

Third Talk

Implications of conformation to Christ for religious formation

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(References to **Point 1**, etc., correspond to the accompanying two-page handout, though there are many important points not included on that handout.)

Formation in general

Point 1: Formation is a period of discernment about vows and ordination. That period of discernment is preceded by a discernment of whether or not a man is called to enter the program of formation. **Point 2:** Discernment is two-sided: both the man and the province must discern. That is, both discernments are two-sided: the *man* must discern whether he is called to enter and later whether he is called to take vows and accept ordination. And the *province* must discern whether the man should be accepted into the program of formation and later whether he should be admitted to vows and be ordained.

Point 3: Only the man himself can do his side of the discernment. Nevertheless, some formators—especially spiritual directors—have the responsibility to *help* the candidate discern. They should help those seeking information learn what would be involved in the religious and/or clerical vocation they are considering and should do so *disinterestedly*, that is, not with a view to recruiting but with a view to really helping a man discern *God's* will.

Point 4: [*The following points are included in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation. A much more in-depth version of this treatment of discernment is available in the accompanying article "How to Discern the Elements of Your Personal Vocation," which is also available online.*] Those who enter into a discernment should understand two kinds of things, namely, what discernment presupposes and what the actual process of discernment involves. And formators should explain both of these to the men entrusted to their care. Let's take a closer look.

- The following issues must be understood if one is to discern properly.
 - Discernment is not a matter of clarifying one's own desires but seeing what God wants.
 - Discernment presupposes that morally objectionable options have been excluded.

- A sincere effort to discern cannot fail (since God has a plan for our lives that he wants us to discover).
 - One should be motivated by the conviction that God's plan is one's surest path to authentic fulfillment and by the desire to please him.
 - *Discernment requires detachment* from one's own agenda. (I will say more below about this important point.)
 - Discernment bears not on whether one should *do* a certain thing but only on whether one is called to *try* to do it.
 - Some vocational paths require the consent of more than one person.
 - Since death can come at any moment, one never knows whether one will be given the opportunity to carry out what one discerns one should try to do.
 - God asks for fidelity rather than success.
 - No faithful effort is ever wasted. One's best efforts, even if unsuccessful from a this-worldly perspective, constitute solid building material that the Lord uses in constructing his kingdom. And as noted in the other talks, our whole purpose should be to cooperate with God as he builds up his kingdom.
 - Discernment is ongoing because the elements of one's personal vocation continue to unfold throughout life.
 - For example, discerning whether one is called to take vows or accept ordination presupposes discernment of whether or not to enter the program of formation.
 - So also, later discernments, for example, about further studies, presuppose the discernment about vows and ordination.
- The following steps constitute the actual process of discernment.
- Begin by focusing on the end: ask what is most likely to fulfill the purpose for which I was created, namely, to honor God and find salvation.
 - Wholeheartedly ask God to help one see what he wants one to do.
 - Recognize that a vocation is a call to service and call to mind both one's gifts and people's needs so as to be prepared to judge how one's gifts can best meet those needs.
 - Be open to possibilities that people do not typically consider.
 - Consider the pros and cons of each option and discount the unsuitable ones.
 - Allow one's "Christian emotions" (emotions that pertain to one's converted self) to play their proper part with respect to the remaining options (this includes using imaginative exercises and paying close attention to one's affective response to each option).

- Continue until one option emerges as the most appealing and one is at peace with embracing it.
- Accept the discernment by taking the initial steps to respond to the call.

As I said above detachment is central to discernment. Since formators and candidates should be trying to discern God's will, they should never begin the process with a preferred outcome. Rather, they should only want whatever God wants, as Fr. Fiorelli very eloquently explained. Those being formed should not let outside pressure influence their decisions about whether to enter or take vows. Examples of such pressure include: my mother wants me to be a priest or religious; I don't know what else I could do with my life if I don't do this; I have entered and now I feel the pressure to stay.

Formators should avoid thinking in terms of recruiting men for their program of formation. Instead, they should think in terms of helping those who approach them discern whatever it is that God may be calling them to. They should honestly communicate about the Oblate life to help men discern whether God is calling them to enter the Oblate program of formation and whether, once in it, to take vows. But they should never accept inappropriate candidates because they are worried about numbers, and they should avoid pushing men through the program because it would be a shame and we wouldn't know what to do if all our novices leave. The attitude should be: if Jesus doesn't want a single one to be an Oblate of St. Francis de Sales, that's fine with us. We're here to serve the Lord and to make only the Oblates he is truly calling.

Point 5: By deciding to enter, a man commits himself to discern whether or not God is calling him to this particular state of life and congregation. While discerning this he should avoid stirring up emotions connected with other callings. A man who is considering whether or not to enter the Oblate program of formation rightly thinks in terms of discerning whether to enter *or to do something else*, such as enter some other program of formation or initiate a romantic relationship that could lead to marriage in the Church. This point is significant, because before a man enters, he rightly stirs up emotions connected with various upright possibilities so that he can consider his affective response and discern what God is calling him to focus on.

However, once he enters, he should no longer think in terms of discerning between religious profession and some other positive alternative. Rather, he should think only in terms of whether God is calling him to profess vows in the Oblates. This point is significant, because once a man is in formation, he should no longer stir up emotions connected with possibilities other than the one he has concluded that God wants him to focus on, namely, the possibility that he is called to become a vowed Oblate.

Point 6: By deciding to accept a man into the program of formation, the province commits itself to discern whether or not God want him to be accepted into vows. Since the provincial is the ultimate decision maker, he should be personally involved. He should get to know the men from the beginning. He need not do many of the things others can do, but he should know them, deal with them personally, give advice, and in general build a good fraternal relationship. If it is feasible, much formation should be carried out within the provincial motherhouses. Every member of the community should be involved in formation, at least by providing a good example and making the community as a whole as good a community as possible.

Point 7: God sometimes calls a man into a program of formation without calling him to vows. Of course, no one should enter into the program of formation unless he is convinced that God may well be calling him to become a vowed and eventually a perpetually vowed member of the community, and no one should accept a man into the program of formation unless he shares that conviction. But *God* is free to call a man into the program of formation and also to call him out. Therefore, a man who enters with the right attitude, cooperates with the program of formation, and does not break his vows may rightly discern that God is calling him to leave. In such a case, no one should assume that his initial discernment was mistaken.

For those who are not yet professed or ordained, formation is a specific form of lay Christian life. Earlier we spoke about the role of priests and those in consecrated life as that of doing what they can to make Jesus' saving acts fruitful in people's lives. Formators should be doing that for candidates and for those who have already entered: they should try to promote the fruitfulness of Jesus' salvific acts, made present in the sacraments, in the lives of the men who are entrusted to their care. This means doing what they can to help candidates and those in formation cooperate with Jesus' acts by faithfully fulfilling the responsibilities of their present state in life. Since candidates and those in formation do not have vows and are not ordained, they should think of themselves as lay people living a specific form of lay life, namely, one in which they are listening to God and trying to discern what he wants. They need to be able to judge whether or not they are being led into this particular form of close collaboration with Jesus in promoting the kingdom.

Point 8: Formators should be trying to help these men listen to the Holy Spirit and become what he wants them to be. However, no one can make someone else be faithful to God's will. More specifically, no one can make someone else be a good novice or Salesian. **Point 9:** The key players are the Holy Spirit and the man being formed. The candidate will be properly formed only if he is cooperating with the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that formators should simply stay out of things, be permissive, and hope and pray for the best. Rather, they should understand themselves to be working with and for Jesus, whom they recognize as the true head of formation. Formators should themselves be cooperating with the Holy Spirit. This means doing all

they can to make sure that the men are being offered the formation Jesus wants (including a profound exposure to the life they are discerning) and are being evaluated to see whether or not they are cooperating with that formation.

Point 10: Honest communication is essential. Formators and those being formed must face each other as free and equal persons who are being totally honest with each other. The candidate or man in formation should not simply say and do what he knows the formator wants simply so that he will be accepted into formation or be approved for vows. So also, formators should not say and do what they think will convince a man whom they want in their community to enter or take vows. Both the man and the formators need to communicate honestly in order to discern what *God* wants.

There is no perfect analogy to illustrate what this free, equal, and honest communication should be like. However, it certainly should not be like the communication between a recruit or potential recruit and a military or business outfit, where the focus is on trying to convince the candidate to accept the offer. It should be more like the communication between an engaged couple. That analogy is not perfect because marriage is natural and religious life is not. Moreover, men considering religious life are entering first and foremost into a specific sort of relationship not with the formators but with God. The formators with whom they communicate have the responsibility of facilitating that relationship. They are charged with helping individuals cooperate with the Holy Spirit in becoming what He wants them to be. Nevertheless, like engaged couples, men considering religious life and their formators must engage in utterly honest, open, and confidential conversation as between equals before these men can reasonably commit themselves to the lifelong relationship of intimacy that they are considering. The candidate should be led into a cooperative relationship with the Holy Spirit, who alone can make him be a good religious, a good Salesian, a good anything.

An invasive psychological exam, in which intimate questions are asked by strangers, often even before an appropriate relationship of trust has been cultivated between a candidate and his formators, is inappropriate. It tends to tempt men to be deceptive and even to lie from the very beginning. Instead, formators should try to cultivate a personal relationship with the candidate and honestly answer his questions. Eventually certain very intimate questions will need to be asked, but they should be asked within the context of a relationship of trust. Psychological exams should be used honestly, and not as a way of teasing out information that an honest candidate could provide himself. The problem is that such a use means that the formators do not trust the man to provide the information he is capable of providing and undermines the relationship they should be cultivating.

Point 11: Legalism should be avoided. Emphasis should not be placed on getting those in formation to do the outward performance in a neat and orderly way

that can be easily seen and measured. Rather, emphasis should be placed on trying to get the men see the good reasons, the real value, of doing what they ought to do. The effort should be to elicit their desire to do those things for the right reasons. What can be seen outwardly is not unimportant and should not be ignored. A man who fails to do essential outward things is not a good candidate. However, it is not good enough to get those in formation to get the right outward performance, for they may be giving in to the temptation simply to *play the part* of a good novice. (As TS Eliot put it, “The last temptation is the greatest treason, to do the right deed for the wrong reason.”) A real effort should be made to try to get the men to avoid role playing and hypocrisy. They need to understand *why* what is expected of them is important.

Point 12: A special effort should be made to help candidates avoid hypocrisy. Everyone is tempted to be hypocritical – to want to appear better than they are. This is a special temptation for us priests and religious because the lifestyle to which we commit ourselves is demanding and we know that, for good or ill, the witness of our lives is going to be noticed. So, we can be strongly tempted to try to *appear* to be a good priest or religious. The temptation can be to cover up shortcomings and sins. Obviously, avoiding hypocrisy does not mean publicly confessing one’s sins. Honesty does not require one to tell all the truth one knows, but it does require never telling lies to anyone and never deceiving those who should be properly informed.

Unfortunately, much formation tends to promote hypocrisy by giving those being formed far more than they can realistically do and setting up standards that are virtually impossible to meet. The tendency for those with such expectations placed on them is to at least *seem* to meet the standards.

Point 13: To avoid the problem, an approach of sensible minimalism should be adopted. This requires getting very realistic about what should be included as requirements within the program of formation. Every requirement should be analyzed with a view to determining whether it really is necessary. If it is, the reason why should be explained and the men should be given the time needed to do it well. If it is not, it should be dropped in favor of what is necessary. For example, is it necessary for them to learn Latin? To learn all the writings of St. Francis de Sales, or only some, and if only some, which ones? Rushing them through a great deal of material tends only to encourage pretense. The operative question should be: will learning this material or engaging in this activity help them (more than things they are not required to learn or do) discern whether or not they should take vows? **Point 14:** Those in formation should be required to do essential things well. If they do, especially when it’s not easy or pleasant, they manifest real commitment.

Authority and obedience

Point 1: The reasons why authority/obedience is a necessary feature of religious life should be clearly explained to the men in formation. Subjects who understand and appropriate the reasons for it do not merely accept it as a necessary evil but find deeper fulfillment in obeying and are less likely to become resentful. So, let's consider the reasons for authority and obedience in religious life.

First, only by cooperating with each other can religious and clerics carry out their commitment of single-minded service to the kingdom. All Christians need to cooperate in promoting the kingdom. Close collaborators of Jesus (priests and religious) commit themselves to single-minded service of the kingdom (inasmuch as they, unlike lay apostles, forego promoting other human goods). They carry out their service within a particular community with a particular charism. This situation clearly intensifies the need for cooperation in promoting the kingdom.

Second, cooperation within a religious community and in priestly ministry inevitably involves some exercise of authority and some practice of obedience. Other approaches to cooperation tend not to work well. Seeking consensus before acting may be appropriate in some limited circumstances, but it generally will be impractical, especially if the community has more than just a few members. Deciding by majority rule also is problematic as a normal way of proceeding. It is impractical to involve the entire group regularly in discussions, and the approach tends to divide the group into factions.

Third, the dynamic of authority and obedience is evident in the relationship between Jesus and the Father and in the relationship between the apostles and Jesus. Moreover, there are scriptural warrants for understanding this dynamic as a permanent element in the Church: For example, "Whatever you bind on earth . . ."

We can see, then, that authority and obedience is clearly necessary to promote cooperation, which means not just coordinating activity but sharing the same purpose. It means being of one mind and heart in making Jesus' acts present and fruitful. This is authentic religious cooperation and it is the way we are given to cooperate with Jesus himself.

Formators should not only explain to the men in formation why authority/obedience is a necessary feature of religious life, but they should also explain, whenever it is feasible to do so, why obedience is expected in individual instances. Of course, subjects should obey even when reasons are not given, but when they understand why they are being told to do something, they will be more personally engaged and their experience of participation in a cooperative project will be more

meaningful. When subjects do not understand the reasons for their superior's decision, those decisions can seem arbitrary and it can be difficult to avoid resentment.

Point 2: It is important to distinguish between cases that call for a judgment of conscience and cases that call for a decision to be made. This distinction should be explained to the men in formation.

In cases that call for a judgment of conscience, the superior's role is not to make a decision about how to proceed, as if the options were open to whatever he might decide. Rather, the superior's role is to serve as a moral guide to help a man see what morality itself requires. A superior might give a precept to back up what morality requires, but such commands are no substitute for helping a man see the moral truth, since what we should want above all is a man living in the light and acting on a sound conscience. The superior should try to help the man see, for example, that if he acts in a certain way he would be failing in his responsibility to those entrusted to him in his apostolic assignment. In certain cases the superior may well need to command the man to carry out a certain responsibility, but it will be far better if he can get the man to see the point and cooperate willingly with what *God* requires of him.

Cases that call for a decision to be made differ from those just described in that here the issue is *not* settled by what morality requires. Rather, there are two or more morally open alternatives, and the superior's role is to make his best judgment about which one will best promote the ends of the institute and God's greater glory, and then decide for that alternative. Again, in the first kind of case there was no need for discernment, for the matter is settled at the outset by the requirements of morality. In the second kind of case, the matter is not settled at the outset by the requirements of morality, and so a discernment must be done. Obviously, one can only discern what God wants if the alternatives being considered are morally good. Once the discernment has been done, however, morality reappears. A superior is then obliged to go with the alternative that he has discerned to be the one that will best promote the ends of the institute and God's greater glory.

Of course, no one should obey an immoral order. For example, if he is told to lie, or to disregard an applicable canon, or to do something that a higher superior has forbidden, he should not obey, and superiors do not have the authority to command such things – or even to put a sort of religious social pressure on the man to do such a thing.

But if a superior really is discerning between morally open alternatives, subordinates are morally obliged to obey because they simply *cannot* know that the superior is wrong. This is so because if the options under consideration really are morally acceptable, then no one but the superior (the one discerning) can say what Jesus wants the group to do. Only the one with the responsibility to decide is given the

charism of knowing what should be decided. God does not give people charisms for things they are not called to do. Moreover, only the superior is in a position to see the overall picture – not simply the needs of a particular individual or community, but of the entire province in the contexts of his overall apostolic plan and in light of information to which others do not have full access.

In both kinds of cases we considered, superiors need to know their men and dialogue with them. For a superior will be able to see and help the man see that a matter is settled by the requirements of morality only if he clearly understands the case at hand. And if a matter is not settled by the requirements of morality, the superior will be able to make the best decision about how to proceed only if he understands fully what is at stake, and that will include understanding the concerns of the man who will be expected to obey the command.

Point 3: Those who exercise authority also have to be obedient. This requires that they recognize what *their* responsibilities are. They should be on the lookout for matters that call for cooperation and decision. They should try to see when discernment is needed. And, again, they should know their men, listen to their concerns, and understand situations as well as possible before making decisions. They should make sure that their decisions comport with Church teaching and law, and with what their own superiors reasonably expect of them. And they should never give an order that they are not prepared to follow up on.

Point 4: Men in formation should be encouraged to communicate honestly with their superiors. A man being formed should let the superior truly know him so that he will be in a position to judge and decide properly. A man should not rely on the distinction between external and internal forum as a way of avoiding letting his superiors truly come to know him. Although the distinction is important, we need a more sophisticated understanding than many have, and that understanding should be communicated to the men in formation.

The sacrament of confession with its absolutely binding seal is the only absolutely internal forum. Spiritual direction is of course internal forum, but apart from the sacrament of confession, it is not absolutely internal forum. For example, if someone discloses in spiritual direction that he or someone else has molested a child or is about to cause a grave harm to an innocent person, those matters should be reported to the proper authorities (some state laws require this). This assumes that the man cannot be persuaded to inform the authorities himself and/or cannot be dissuaded from doing harm. But these are extraordinary circumstances and should not be presented in a way that would undermine the trust that men have in the confidentiality of spiritual direction.

Conversations between other formators and men in formation (like the conversations I have with the men who are assigned to me as formation advisees rather than spiritual directees) are in the external forum. Nevertheless, such conversations are marked by a certain degree of confidentiality. I only speak to other formators who need to know about the matters at issue, and I do not speak with just anyone about our conversations. So, there is an element of the internal forum even in these conversations; the men should be aware of this and confident of the level of confidentiality.

The men in formation should be encouraged to be transparent in their dealings with their formators. If a man in formation really has the detachment I spoke of earlier, his attitude will not be that of trying to get through by appearing to be a good religious and hiding his shortcomings. Rather, he will want to be approved for vows and ordination only if God wants this, and he will be perfectly content if it turns out that God has some other plan. He will not think that God somehow needs his duplicity. Rather, his attitude will be that God has called him into this program of formation and will work his will in and through the man's transparent and straightforward cooperation. The man will realize that his obedient and cooperative attitude is his way of obeying God himself.

Point 5: The men in formation should be helped to see that good subordinates do much more than what is strictly required. They strive to act on what they believe the superior intends and not just on his formal directives, and they do so even if they think the superior's will is unlikely to be enforced. Even when they sense that a superior has not carried out his responsibilities as well as he should, they try to avoid resentment and comply without adopting an attitude of opposition. They find it possible to do this by recalling that they are trying to serve God and make their contribution to his ultimate kingdom.

Specific aspects of formation

Point 1: Formation should include adequate emphasis on each of the four pillars of formation—the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral—discussed by John Paul II in *Pastores Dobo Vobis*.

Point 2: Formation should be shaped by the awareness that “spiritual formation is the core that unifies the life” of the religious and priest, “the center around which all the other aspects are integrated” (PPF 115). This requires the cultivation of an intimate relationship with the Holy Trinity and the Blessed Virgin Mary as the affective center of one's life. This point cannot be emphasized enough: the religious should be soaked in prayer, for only then will he have an awakened heart that enables him to respond consistently to the promptings of the Holy Spirit serve the Lord with joy.

Point 3: Distinctive garb should be worn. I'm well aware that this can be a contentious issue, and I also realize that to avoid conflict, many communities have left it up to the individual to decide for himself whether or not he will wear distinctive garb. But bearing witness is central to what we do as religious, and we bear witness not only by what we say but also by how we present ourselves. It's one thing to wear casual clothes for in-house events, and another to do so when it means people won't benefit from our witness. Leaving the matter up to the individual tends to make it very difficult for the man who wants to wear distinctive garb, because he is made to feel as though he wants to draw attention to himself, even if what he really wants is simply to bear witness as a member of a community.

Wearing distinctive religious garb can also help community members avoid acting inappropriately and giving in to temptation, and can even make it less likely that they will be tempted by others, since they themselves and those with whom they interact are reminded of what they stand for simply by seeing the way they present themselves.

Finally, wearing distinctive garb sends a clear message about a community's identity: we know who we are and we are happy to proclaim our commitment. This is appealing to young men who are considering religious life. It does not imply the mentality of recruitment, which I criticized. Rather, it proclaims who you are in a way that helps a young man judge whether or not he is called to share your particular way of bearing witness and living the gospel. When distinctive garb is not worn, young men who might be interested in sharing your way of life may never find themselves attracted enough to begin the discernment process.

Point 4: There should be some framework for activities that the community as a whole and those in formation share as much as possible.

Point 5: Formation should extend beyond the novitiate right through the three years of temporary profession. The men in studies will not be at the provincial house, but the houses to which they are sent should keep the discipline.

Point 6: Fraternal correction, properly practiced, is important. It is a way that community members can help each other become better religious. It requires honesty, courage, humility, and diplomacy. Only a community whose members are close can expect to practice fraternal correction fruitfully. Members who are corrected have to be convinced that those offering correction are genuinely know and love them.

Celibate chastity

Point 1: It's hard to imagine anything more significant for men considering a commitment to a life of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom than to have a proper

appreciation of human sexuality and sexual morality. It's absolutely essential that what they are taught in this area be completely consistent with Church teaching. For the Church's sexual morality is either true or it is not. Either we can or we cannot rely on the Church's teaching in this area.

I realize that this is an area of great controversy, but it won't do just to ignore differences in order to maintain peace. For, if there's disagreement about something so important and essential, then in the deepest sense there *is* no underlying peace in this area, but rather conflict. So, differences in this area need to be resolved.

Church teaching in the area of sexuality is of course rooted in Scripture, and not just in texts identifying certain kinds of sexual activity, like fornication and homosexual acts (and what leads up to them) as always and everywhere wrong. Church teaching is also rooted in the Scriptural understanding of man and woman as complementary and called to exercise their sexual powers only within the context of a committed relationship open to the gift of life. Pope John Paul II beautifully explained this Scriptural basis in his theology of the body. Only if we understand why sex is so good and so important can we see why the Church teaches that grave matter is always at stake when people are sexually active outside of marriage.

I would add that it's very important for those charged with the task of forming the men not only to fully accept Church teaching in the area of sexual morality but to do so with joy. We should consider that teaching not a burden imposed from without to make people feel guilty, but an illuminating gift of truth that Christ gives us through the Church He founded, a gift of truth that directs people toward true happiness and away from what harms their innermost selves. I say this because only when we have this outlook, can we grasp the goodness of what we give up for the sake of the Christ and his kingdom, and help men appreciate the gift of celibacy.

Point 2: We must resist the cultural assumption that normal people cannot live without sex. Celibate chastity really is possible. Some people clearly do live lives of chaste celibacy. Even those who do not have the gift of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom can and do live a life of celibacy for certain portions of their lives. We also know that God never refuses the grace we need to do what he requires of us. (Trent definitively teaches this, and the teaching rings true to all those who realize that God is truly good and not arbitrary or capricious.)

Point 3: Only those who are already peacefully chaste should be allowed to make any profession at all. No one should profess any vow of celibacy unless he is confident that he can live it out with peace. **Point 4:** One can have that confidence only if one has lived a celibate life without any falls for a significant stretch of time, say, for a one-year period. This means without any free choices of grave matter in this area,

including the choice to fornicate, engage in a homosexual act, view pornography, masturbate, or even fully consent to impure thoughts.

I maintain that a period of approximately that length is necessary because it reflects life inasmuch as it includes the experience of all the seasons of the year, times of vacation, challenges and disappointments, fluctuation in apostolic responsibilities, and so forth. If a man does not remain chaste through such a period, how can he have confidence that he not only can live out his vow of chastity, but can do so with peace? Requiring such a period can seem draconian. However, we must bear in mind that what is impossible for us on our own is by no means impossible for God. God gives everyone the grace necessary to avoid falling. (Forgiveness is, of course, readily available for those who fall, but what is at issue here is not forgiveness per se but suitability for vows.) The failure to respond fully to the grace to avoid falls in this area does not necessarily indicate that a man lacks the gift of celibacy for the sake of the kingdom. Nevertheless, the failure to live a celibate life during this period does, at the very least, make it impossible for him to judge here and now whether or not he can live out a vow of celibacy with peace. Only by reflecting on the experience of chaste celibacy can a man say whether or not it was a period of peace.

Point 5: What about men with same-sex attraction? We're all familiar with the Vatican's *Instruction on the criteria of vocational discernment regarding persons with homosexual tendencies*—no doubt a controversial document, but one that should guide our thinking on this matter. Without getting into great detail, I would say that men who experience such attractions need to overcome what the Church calls a disorder (and we all have disorders of various kinds, don't we?) at least to the extent of being able to be peacefully chaste and to sublimate their sexual energy into priestly service. They should have the masculine affect, psychology, and virtues of a good father.

Men with who experience same-sex attraction shouldn't be ashamed of their condition, for no one should be ashamed of anything but his sins. But they also shouldn't be proud of their condition, or feel the need to tell people about it who don't need to know, because, rightly or wrongly, doing so can put people off and prevent people from being open to Jesus ministry through them. And a man should not identify his core self with his same sex attraction. Rather, he should recognize himself as, at the deepest level, a beloved son whom the Father calls, as he calls each of us, to ever deeper healing. And significant healing should have taken place long before he professes vows. One should not expect to experience such healing without cultivating an intimate relationship with the Lord in prayer, for it is in the context of that relationship that one can taste the truth of God's love for him and God's affirmation of his masculinity. (For more information on this topic, consult Regeneration Ministries on the Internet for articles by Alan Medinger.)

Point 6: The formation environment should be one in which a well-integrated heterosexual male will feel comfortable.

Point 7: Those conducting formation must be peacefully chaste themselves. Otherwise they cannot honestly bear personal witness to the possibility and joy of living chastely. They also cannot credibly discourage men from valuing appearance over reality – from seeking to appear virtuous rather than actually being virtuous.

Point 8: The sexual problems of candidates should be properly assessed and addressed. Some people's sexual problems are such that they should never be accepted even if they fully resolve those problems. The most obvious example is a man who has ever abused or seduced a minor. The reason he should never be accepted is not simply that it is against USCCB policy. The reason is that formators need to have utter confidence that this man will never do such a thing again. That confidence is lacking if good parents would not be completely at peace if for some reason their child was alone with the man. It is impossible to have that level of confidence if a man abused or seduced a minor even once.

Some people's problems will need to be more fully resolved before they can be accepted. Others may be accepted if there is reasonable hope that their problems can be resolved, perhaps with the help of a 12-step program, well before the profession of vows. Anyone involved in such a program should have strong grounds for confidence that what they share will remain confidential.