



LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903

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CASE STUDY

"Father Stan" • Treating Human Formation Defects

Carol Farthing is the Associate Clinical Director at SLI.

Father Stan is a 34-year-old priest who was ordained 2 years ago and is in his first assignment. He initially seemed excited about his new status as a priest, but this quickly faded. He liked celebrating Eucharist, but was irritated if he got less than glowing remarks from parishioners about his homilies. A few parishioners complained that Fr. Stan was abrupt or rude. He seemed annoyed when parishioners wanted to see a priest in the evening when he considered himself "off for the day." Over the past few months, Fr. Stan has spent more and more time in his room and has let parish duties slide. Fr. Stan talks about needing a mentor to "show him the ropes." His pastor gave him feedback but noticed that Fr. Stan then seemed more down and isolated than before. As Fr. Stan did less and less, his pastor got both frustrated and worried. He talked to the Bishop and Fr. Stan was referred for an evaluation and then for treatment for depression.

Fr. Stan's history revealed limited social experience and few friends. He always liked to read, especially science fiction, and he earned good grades in school. His seminary team described him as serious, studious and a little shy. Fr. Stan had hoped the status of priesthood would bring him the attention and social success he desired. In contrast, his experience was that "the people don't respect me." As Fr. Stan responded to treatment and became less depressed, it became clear that he lacked relationship skills and was at a loss about how to relate to others. For successful treatment with Fr. Stan it wasn't enough to treat his depression and his self-esteem problems. He also had major deficits in "human formation" that needed to be addressed.

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II talks about human formation as the foundation for priestly formation. He writes that "the whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation." and that "of special importance is the capacity to relate to others." "In order that a priest's ministry may be humanly as credible and acceptable as possible, it is important for priests to develop their personality in such a way that they become bridges not obstacles for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of humanity."

Fr. Stan took the importance of developing his relationship skills seriously and made meaningful progress. Living in a therapeutic community, he had experiences of learning to trust and open up in relationships and began to enjoy himself in others' company. In large and small therapy groups, he received feedback about how others experienced his behavior. As he saw

himself more accurately, he realized the need to change some of his behaviors that were keeping others at a distance. The members in his groups gave him feedback and an opportunity to try out and gain confidence with new behaviors. He found relationships more satisfying and was more open to opportunities to spend time with people as he began to have more success in relating to others. Gaining experience in relationships, he was able to fine-tune his new skills over time. The report from Fr. Stan's new assignment is that he is relating to his parishioners more comfortably and is pleased with the changes he has made.

Saint Luke Institute is known for working with people with psychiatric disorders and addictions, and residential treatment is indicated if the problems are serious enough. We are also discovering that often individuals have deficits in human formation that underlie or exacerbate their other problems. On rare occasions the individual has no major psychopathology, but deficits in skills necessary for effective functioning are so severe that residential treatment makes sense. Treatment in a residential community can be powerfully effective for fostering the personal development and integration needed to overcome deficits in areas of human functioning.

We especially see this with some of the newly ordained priests sent to us for evaluation. Their priestly formation emphasized instruction on being a priest but was not designed to correct or make up for areas of underdevelopment, for example, lack of development in interpersonal relating. These men often do well as seminarians within the structure of a seminary with clear guidelines and an emphasis on intellectual learning. Fairly soon after ordination, however, some recently ordained find themselves in parish assignments where they must deal with complex interpersonal situations for which they are not prepared. One way to respond is to fall back on one's authority as priest, but this is likely to backfire with today's educated Catholics. There are complaints and the priest is moved. More complaints and the priest is moved again or referred for evaluation. At this point, attention to a priest's "human formation" can help him become an effective minister.

Since a priest's most basic vocation is to be human, it is imperative to foster his ongoing human development during seminary and beyond. Human formation is not "once and for all" but ongoing. "To follow the example of Jesus who "knew what was in humanity" (Jn. 2:25; cf. 8:3-11), the priest needs to be able to know the depths of the human heart, to perceive difficulties and problems, to make meeting and dialogue easy, to create trust and cooperation, and to express serene and objective judgments." (Pope John Paul II)

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