as a service to this same community of believers at this particular *kairos* moment in our history.

These assessments can help identify problems that often lead to the development of certain abusive behaviors, so that these individuals can be screened out. However, the science of psychology cannot definitely protect any community, whether medical, academic, or ecclesial, from a predator. There are many aspects of a person including “one’s affective maturity and the absence of mental disorders” or “personality.” According to the Guidelines, a person’s make-up and history are factors that together can tend to lead into sexual misconduct, either creating potentially offending situations or actual offending behaviors. Furthermore, the Guidelines point to the necessarily

interpersonal demands on the candidate to the priesthood. The document also alludes, though in a vague fashion, to the reality that a person may develop problems along the way. Rectors and spiritual directors see this often. Problems that a candidate or seminarian thought they had dealt with long ago arise when they least desire them, or under times of stress and transition. Internal and external conflicts that they never knew existed become important to understand. If these remain unresolved, the rector or seminary staff put the people of God at risk.

SPECIFIC ASSESSMENT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The issues of specific assessment and psychological problems are named in the Guidelines. When a psychologist reads the document, one cannot fail to notice the ethical and professional implications for our field. It is helpful to name some of the potential challenges that psychologists will encounter.

Linguistic and Conceptualization Problems

The document explains and defines some psychological concepts incompletely and idiosyncratically. For instance, a personality is defined as “affective maturity and absence of mental disorder” (Par. 2). Such a characterization might refer to an important aspect of an “optimal personality,” but would not comprehensively summarize personality. The terminology of “the absence of” is vague and subject to misinterpretation. One would have to stretch any of the personality theories (psychodynamic, behavioral, social, trait, etc.) covered in introductory psychology courses to conceptualize personality in such terms. A clearer and more comprehensive definition of personality might help both formators and psychologists agree on the particular concerns and issues that are at hand. Catholicism’s unique anthropology, with its psychological nuances and features, requires a clearer definition of personality and its optimal representation in the seminary, so that proper assessment of it can be made during psychological testing.

Additionally, the assessment and evaluation of a candidate occurs in a developmental context, so that initially the “personality” is not fully formed and is subject to further growth. Admission to seminary should and does require psychological assessment. The age of the candidate at entrance to the seminary might necessitate further evaluations to better assess the effects of a seminary or formation program. In most cases, formation adds to the healthy development of one’s vocation with its incumbent capacities, talents and skills. But in other cases, it can cause unrecognized or hidden regressive and maladaptive features to arise in the person. Such problematic potentials might not fully emerge in a classic personality assessment because they are situationally based and subject to misrepresentation by the candidate (impression management). Repeated evaluations might be necessary; one is needed at entrance to the seminary or novitiate, another might be necessary at entrance to theology or prior to ordination.

Furthermore, these linguistic and conceptual issues seem to lead to more questions than answers. In the Guidelines, Section A—Initial Discernment, and Section B—Subsequent Formation, provide a list of several issues identified as “psychological problems” that could be “diagnosed” or identified by psychologists:

- affective dependency
- disproportionate aggression
- insufficient capacity for establishing serene relations of openness
- trust and fraternal collaboration as well as the ability to collaborate with authority
- a sexual identity that is confused or not yet well defined.

How do we diagnose and evaluate these problems? Is affective dependency the same or different from interpersonal dependency? Is this dependency, or addiction? Is there such a thing a "proportionate" aggression? What is a "serene" relationship? There seems to be an overemphasis on interpersonal problems conceptualized from a

primarily psychodynamic or more abstract perspective. This seems odd when one considers the anthropological differences in the perspectives of the self and that of the church. Nothing is wrong with this perspective, but how does the church or any similar organization operationally define these constructs? This is something of a rhetorical question, because these really cannot be easily defined and agreed upon. These are abstract characteristics that need to be defined and discussed further. Such delineation is key to the ongoing and necessary dialogue between the church and psychologists. Whether in their optimal state (leadership) or their problematic state (pathology), those familiar with these issues in formation and psychological assessment are encouraged to engage in more healthy and fruitful dialogue.

There is a second list of problems that need to be evaluated and monitored in subsequent formation:

- affective dependency
- notable lack of freedom in relations
- excessive rigidity of character
- lack of loyalty
- uncertain sexual identity
- deep-seated homosexual tendencies.

How does a psychologist go about diagnosing “lack of loyalty”? Or better yet, “deep-seated homosexual tendencies”? Even if one could diagnose “deep-seated homosexual tendencies,” what does a psychologist who adheres to American Psychological Association ethical codes do with this information? Can a psychologist ethically integrate this information into a report knowing what the seminary admitting committee will do with this information? Has the candidate been *fully informed* as to the implications of identifying him as homosexual? Has the vocation and/or seminary team fully explained the position of the church, diocese or religious order?

In any case, it is doubtful that a psychologist would be able to identify “deep-seated homosexual tendencies.” The focus on uncovering hidden and

denied characteristics is both antithetical and perhaps inconsistent with the overall attitude and approach used in most psychological assessments. A better concern would be to look for the potential for impulsive sexual behavior of any kind. At times, professional ethics and scientific limitations may lead to psychologists not being able or willing to address certain questions. How should this be handled?

As we mentioned, if one accepts the developmental model, when does development end and ongoing formation begin? What are the criteria for these distinctions? Psychologists would assert that development, growth and maturation occur at all stages in life, albeit a little more slowly in adulthood.

On a positive note, the document does explore and explain the fact that candidates need to give their full and informed consent for the psychological evaluation to happen and for the information to be exchanged between the candidate, the evaluator, the diocese or the team designated by the consent form. This fact might need more explanation and care to guarantee that only those individuals mentioned in the consent form actually have access to the details of the psychological report and possible treatment. Additional clarity might also be necessary to cover how to protect these evaluations and this information once it is gathered. Psychology can assist the church in implementing professional standards of care for documentation and the retention of records. There are other feedback models, which would include discussion and working over findings, with options for different types of reports for different audiences. Screening evaluations, for example, might be communicated differently than self-enhancement consultations.

Ethical Questions and Standard Psychological Practice

The Guidelines raise several psychological concerns from the perspective of the formators. The document acknowledges some personality dynamics and individual differences that are very important in personality assessment. For example, the document addresses issues related to what we know variously as “social desirability,” “biased response style,” and “deception.” It states:

Nor must it be forgotten that there is a possible tendency of some candidates to minimize or deny their own weaknesses. Such candidates do not speak to the formators about some of their difficulties, as they fear they will not be understood or accepted. Thus they nurture barely realized expectations with respect to their own future. On the other hand there are candidates who tend to emphasize their own difficulties, considering them insurmountable obstacles on their vocational journey (Par. 8).

There is a considerable amount of psychological research on these issues, for example, on “impression management.” To a certain extent, presenting the best of yourself in job interviews and vocational settings is normative and healthy behavior and is not “deceptive or lying.” Where do we draw the line, however? Further, what in the situation fosters or inhibits such behavior? For example, as therapists we know that even clients who come willingly to therapy and pay for it will often present themselves as quite well when in reality they are suffering enormously. We all want to present some aspects of ourselves in the best light possible even when we freely choose to go to therapy. This same dynamic is at work during a priestly formation program in a seminary. The paradox is that one's motivation to enter the priesthood might serve the self-defeating purpose of denying weaknesses, so that they go unattended during formation. Alternatively, we know for example, that characterological denial of vulnerability and sensitivity, which might masquerade as psychological health, is associated with rigidity, stressed reactions, and, in some, episodes of behavioral dyscontrol.

Deception and its antithesis, inner freedom, are also areas of concern. Internal needs and perceived external demands in a situation such as a seminary can be so powerful that candidates might act in a way that they think the authority figure desires, in effect, deceiving them (a conscious act), or suppressing their own expression of inner freedom (an unconscious act). Understanding and evaluating the various

presentations of deception is crucial in assessment and in the formation process to maximize the positive effects of authority on the actions and behaviors of seminarians and candidates. Admissions of the newly ordained to treatment centers might be linked to this phenomenon and the insufficient appreciation of these demands in the assessment and formation process. Experience with these more recent admissions of newly ordained priests suggests that they seem to be steeped in self- and situational-deception and “managing impressions” of others.

At what point does the normal psychological experience of presenting oneself in a good light become a liability? Let's say one administers the MMPI-2 (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-Version II) to a seminarian and one notes that the K corrected scale was relatively high (suggesting defensiveness) and the L scale (assessing the way a person presents self) was also relatively high. (It is important to note that in some cultural populations “airing your dirty laundry” in public is not only socially undesirable, but culturally proscribed.) If a psychologist integrates these findings in the report, is the applicant to the seminary then rejected, or are the limitations associated with these issues identified as an area of internal review, reflection and growth? What are the implications of these psychological findings? What are the ethical implications? How do we appreciate the fact that such false positive presentations are variable across culture and nation?

SCOPE OF COMPETENCE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY CONSULTATION

Paragraph 5 is clear when it says that “the vocation to the priesthood and its discernment *lie outside the strict competence of psychology.*” Regarding seminary formators and their use of psychology, it states, “the use of specialist psychological or psychotherapeutic techniques must be avoided *by the formators*” (emphasis added). The Guidelines fail to provide a clear frame of reference defining the scope of competence of the formator. This lack of clarity can lead to more confusion and more misinterpretation. The fields of expertise are clearly delineated; however, the practical consequences of these delineations need more specificity for both formators and any consulting psychologist.

The Guidelines state:

Right from the moment when the candidate presents himself for admission to the seminary, the formator needs to be able to comprehend his personality; potentialities; dispositions; and the types of any psychological wounds, evaluating their nature and intensity. . . . The assistance of experts can be useful . . . when evaluating whether it is possible for the candidate to live the charism of celibacy in faithfulness and joy as a total gift of his life in the image of Christ (Par. 8).

This section of the Guidelines makes the assumption that a cross-sectional snapshot of the candidate's personality will conclusively and accurately predict and describe the individual's future behavior and psychological functioning. Alternatively, it suggests that the formator can achieve a deep and assured understanding of the candidate quickly, without guesswork and speculation. Such accuracy and comprehensiveness is only attainable over time. A longitudinal and recurrent evaluation of the candidate's psychological functioning is necessary; one evaluation will not do it.

It has been said that psychology is quite good at *post-diction* but very lacking in *prediction*. This straightforward assertion belies the complexity of the task, however. Human behavior is extremely complex and the human person continues to be an elusive mystery that often transcends the reductionistic and empiricist attempts of psychological measurement (Epstein, 1983; Wiggins, 1973). Such complexity is especially true in vocational discernment and the identification of psychological problems in candidates to the priesthood. To ascertain whether a candidate will be able "to live the charism of celibacy," for example, one must be able to measure its predictors (Kraus, 1995). How do psychologists identify early predictors in applicants to the seminary? What is the viability and role of psychology in accurately and reliably assessing psychological problems in seminary settings? Are the Guidelines realistically hoping that a cross-sectional evaluation will maximize prediction? The question remains: how can this be done? The Guidelines state:

The church, "begetter and formator of vocations," has the duty of discerning a vocation and the suitability of candidates for the priestly ministry. In fact, "the interior call of the Spirit needs to be recognized as the authentic call of the bishops" (Par. 1).

Keep in mind that these experts (psychologists) in addition to being distinguished for their sound and spiritual maturity, also must be inspired by an anthropology that openly shares the Christian vision of the human person and sexuality, as well as the vocation to the priesthood and celibacy. In this way their interventions may take into account the mystery of humanity's dialogue with God, according to the vision of the church (Par. 6).

The Guidelines explicitly attribute the source of one's vocation to God and further define the church as the "begetter and formator of vocations." They highlight the Christological dimension of the vocation as a gift to increase the kingdom of God. This theological understanding of vocation drastically differs from the psychological theories of vocation and career development conceptualized by psychologists. The Guidelines' understanding of the experience of vocation seems to be couched in mystery. One wonders if this actually convolutes the experience so that those discerning their vocation are led to believe it is more mystical than it needs to be (Butler, 2005).

Although relatively secular and individualistic, most psychological vocational theories demystify the vocational decision-making process and emphasize the mental, materialistic (time and money resources) and individual-focused factors that contribute to the awareness and development of one's vocational commitment and competence. Some vocational theories have strong psychometric roots, as in the case of Holland's Self-Directed Search (Spokane & Cruza, 2005). Others are broadly based in developmental psychology, for example, Super's Life Career Rainbow.

And some emphasize the person's attributes, e.g., Bandura's Self-Efficacy in vocational and career aspirations. Multiple vocational instruments have resulted from these theories and they are widely used by vocational counselors. From a psychological perspective on vocation, a priority need is to integrate the theological and spiritual conceptualization of the church, the interests and competences of the candidate, and the psychological constructs and tools of vocational measurement.

A logical extension of current vocational theories would be to develop a comprehensive multicultural model of Catholic vocational discernment. Additional priorities include:

1. International consultation with cross-cultural and indigenous psychologists familiar with both Catholic and culture-specific vocational perspectives.
2. Further collaboration with seminary formators in different cultural contexts.
3. Systematic comparisons of the personality concepts relevant to vocational discernment derived from multicultural collaboration.
4. Intra-national studies assessing the implementation of the practical components of the Guidelines.

There is a need to integrate theological and psychological conceptualizations of vocation.

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

This is the area where the document is the most lacking and makes several unsupported or implausible assumptions. It maintains a “Euro-centric” and “Anglo-centric” perspective and bias. The section that can be commended, however, is Par. 7 where it says: “...different countries will have to regulate the recourse to experts in the psychological sciences in their respective *rationis institutionis sacerdotalis*.”

There is a need to integrate theological and psychological conceptualizations of vocation.

This clause assumes incorrectly that most countries have access to experts and psychological knowledge. In some countries psychology is stigmatized and almost nonexistent, psychological services are organized quite differently, or are relatively inaccessible. Additionally, assessment instruments are typically produced in languages with national rather than international databases so that instruments may not be available, validated or widely used in certain countries. In many countries, it is psychology “Made in the USA” with psychologists or experts using American models of personality assessment imported (or more accurately imposed) on populations for whom they were not constructed. More recognition of such limitations and the importance of language and culture would make the *Guidelines* more applicable to the international and multicultural mission of the church.

This is especially important as the number of Hispanic candidates and seminarians increases in the U.S. They number almost fifteen percent (15%) of the clerical population. It becomes even more challenging as the church imports more international priests from Africa, the Caribbean, and the Philippines to fill the ever-increasing priest shortage. The church in the U.S. is in danger of experiencing more sexual abuse cases unless we quickly obtain culturally appropriate norms for psychological tests to be applied to international priests. The fact that international priests reportedly perpetrated 6 out of 12 recent sexual abuse cases by Catholic clergy in the United States highlights this immediate need.

CONCLUSION

Our initial reaction to this analysis is that another, fuller, explanation and article might be necessary to sufficiently delineate fields of expertise and their implications. Specifically, delineation in the field of priestly vocational screening, priestly formation, seminaries, and psychology needs further attention and more careful explanation. As we have stated, this document does move the church and the field of psychology into a more collaborative and interdisciplinary discussion. Though we have pointed out some of the document's limitations, we also strongly affirm the positive and overall useful nature of the Guidelines. If the church is to fully utilize what psychology can offer to prevent abuse and to maximize contributions of future priests, it may want to consider supporting longitudinal research to identify what precursors during seminary formation predict optimal and problematic outcomes in the priesthood.

We firmly hope that these comments might assist us all in conversation and dialogue over the critical spiritual, pastoral, intellectual, and human pillars that create the priest of tomorrow. To that end, this document clearly points us to a more collaborative effort between psychologists and formators.

RECOMMENDED READING

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By "cause for concern"™, we refer to countries that are exhibiting worrying signs of deterioration. Both groups are countries that require observation in the coming years, either to continue tracking successful outcomes, or to see if, and how, countries and governments address recent failures. For those showing a glimmer of hope, some were in the bottom 25 places in the rankings as recently as 2014, but their improvements have been sustained enough to move them closer to the middle of the rankings. Others, sitting near the middle portion of the index, have seen an acceleration of growth in pros

No Cause for Concern is the first studio album by Vice Squad. It was originally released in 1981 by Zonophone, a division of EMI. Although it wasn't released by Riot City Records the band decided to use the Riot City name as it was a label they founded. It was later re-released by Dojo with two bonus tracks and Captain Oi! with the same two bonus tracks and six more tracks. "Young Blood" (Shane Baldwin, Dave Bateman) â€" 2:42. "Coward" (Bateman, Rebecca Bond) â€" 2:14. "Nothing" (Bateman, Bond) â€" 1:34.