

The Quality of Candidates for the Priesthood

"No longer do candidates for the major seminary share a common background or experience which can be presumed as a joint basis for further development and growth," Bishop Thomas Murphy of Great Falls and Billings, Mont., told participants in the first Assembly of Ordinaries and President-Rectors of Theologates who met July 17-20 at St. Mary of the Lake Seminary in Mundelein, Ill. Murphy is chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation. Sponsors of the assembly were the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the National Catholic Educational Association. Murphy discussed influences on the young man entering a seminary, as well as factors in the church's life to consider in addressing the quality of candidates for the priesthood. For example, he observed that modern youth represent "a very success-oriented generation" and that values associated with this need to be addressed. Murphy also said that the "integration of personal sexual identity and maturity seems to be a process now which takes far more time than we presumed in the past, especially in understanding and living out the commitment to celibacy." Addressing the quality of priesthood candidates means addressing new expectations of the priest, what it means to be Catholic, involvement in a corporate mission and the subtle pressure to blur distinctions between ordained priesthood and the priesthood of all the baptized, said Murphy. His text follows.

A concern for quality is a major issue in many dimensions of human life and experience today. This concern ranges from the desire to

maintain and promote the quality of life from the moment of conception to the moment of death, to the organized efforts made to preserve the environment. In human services and relationships there is also a concern for quality — from the quality of manufactured products to the quality of applicants for different occupations and positions. We have long experienced the call and demand for quality of applicants to certain professional schools such as medicine and law. Moreover, the stringent examinations for the practice of public accounting, law and medicine are but another example of what is now a taken-for-granted reality within society today.

For the past few months the number-one best seller on the non-fiction book list has been a volume titled *In Search of Excellence*.¹ This book examines procedures learned from the operation of what the authors call "America's best-run companies." Over and over again the authors stress the need for and development of the quality of those involved in leadership positions within a company.

This same desire to seek quality on the part of applicants to
(continued on page 183)

CONTENTS OF THIS ISSUE:

*The Quality of Candidates for the Priesthood, by Bishop Thomas Murphy, p. 181;

*On File, p. 182;

*Datebook, p. 182;

*Different Expectations of Priests, Different Kinds of Training, by Father John Grindel, CM, p. 187;

*Seminary Resources: The Challenge of Stewardship, by Msgr. William Baumgaertner, p. 194.

AUGUST 18, 1983
VOL. 13: NO. 11

origins

NC documentary service

MURPHY — *continued from front page*
seminaries is part of the tradition of the church in approving candidates eventually for ordination to the priesthood. There has always been a process of screening in order that future priests might possess essential qualities to live out the demands and expectations of ordained ministry for service to God and to the people of God. Objective criteria were always established and behavioral patterns were expected to be followed so that a recommendation might be made for priesthood ordination.

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has spoken often to this issue of quality in the candidates seeking ordination. The Holy Father emphasizes over and over again the need for spiritual growth, intellectual development and loyalty to the church. In discussing this question of the quality of candidates for the priesthood, we are grateful to the strong emphasis given to this need by the Holy Father. We are also aware of the excellent processes used by seminaries and dioceses and religious communities in searching out candidates for priesthood who not only possess the qualities needed for priesthood, but who also are quality human beings.

The Ideal

The Decree on the Training of Priests from the Second Vatican Council emphasizes the need for quality in the selection of candidates for the priesthood.

"Each candidate should be subjected to vigilant and careful inquiry, keeping in mind his age and development, concerning his right intention and freedom of choice, his spiritual, moral and intellectual fitness, adequate physical and mental health, and possible hereditary traits. Account should also be taken of the candidate's capacity for undertaking the obligations of the priesthood and carrying out his pastoral duties."²

This need for quality is a priority and should never be compromised. The Decree on the Training of Priests goes on to state: "Notwithstanding the regrettable shortage of priests, due strictness should always be brought to bear on the choice and testing of students."³

At the meeting of the Synod of Bishops in 1967 a request was made by the cardinal-prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education that a basic plan (*ratio fundamentalis*), in accordance with the Decree on Priestly Training from Vatican II and other conciliar documents, be prepared which would list the themes that ought to be included in all programs of priestly formation. This basic plan speaks of candidates not in abstract terms, but rather within the context of their experience and the world in which they live. In the introduction to the basic plan it states that "the young men who are called by divine providence to exercise the priestly office among men of our time bring special dispositions that match the mind and attitudes of modern men."⁴ Moreover, the introduction says that "the priestly office, as essentially defined by the church, is today carried out

in an entirely new situation, which comes to light as a result of mankind's new needs and from the nature of modern civilization."⁵

It would seem that a concern for quality in the admission, evaluation and promotion to sacred orders of candidates for ordained priesthood is part of the agenda of the original documents calling for seminary renewal. Yet this concern for quality takes on a unique urgency in light of the conditions, needs and challenges of the time.

The (U.S.) Program of Priestly Formation, now in its third edition and approved by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, speaks to this question of the quality of candidates for ordained ministry in examining admission requirements, continued evaluation and promotion to orders.⁶ The Program of Priestly Formation calls attention to the basic canonical requirements which are again emphasized in the revised Code of Canon Law.

"The diocesan bishop should admit to the major seminary only those young men who, considering their human, moral, spiritual and intellectual qualities, their physical and psychological health as well as their right intention are judged capable of dedicating themselves permanently to the sacred ministries."⁷

In addition to these canonical requirements, there is a need for an "overall balance and aptitude of personality which includes spiritual, emotional, intellectual and physical qualities. It also presumes the proper motivation or right intention, which may be described in words of Pope Paul VI as 'the clear and determined desire to dedicate oneself completely to the services of the Lord.'" (*Summum Dei Verbum*, U.S. Catholic Conference translation, p. 10)⁸

When it comes to the final decision regarding the promotion to sacred orders, the Program of Priestly Formation lists the qualities which the candidate should possess. It is worth noting at this time that these qualities are not totally present in the candidate at the time of admission to the seminary, but rather they are developed and refined in the process of priestly formation and education. Likewise, these same qualities should reach greater maturity in the living out of priestly ministry after ordination. Yet these are the qualities which should be sought after in determining whether a candidate should be promoted to sacred orders or not.

"In accordance with the norms of the Second Vatican Council, the Holy See and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the ordinary will look for these qualities in candidates for orders:

"a) A knowledge of and a fidelity to the word of God and the authentic teaching of Christ's church;

"b) Charity, zeal for souls and lifelong commitment to the priesthood, including celibacy, according to the tradition of the Western church;

"c) Competency in pastoral skills,

Some 128 persons, representing each of the 54 schools of theology in the United States, attended the July 17-20 first Assembly of Ordinaries and President Rectors of Theologates in Mundelein, Ill.

The four-day assembly was sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men and the National Catholic Educational Association. Major funding was provided by a grant from the Lilly Endowment of Indianapolis.

The purpose of the assembly was to help persons responsible for the education and formation of future U.S. priests develop a practical response to a 1980 study, "The Fiscal Resources of Catholic Theology Schools, 1975-1983," conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, a church-related research organization in Washington, D.C., and the Lilly Endowment.

The Mundelein assembly of bishops and seminary rectors concluded with a call for creation of a task force to examine further several issues discussed at the meeting.

Issues to be studied include development of guidelines for the admission of candidates to seminaries and the need for greater clarification of the vision of the church and Christology in relationship to priestly formation, said Rev. Robert Sherry, executive director of the secretariat of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Priestly Formation and the coordinator of the assembly.

"Besides formation for priesthood, there is a rising consciousness regarding the role of seminaries in preparing lay people for church ministries," Sherry said. Participants also agreed, he said, on the pressing need to continue developing programs which recognize the multicultural and multiracial character of U.S. Catholics.

Other concerns of the assembly included continuing education after ordination, financial costs, equity in student charges and appreciation of the various models in education and formation programs.

For a discussion in Origins of the decline in the number of vocations to the priesthood, see the remarks of Auxiliary Bishop Nicolas Walsh of Seattle to the U.S. bishops during their national meeting in November 1982. His text appeared in vol. 12, p. 425.

especially in the proclamation of God's word and in leading divine worship;

"d) A sense of responsibility and commitment to the people entrusted to them and an ability to communicate with them; an interest in the universal work of the church and a commitment to the mission agencies which help that work;

"e) Personal initiative and capacity for courageous leadership, together with prudence and decision in action;

"f) Willingness to subordinate personal preferences in the interest of cooperative effort;

"g) A commitment to the promotion of justice."

These are clear, objective criteria as far as qualities which a person should possess who is to be promoted to sacred orders. Yet any listing of qualities must take on shape and form within the object, program or person who is expected to possess such qualities. Moreover, there are other factors which influence the qualities a person should possess based on the values of a society as well as the understanding of such qualities and their integration into a person's life.

Today the candidate for priesthood comes from a varied background in regard to age, education, family and the experience of church. No longer do candidates for the major seminary share a common background or experience which can be presumed as a joint basis for further development and growth. Moreover, the candidate today has been shaped, formed and influenced by a culture and values which are often at odds with the values of the Roman Catholic faith tradition.

As generous young men apply for entrance into a major seminary and as they experience evaluation and consideration of promotion to orders, it might be well to address some of the factors which could become variables and questions having an effect on the quality of the candidates involved. In naming such variables and questions the purpose would be to address these issues effectively to ensure the quality of candidates for priesthood for the benefit of the individual and the church. These questions and variables are part of the church and world today. They would fall into three general categories: personal factors, societal factors and ecclesial factors.

A Realistic Appraisal

Societal Factors

In society today there are unique pressures to our time which influence people of all ages, including those considering priesthood as a vocation. The American value system places a high priority on the value of self-fulfillment as well as a strong personalism prevalent in almost every dimension of human experience. What is self-satisfying and self-fulfilling has become the normative ethic for many.

Thirteen years ago the Basic Plan for Priestly Formation recognized these realities in terms of new needs of the human race and the

nature of modern civilization. It stated that "young men who today enter a seminary are closely attached to that kind of society, and their outlook is affected by problems concerning religion, especially priestly life and activity."¹⁰ Any program of priestly formation today must take this reality into account.

A recent survey on vocations indicated that today's youth is a very success-oriented generation, and many young people have set goals that bring with them self-fulfillment, primarily through financial reward.¹¹ Such values must be addressed in preparing candidates for priesthood.

Personal Factors

The candidate applying for admission to a seminary today has been shaped and molded by numerous events and the values of society. There is a need to understand and appreciate the candidate in terms of the young adult generation of today. The Basic Plan for Priestly Formation described the special dispositions of young people 13 years ago in the following words:

"One observes in them an ardent longing for sincerity and truth; they are noticeably prone to take up everything new and out of the ordinary; they admire the world with its scientific and technical progress; we see them wanting to work their way more deeply into the world to serve it, with a sense of solidarity particularly with the poorer classes and the oppressed, and a spirit of community. But besides all this they have clearly a distrust for everything old and traditionally accepted; they cannot make up their minds and are inconsistent in putting plans into effect; they show a lack of docility — very necessary for spiritual progress — with a disposition difficult and critical toward authority and the various institutions of civil and ecclesiastical society, etc."¹²

There would be many of the same characteristics present in today's youth with an even greater awareness of personalism and the need for affirmation, approval and encouragement, while at the same time a seeming decrease in actual contact with the poor and the oppressed.

An appreciation and understanding of these qualities is not meant to exclude young people as candidates for priesthood, but rather for the seminary educator "to understand them, and to turn them...to his purpose of formation, with the cooperation of the future priests themselves."¹³ Seminary educators are asked to make a "clear distinction always between what is less useful, not useful at all or an actual obstacle. All things considered, it is impossible to ignore the fact that in these last years particularly there are problems, originating from youth or from modern society, which exercise a powerful influence on the whole work of formation and therefore demand greater efforts from educators."¹⁴

The sexual revolution is also part of the scenario of life today which has had a powerful impact on young adults. There is some confusion about the experiences of sexuality and the

church's ethical teaching on sexuality. The integration of personal sexual identity and maturity seems to be a process now which takes far more time than we presumed in the past, especially in understanding and living out the commitment to celibacy. The Program of Priestly Formation emphasizes that "the value of celibate chastity must be learned. A consumer culture, characterized by materialism and narcissism, does not reach the gospel values of simplicity of life, chaste love and responsive obedience. Treatment of human sexuality in public fora and by the media offers little support or understanding for traditional Christian norms, and in fact causes uncertainty and misunderstanding. Hence, rectors and directors of formation in seminaries cannot assume that seminarians have a healthy Christian appreciation of the positive meaning and purpose of human sexuality, or a mature, Christ-centered acceptance and direction of their own sexuality. Education in the realities of human sexuality is needed for seminarians."¹⁵

"A concern for quality must not fall prey to the fulfillment of educational hours and credits alone, but rather deal with the issue of the person himself in his faith journey and his integration of this faith into a lived experience within the Roman Catholic faith community."

Any realistic appraisal of sexuality must look at this dimension of human experience in terms of human relationships, intimacy and human growth. Heterosexual and-or homosexual orientation or activity must be considered in assessing a candidate's admission, evaluation and promotion to sacred orders.

A final personal factor which needs to be addressed is the ever-increasing presence of what we have come to call "older candidates" for priesthood. Often enough the choice for priesthood is an early second-career decision. The Program of Priestly Formation recognizes this phenomenon of our time and describes these applicants "of a higher age who often enough do not have the traditional philosophical and theological background, as well as a strong basis in spiritual formation and the experience of a Catholic culture in their background within family life, education or church itself."¹⁶

Seminaries have responded to this phenomenon with special programs of education and spiritual formation for a year or more. Yet there is and there should be a concern for the development of quality in assessing the readiness of such candidates for ordained ministry in light of integrating an experience and sense of Catholic culture and tradition which cannot be measured in semester or quarter hours. A concern for quality must not fall prey to the fulfillment of educational hours and credits alone, but rather deal with the issue of the person himself

in his faith journey and his integration of this faith into a lived experience within the Roman Catholic faith community.

C. Ecclesial Factors

Several factors within the church have a bearing on the quest for quality among candidates for the priesthood. First and foremost would seem to be a changing attitude regarding the experience, understanding and sense of what it means to be Catholic. Candidates for priesthood today are products of Catholic schools and religious education programs of the late '60s and early '70s, a time when so much transition was taking place in meeting the catechetical expectations of Vatican II. People in their early 20s today have little knowledge or experience of traditions, certain forms of Catholic piety, and values which are still important to many adults. A concern for quality must consider this question of what it means to be Catholic in regard to basic church teachings.

There are new expectations for the priest today. The priest is no longer the exclusive minister within a Christian community. In almost every ecclesial setting from parishes to schools, from diocesan offices to health-care facilities, the priest works with others who are committed to a service of the church on a full-time or part-time basis, whether in a paid position or in a volunteer capacity. Such Christian service was often the sole responsibility of the priest in the past. Today the challenge for priests is the ability to work with and relate to others involved in Christian service. This also involves the much more basic ability needed to relate to lay men and women at all levels of church life. These relational qualities are absolutely essential for the priest. Somehow the candidate for priesthood must be prepared to fulfill this need if his ministry is to have a quality dimension to it.

Moreover a priest is not ordained in isolation. Rather, there is a commitment expected of the priest to a diocese or a religious community. Preparation for involvement in the corporate mission of a presbyterate or a religious community is part of the preparation for ordained ministry, which again is able to offer a quality dimension to priestly service. Such service must be part of the preparation for priesthood itself. In this context also there is the related question of priesthood being assumed on personal terms or ecclesial terms. The ministry of the priest cannot be so exclusive that it restricts the ministry of the priest to one particular dimension of church life or to one segment of people. Rather, priesthood must be seen in inclusive terms if priesthood is to have an impact on people and the church today.

Finally, a strong related question which puts pressure on seminary programs and the desire for quality in priesthood candidates is the subtle pressure to blur all distinctions between ordained priesthood and the priesthood of the baptized. Despite the strong teaching of Vatican II and the repeated statements of the Holy Father, there is an attitude among some of

The launching of a study of U.S. seminaries was announced in September 1981 by Archbishop John Roach of St. Paul and Minneapolis, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. U.S. seminaries would be reviewed by the Vatican's Congregation for Catholic Education with the collaboration of the U.S. bishops' national secretariat, it was indicated. Bishop John Marshall of Burlington, Vt., was named coordinator of the study.

The study is currently in process. Marshall met July 2 with Pope John Paul II to discuss its progress.

Roach said the review is based on a desire to assist seminaries "in their ongoing process of renewal in the postconciliar era. Additionally the Holy See, for the past few years, has expressed concern about the best use of personnel and resources in a situation in which higher education is becoming increasingly costly."

Roach said that the Congregation for Catholic Education "indicated that it is the express wish of the Holy Father that the study process itself, as well as an overall plan for accomplishing the study, be developed in close collaboration with the episcopal conference and those responsible for the formation of American seminarians."

The text of a letter to the U.S. bishops about the study appeared in Origins, vol. 11, pp. 263f.

**QUOTE FROM A PAST
TEXT OF CURRENT
INTEREST:**

"My bottom-line conviction is that, as in the early church, vocations must evolve from the local community. The day is gone when potential candidates, who might have all the good will in the world but no proven experience, are simply plucked from the real world and placed in a hothouse environment to return a few years later to a diocese as the new clerics in the block. If our ministry is a call to serve the local church, then new servants must somehow be called forth from the local community.

*"A recent phenomenon which I welcome is the growth in the many people who have already witnessed to a deep commitment to the Lord, who are already deeply involved in the life of the world and the church and who now wish to formalize a life commitment already being lived. While I recognize the need for theological training, I would hope that special consideration and adjustments can be made on a case-by-case basis for older applicants to priesthood." (From "The Person Who Becomes a Vocation Director," by Bishop Walter Sullivan of Richmond, Va., in *Origins*, vol. 12, p. 334.)*

almost an egalitarian approach to the understanding and appreciation of ordained ministry and all other ministries in the church today. Vatican II clearly states: "There is an essential difference between the faithful's priesthood in common and the priesthood of the ministry of the hierarchy, and not just a difference of degree. Nevertheless, there is an ordered relation between them: One and the other has its special way of sharing the single priesthood of Christ."¹⁷

Bridging the Ideal and the Reality

There is a need today to bridge the ideal expressed in the Program of Priestly Formation and the reality of the variables and questions raised in light of today's young person and society itself when it comes to describing the qualities of candidates for priesthood in admission, evaluation and promotion to sacred orders. Addressing the variables and questions raised in this paper will help ensure and deepen the quality of candidates for priesthood.

It would seem that this task of bridging the ideal and the reality is a corporate enterprise shared by the bishop or religious superior, the seminary faculty, members of the presbyterate and the people of God. Ways must be found to include these different segments of the church in preparing candidates for admission, evaluation and promotion to sacred orders. Such involvement of the people of God in the process of evaluation and promotion to orders is recommended in the Program of Priestly Formation.¹⁸

"There is a need today to bridge the ideal expressed in the Program of Priestly Formation and the reality of the variables and questions raised in light of today's young person and society itself when it comes to describing the qualities of candidates for priesthood in admission, evaluation and promotion to sacred orders."

One conclusion is shared by all those involved in preparing candidates for priesthood — the desire to have the best possible candidate with all the necessary qualities essential for priestly service to the people of God. There is less hesitation today on the part of seminary faculties and vocation directors and bishops to suggest to some individuals that priesthood is not the vocation for them, not from their point of view, but from the viewpoint of the church they will serve. Moreover, in recruitment of candidates for priesthood, there is a growing consensus on the part of religious communities and diocesan

presbyterates, as well as lay persons in the church today, that the quality of candidates for priesthood is a priority for the church of today and tomorrow. There is less and less the temptation to be conscious of the numbers ordained in contrast to the quality of those ordained.

The questions which need to be raised in the context of the variables and issues considered would be whether the present length of seminary preparation is adequate. A further question is the need for more involved and integrated preparation between the local church and-or religious community and the seminary program. There is the further need for postordination internship and supervision. We might well also ask whether it is possible today to speak about candidates in terms of classes in a chronological time frame as if everyone within the same entrance class is expected to complete one's preparation at the same time. Some question whether it is realistic to have a student begin theological studies without first having a supervised extended experience within a pastoral setting in order to have a lived experience of church.

Paul's words to Timothy are a reminder to all of us interested and committed to the need for quality among the candidates for priesthood in the church today. We are encouraged to speak and live these words to young people today considering the vocation to priesthood:

"I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God bestowed when my hands were laid on you. The Spirit God has given us is no cowardly spirit, but rather one that makes us strong, loving and wise."¹⁹

May we be strong, loving and wise in our concern for the quality of candidates for priesthood today.

Footnotes

¹ *In Search of Excellence*, Thomas J. Peters and Robert Waterman Jr., Harper and Row Publishers, New York 1982.

² The Decree on the Training of Priests, Vatican II, no. 6.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The Basic Plan for Priestly Formation, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1983, pp. 19-20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶ The Program of Priestly Formation, NCCB, 1982, 3rd edit., nos. 265-283.

⁷ Revised Code of Canon Law, 1982, private translation, Canon 241, 1.

⁸ The Program of Priestly Formation, no. 265.

⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 280.

¹⁰ The Basic Plan for Priestly Formation, p. 23.

¹¹ Our Sunday Visitor, July 9, 1983.

¹² The Basic Plan for Priestly Formation, p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The Program of Priestly Formation, no. 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Introduction, no. 24.

¹⁷ Constitution on the Church, Vatican II, no. 10; cf. Holy Thursday Letters of Pope John Paul II.

¹⁸ The Program of Priestly Formation, no. 281.

¹⁹ 2 Tm. 1:6-7.