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Careful Selection and Training of Candidates For the States of Perfection and Holy Orders

by

Sacred Congregation for Religious
February 2, 1961

Editor's note: The following is an abridged version of the Vatican document which discusses various impediments to ordination including, in explicit terms, "advancement to religious vows and ordination should be barred to those who are afflicted with evil tendencies to homosexuality or pederasty."

An Instruction, *Religiosorum institutio*, to the Superiors of Religious Communities, Societies without vows, and Secular Institutes on the careful selection and training of candidates for the states of perfection and Sacred Orders is as follows.

Purpose, Binding Force, And Extent Of This Instruction

1. The Instruction *Quantum Religiones*

The training of religious and of others pursuing perfection and aspiring to the ranks of the clergy in the states of perfection has always been particularly close to the heart of the Sacred Congregation for Religious. Thus, in the Instruction *Quantum Religiones*, of 1 December, 1931, the Sacred Congregation instructed the superiors general of religious communities and clerical societies on the proper religious and clerical training of their subjects, and on the investigation to be carried out before profession and the reception of Sacred Orders.

The main purpose of this Instruction was, in so far as human frailty may permit, to forestall serious cases of defection not only from the

religious state but likewise from the sacred ranks in which religious had been enrolled through the reception of Orders.

2. The Purpose Of This Instruction And Its Binding Force

Now, however, without any change in the chief directives and criteria contained in the aforesaid Instruction, this Sacred Congregation proposes to take up this same question again and to treat it anew (can. 22), especially as regards the selection and training of candidates and the investigation to be made prior to professions and Sacred Orders in order that the aforesaid Instruction may be in complete harmony with subsequent developments and with later pertinent pontifical documents.

3. The Principal Sources Of This Instruction

In the Jubilee Year of 1950 there was held at Rome an International Congress of the States of Perfection, in which specialists summoned from all over the world on the basis of their knowledge and experience, spoke and wrote on the selection, nurturing, and perfecting of religious and clerical vocations. These discussions were published in the four-volume *Acta et Documenta* of the Congress. Later, congresses were held in various nations and in them the same topics were taken up.

During this same period other documents of the utmost importance appeared. These were the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XI, of immortal memory, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, of 20 December, 1935, and various others published by Pope Pius XII, of venerable memory, to whom the states of perfection are so indebted, such as his Exhortation to the Clergy, *Menti Nostrae*, of 23 September, 1950, his encyclical letter, *Sacra Virginitas*, of 25 March, 1954, his allocution, *Sollemnis Conventus*, of 24 June, 1939, to all clerical students and their superiors, his allocution, *Haud Mediocri*, of 11 February, 1958, to the superiors general of religious orders and congregations resident in Rome and especially the Apostolic Constitution, *Sedes Sapientiae*, of 31 May, 1956, on religious, clerical and apostolic training of clerics in the states of perfection. Nor of any lesser value are those documents which the Sovereign Pontiff, John XXIII, happily reigning, has issued on the priesthood and priestly formation, both in his solemn allocution on the occasion of the first Roman Synod and likewise in the Synodal Constitutions. There was also published a reserved *Circular Letter* of the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments on 27 December, 1955, addressed to local Ordinaries for secular clerics, imposing an investigation of candidates before their promotion to Orders.

Certainly it was most opportune for, and even the duty of, this Sacred Congregation to incorporate the fruits of this longstanding and rich experience and evolution into a new Instruction, which would likewise serve as a particularized commentary on the Apostolic Constitution, *Sedes Sapientiae* (cf. n. 40 and the *Statuta Generalia*, art. 17).

4. To Whom This Instruction Is Addressed

This Instruction is addressed to the superiors of religious communities, societies living the common life, and secular institutes, especially as far as the last are concerned, if their members are incorporated into the institute as clerics. Therefore, although frequently, for the sake of convenience, only religious will be mentioned, the norms and criteria set forth in this Instruction are also applicable to the members of the other states of perfection (cf. *Stat. Gen.*, art. 16, §§ 1-2).

Likewise, although the Instruction refers especially to candidates for the clerical state, nevertheless those points which by their very nature deal with the selection and training of candidates for the states of perfection are, with due adaptations, to be applied also to lay religious, including religious women (*Ibid.*, §3, 2°)

I. The More Common Causes Of Defection

5. An Inquiry Into The Causes Of Defections

It is necessary at the very outset to set down the most frequent grounds alleged for defections and to lay before superiors the reasons which religious priests claim to be the causes why they lose interest in the life they have embraced and ask the Holy See for secularization or even for "laicization," i.e., reduction to the lay state. Attention must be drawn also to the pretexts under which these same religious priests presume to leave the religious life and return to the world on their own initiative, or even make so bold as to question before the Apostolic Dicastries their clerical obligations, especially celibacy. Once the causes of defections are known, superiors will be able to exercise more experienced care and vigilance either in examining the divine vocation of candidates or in strengthening and preserving it by their devoted efforts. In general, the aforesaid religious claim either that they entered on this way of life and continued in it without a genuine divine vocation, or that they lost the genuine divine vocation during the period of their formation or in the early years of their ministerial life.

6. Undue Family Influence

Frequently such religious claim undue influence from parents and members of their family, inasmuch as they were born into a large or poor family and thus were advised either by their parents or by other relatives to leave the paternal home and go to the seminary as a happy solution of family difficulties and were even at times pressured by request, persuasion, or even disguised threats, into embracing the life of perfection and the priestly life and continuing in it. As a result, they allege that their

repugnance or reluctance to accept the religious clerical state, for which they had an aversion, was broken down.

7. Undue Influence Of Superiors And Directors

There were also those who lay at the door of their religious superiors and their spiritual directors the responsibility for their most difficult situation, claiming that these latter, although they had noticed in them no happiness in the religious clerical life, no spirit of piety, and no zeal as they grew older, nevertheless did not hesitate to urge them on, either because they hoped the subjects would do better in the future or because they were more interested in the number than in the quality of vocations, or because, blinded by a false sense of kindness toward the candidates, they threatened them with the danger of loss of eternal salvation if they left the religious clerical state.

8. Ignorance Of Obligations And Lack Of Liberty In Accepting Them

Not infrequently religious priests plead insufficient knowledge of religious and clerical obligations, especially celibacy, or uncertain will in advancing to perpetual profession or Sacred Orders. If they entered a religious seminary as young boys or in their early adolescent years with only a confused knowledge of the religious and ecclesiastical vocation or with a very uncertain will, these unfortunate religious and priests claim that they never got over this state of mind, once they had completed their studies and their years of formation. Nevertheless, they did not withdraw from the path on which they had entered either because they heedlessly followed their companions according to custom, or because, being bashful and incapable of any serious decision, they unwillingly went along with the urgings and counsels of their superiors. Hence they affirm that in making profession or receiving Orders they were not sufficiently aware of the obligations of the priestly life or did not accept them with full freedom.

9. Fear Of An Uncertain Future

At times such candidates, on the verge of Sacred Orders or perpetual profession and somewhat mature in age, finding themselves without academic degrees and untrained in any art or liberal profession, were afraid to leave the religious life, feeling deep down in their hearts that if they returned to the world, they could not make an upright living unless by manual labor, or would be obliged to make difficult and uncertain efforts to acquire a liberal profession. Therefore they regarded the decision to continue in the religious clerical life as a lesser evil.

10. Difficulty With Chastity

Sometimes these religious priests affirm that it is now impossible for them to observe chastity, first because of bad habits contracted in youth, which were sometimes corrected but still never completely eradicated, and secondly because of sexual tendencies of a pathological nature, which they

feel cannot be brought under control either by ordinary or extraordinary means, even those of a spiritual order, in such a way that they frequently fall into the solitary sin.

11. Loss Of The Religious Spirit

Lastly, not infrequently there is adduced as a cause the loss of the religious spirit either because, under the insidious impact of present-day naturalism, these priests become incapable of discipline and religious observance, or because, living in religious houses an indolent and unproductive life, deceived by the desire of life outside and ill-regulated pseudo-apostolic activism and neglecting the interior life, they fall victims to dangers of all kinds, which they do not avoid and do not even recognize.

12. Weakness And Subjective Character Of Such Arguments

Unfortunate religious priests bring forth these and other similar arguments, at times even attempting to make the Church responsible for their deplorable condition, as though the Church, through her ministers, had admitted them to the religious and priestly life without the necessary qualifications, or did not know how to train and protect them once they had been called unto the portion of the Lord. But, as the Sacred Congregation of the Sacraments states in the above-mentioned *Circular Letter*: "it cannot be denied that these charges made by the priests during the trials have only a shadowy appearance of truth, for often the only proof is the statement made by the plaintiff alone, a very interested party, and not by witnesses or documents proved in court." Nor is this surprising since these unfortunate religious priests not infrequently take their present state of mind and psychic crisis, which has gradually evolved over a period of years, and unconsciously transfer it to the time of their profession and ordination, being unaware of the inner change which has taken place within themselves.

13. Removal Of All Appearance Of Justification For These Claims; Superiors' Obligation In Conscience

And yet the honor of the Church, the welfare of religious communities and the edification of the faithful demand of superiors most accurate diligence and untiring zeal in order not to provide even a vestige of foundation for priests advancing such claims. Superiors should see to it that they be not responsible for the mistakes or errors of those in charge of selecting and training young men. This will be the case if they are culpably uninformed of the norms laid down by the Church, or ignore them, or apply them carelessly; if, ignoring the necessary discernment of spirits, they admit into religious life and allow to remain therein those who have not been called by God, or if they neglect to give proper formation to those who are evidently called and to safeguard them in their divine vocation. Therefore, this Sacred Congregation regards it as its duty to exhort

superiors most earnestly always to keep before their eyes the norms herein set forth, being mindful of the grave warning of this Sacred Congregation in its Instruction, *Illud Saepius*, of 18 August, 1915: "When a religious leaves his order, the superior of that same order, if he has diligently examined his conscience before God, will very frequently be well aware that he himself is not without fault and has failed in his duty. This neglect of duty is often verified either in the admission of candidates or in training them to the religious life, or, after they have made vows, in keeping watch over them".....

....The duties and obligations of the religious and clerical life should be discussed frequently by novice masters and spiritual prefects, each in his own field, by means of timely warnings and the usual instructions and exhortations. Preachers should likewise take up this subject in retreats before perpetual profession and sacred ordinations. Lastly, in their explanation of the tract on Orders, professors of moral theology should provide lectures on clerical duties and obligations, and candidates for Orders should be questioned on these points in their examinations.

28. Denunciation Of Temerity In Embracing The Religious And Clerical Life

It is commendable to keep the sanctity of the religious life and the dignity and excellence of the priesthood frequently placed before candidates from the very beginning and throughout the whole period of their formation, and defection from a genuine divine vocation is justly censured. But similarly, and even more severely, should rashness in embracing the religious and priestly state be denounced and its manifold dangers pointed out for those who either were not called by God or have become unworthy of a divine vocation, but who venture to make vows or to receive Sacred Orders. Superiors should form the conscience of candidates, carefully avoiding all error and confusion in their teaching on the religious and priestly vocation, and on virginity and Christian marriage. Let all be firmly convinced that the time for sounding out a vocation does not lapse completely with the first admission of the candidate, but continues on to perpetual profession and ordination to the priesthood.

D) The Required Chastity

29. Importance Of This Point; Young Persons Are To Be Properly Instructed And Warned Of Its Dangers

Among the proofs and signs of a divine vocation the virtue of chastity is regarded as absolutely necessary "because it is largely for this reason that candidates for the ranks of the clergy choose this type of life for themselves and persevere in it." Consequently:

a) "Watchful and diligent care is to be taken that candidates for the clergy should have a high esteem and love for chastity, and should safeguard it in their souls.

b) "Not only, therefore, are clerics to be informed in due time on the nature of priestly celibacy, the chastity which they are to observe (cf. can. 132), and the demands of this obligation, but they are likewise to be warned of the dangers into which they can fall on this account. Consequently, candidates for Sacred Orders are to be exhorted to protect themselves from dangers from their earliest years."

c) Although virginity embraced for the kingdom of heaven is more excellent than matrimony, nevertheless, candidates for Sacred Orders should not be unaware of the nobility of married life as exemplified in Christian marriage established by the plan of God. Therefore, let them be so instructed that, with a clear understanding of the advantages of Christian matrimony, they may deliberately and freely embrace the greater good of priestly and religious chastity.

d) But should superiors find a candidate unable to observe ecclesiastical celibacy and practice priestly chastity, then, completely ignoring any other outstanding qualities, they should bar him from the religious life and the priesthood (cf. *Stat. Gen.*, art. 34, § 2, 4°), conforming to the following directives and using all prudence and discretion in the application of the same, namely:

30. Those To Be Excluded; Practical Directives

1. A candidate who shows himself certainly unable to observe religious and priestly chastity, either because of frequent sins against chastity or because of a sexual bent of mind or excessive weakness of will, is not to be admitted to the minor seminary and, much less, to the novitiate or to profession. (*emphasis added*) If he has already been accepted but is not yet perpetually professed, then he should be sent away immediately or advised to withdraw, according to individual cases, no matter what point in his formation he has already reached. Should he be perpetually professed, he is to be barred absolutely and permanently from tonsure and the reception of any Order, especially Sacred Orders. If circumstances should so demand, he shall be dismissed from the community, with due observance of the prescriptions of canon law.

2. Consequently, any candidate who has a habit of solitary sins and who has not given well-founded hope that he can break this habit within a period of time to be determined prudently, is not to be admitted to the novitiate. Nor can a candidate be admitted to first profession or to renewal of vows unless he has really amended his ways. But if a novice or a temporarily professed religious gives evidence of a firm purpose of amendment with good grounds for hope of success, his probation can be

extended as provided for in canon law (canons 571, §2; 574, §2; 973, § 3; *Stat. Gen.*, art. 34, § 2, 3°).

Well-grounded hope of amendment can be provided by those youths who are physically and psychically normal or endowed with good bodily and mental health, who are noted for solid piety and the other virtues intimately connected with chastity, and who sincerely desire the religious and priestly life.

3. A much stricter policy must be followed in admission to perpetual profession and advancement to Sacred Orders. No one should be admitted to perpetual vows or promoted to Sacred Orders unless he has acquired a firm habit of continency and has given in every case consistent proof of habitual chastity over a period of at least one year. If within this year prior to perpetual profession or ordination to Sacred Orders doubt should arise because of new falls, the candidate is to be barred from perpetual profession or Sacred Orders (cf. above, no. 16) unless, as far as profession is concerned, time is available either by common law or by special indult to extend the period for testing chastity and there be question of a candidate who, as was stated above (no. 30, 2) affords good prospects of amendment.

4. If a student in a minor seminary has sinned gravely against the sixth commandment with a person of the same or the other sex, or has been the occasion of grave scandal in the matter of chastity, he is to be dismissed immediately as stipulated in canon 1371, (emphasis added) except if prudent consideration of the act and of the situation of the student by the superiors or confessors should counsel a different policy in an individual case, sc., in the case of a boy who has been seduced and who is gifted with excellent qualities and is truly penitent, or when the sin was an objectively imperfect act.

If a novice or a professed religious who has not yet made perpetual vows should be guilty of the same offense, he is to be sent away from the community or, should the circumstances so demand, he is to be dismissed with due observance of canon 647, § 2, 1°. If a perpetually professed religious is found guilty of any such sin, he is to be perpetually excluded from tonsure and the reception of any further Order. If the case belongs to the external forum, he is to receive a canonical warning unless, as provided for in canons 653 and 668, there be grounds for sending him back to the world (cf. *Stat. Gen.*, art. 34, § 2, 4°).

Lastly, should he be a subdeacon or deacon, then, without prejudice to the above-mentioned directives and if the case should so demand, the superiors should take up with the Holy See the question of his reduction to the lay state.

For these reasons, clerics who in their diocese or religious who in another community have sinned gravely against chastity with another

person are not to be admitted with a view to the priesthood, even on a trial basis, unless there be clear evidence of excusing causes or of circumstances which can at least notably diminish responsibility in conscience (*Circular Letter* of S. C. of the Sacraments, n. 16; Canon Law Digest, 4, p. 314). Advancement to religious vows and ordination should be barred to those who are afflicted with evil tendencies to homosexuality or pederasty, since for them the common life and the priestly ministry would constitute serious dangers. (*emphasis added*)

5. Very special investigation is needed for those students who, although they have hitherto been free of formal sins against chastity, nevertheless suffer from morbid or abnormal sexuality, especially sexual hyperesthesia or an erotic bent of nature, to whom religious celibacy would be a continual act of heroism and a trying martyrdom. For chastity, in so far as it implies abstinence from sexual pleasure, not only becomes very difficult for many people but the very state of celibacy and the consequent loneliness and separation from one's family becomes so difficult for certain individuals gifted with excessive sensitivity and tenderness, that they are not fit subjects for the religious life. This question should perhaps receive more careful attention from novice masters and superiors of scholasticates than from confessors since such natural tendencies do not come out so clearly in confession as in the common life and daily contact.

31. Care Of Psychopathic Cases

In addition, special attention must be paid to those who give evidence of neuropsychosis and who are described by psychiatrists as neurotics or psychopaths, especially those who are scrupulous, abulic, hysterical, or who suffer from some form of mental disease (schizophrenia, paranoia, etc.). The same is true of those who have a delicate constitution or, particularly, those who suffer from weakness of the nervous system or from protracted psychic melancholia, anxiety or epilepsy (can. 984, 3°), or who are afflicted with obsessions. Similarly, precautions are needed in examining the children of alcoholics or those tainted with some hereditary weakness, especially in the mental order (cf. *Stat. Gen.*, art. 33; 34, § 1). Finally, those young men are in need of special attention who manifest exaggerated attachment to the comforts of life and worldly pleasures. Superiors should carefully examine all these types and subject them to a thorough examination by a prudent and expert Catholic psychiatrist who, after repeated examinations, will be in a position to determine whether or not they will be able to shoulder, with honor to that state, the burden of religious and priestly life, especially celibacy.

III. Care In Training And Strengthening Vocations

32. Experienced Directors Should Be Appointed And Sought Out Wherever They May Be

After the accurate selection of vocations, superiors should have as their second principle the task of appointing excellent and experienced directors for the education of young religious conformably to art. 24 of the *Statuta Generalia*. "To these religious houses," advises Pius XI, "assign priests adorned with excellent virtue, and do not be afraid to take them away from other tasks which may be apparently more important but which cannot match this work of capital importance"....

...By the faithful observance of all these directives, the task of investigating the canonical fitness of candidates for the state of perfection and Sacred Orders will meet with success; those who are not fit will be barred in time and at the very outset, and only those worthy and fit will be admitted to Sacred Orders. These, in turn, properly instructed and trained, will effectively promote the glory of God and the salvation of souls to the honor of the Church and the state of evangelical perfection.

In the audience graciously granted on 23 January, 1961, to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, our Holy Father, Pope John XXIII, deigned to approve this Instruction and ordered that it be communicated to superiors of institutes of evangelical perfection.

Rome, the 2nd day of February, feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the year 1961.

S.C. Rel., 2 Feb., 1961; translated from the original Latin text; references to English versions were, of course, entered by us. Note: Although this Instruction was not published in AAS or any other public form but was privately circulated, it is, nevertheless, referred to by the S.C. Rel. itself as "a matter of public law."
