



LUKENOTES

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An Open Letter to Seminary Formators

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In recent years, at SLI we are seeing an increasing number of priests for evaluation and treatment who are in their first year or two after ordination. The "making of a priest" requires an enormous investment of spirit, time and money on the part of the diocese or religious order as well as the candidate. When serious problems emerge shortly after ordination, the situation is deeply disappointing and painful for all involved. Sometimes, these situations are tragic. It is important to understand what problems these men face and some of the underlying causes.

Underlying Issues

In working with these priests at SLI, we have noted some common issues that may be helpful in the formation of seminarians and in the prevention of future difficulties.

Underdevelopment and the need for more human formation

Some young priests seem developmentally "younger" than their chronological age and lack some important skills for effective adult functioning: an ability to cope with stress, to relate to others, to exercise good judgment and to manage emotions. These men are able to function reasonably well in seminary given the structure of study, clear rules and expectations. After ordination, their lack of maturity becomes more apparent as they fail to function adequately when they are on their own and have less structure. One young priest was not able to cope with parish responsibilities, felt put upon, withdrew to his room and stopped functioning. Another was very socially anxious and hid from genuine connections with others. A third young priest showed poor judgment in establishing appropriate boundaries with parishioners, being overly personal with some and cold and distant with others. Another expected his status as priest to earn him respect automatically and scolded parishioners when they did not behave as he thought they should.

Another area of underdevelopment is a lack of sexual maturity and/or personal identity integration. Often external rigidity covers underlying emotional chaos. It makes sense that an individual whose inner emotional world is unknown, unexplored and frightening can make use of "all or nothing thinking" and rigid rules to give a sense of security and stability. This priest is ill equipped to handle the complex interpersonal situations that priests face with parish staffs and with those they serve. Without a reasonable level of comfort with one's own emotions, such as anger, loneliness and sadness, it is not possible to have genuine empathy for others' feelings. Successful adjustment to priesthood requires comfort with feelings, with emotional closeness, clear boundaries and an ability to be appropriately vulnerable with others.

Mild to moderate psychiatric problems or personality issues

This category includes emotional problems such as depression or anxiety disorders and behavior problems with alcohol or other substances, sex, food, money or some other addictive behavior. Often these men have a history of untreated childhood physical, emotional or sexual trauma and can be successfully treated with therapy, appropriate medications and recovery programs. Good history-taking and psychological evaluation prior to seminary can be crucial in identifying those in need of treatment. Therapy before or during seminary and a demonstrated period of recovery from addictive behaviors should precede ordination. If a candidate does not make progress in therapy or cannot maintain sobriety, postponing or denying ordination must be considered.

Severe psychopathology or personality pathology

Occasionally, we see a newly ordained priest whose problems are so deep and severe that there is little hope that even intensive therapy or other interventions will lead to sufficient change and growth. One priest harshly lectured parishioners and severely reacted if his ideas were not welcomed. He responded rigidly to feedback and when there were multiple sources of the same feedback, he was convinced of a conspiracy against him. His paranoia blinded him to the need for change. Fortunately, few men with this level of severe psychopathology are ordained. However, the suffering experienced by all involved makes these situations tragic.

Recommendations

Given our experience, we offer three recommendations for formators and seminary personnel:

Pay attention to your “gut” feelings

You may experience the candidate as exceptionally naïve, unusually rigid, extremely uncomfortable interpersonally, or have a vague sense that “something” isn’t right. Check out your perceptions with other formators and take shared concerns seriously. Often we hear at evaluations that our conclusions put into words the perceptions of formators.

Pay special attention to difficulty with feedback

The ability to receive feedback, consider it and make changes in behavior when appropriate is key for priestly formation as for all human growth. When individuals remain too defensive to make use of feedback, growth is stunted. If a candidate is unable to profit from feedback, continuation toward ordination should be questioned.

Take action early to address concerns.

Confronting someone about personal problems is difficult. Early on, there is the hope that the problem will get better over time. Later, the thought can be “well, he’s gotten this far; perhaps the problems are not so big.” It is better to face the pain of taking action early and before ordination. Dealing with problems becomes harder, not easier, after ordination.

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