**Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in Seminary Admissions** by *Committee on Clergy Consecrated Life and Vocations. USCCB Washington DC, April 2015*

Note: ***I have added the words “religious life” since this document has been prepared with priesthood in mind***.

To support the implementation of the directives contained in the Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood 1 ( Guidelines ) that were issued by the Congregation for Catholic Education in June 2008, and the pertinent sections of the Program of Priestly Formation, Fifth Edition (PPF), (*Jeffrey’s note: this year 2022 the sixth edition of the PPF was published*) the Committee on Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops provides the following guidelines for bishops, major superiors, and seminary rectors, when developing policies on the use of psychological evaluations in seminary admissions.

**The Purposes of a Psychological Evaluation for Seminary Admissions**

Psychological assessments help the major superior, and the formation director gain a greater understanding of developmental, psychological, and other personal factors at work in the life of an applicant and of how these may strengthen or hinder an authentic vocational discernment. Psychological assessment by professional clinicians provides critical information that otherwise might not be obtained in the course of admissions interviews. Sometimes the psychological report is able to articulate important areas that need to be more fully screened, or it may identify features that warrant serious concern or further discernment by those making the final decisions about admission of the candidate. The process can also provide the applicant with knowledge of his own areas of strength and potential growth as well as some of the actual limits of his own freedom to hear clearly God’s call.

A thorough assessment can provide significant information for the applicant about: a) his level of intellectual functioning, b) the presence of acute mental distress, and c) the characteristic ways he relates to himself and to others. Psychological assessment serves in a supportive role to provide greater clarity about an applicant, so that those responsible for the admissions process have a fuller understanding of the applicant besides the many other components of the application process.

Finally, psychological assessment can serve as tool to help confirm evidence in support of conclusions based on the entire admissions process, especially if there is a divergence of views during the screening process.

**Suggested Components of a Psychological Assessment and Report for Admissions**

Psychological assessment seeks to understand the intellectual, emotional, and psychological functioning of the applicant through the use of psychometric measures; it is the mental equivalent of a physical evaluation. To assist those responsible for judging the suitability of the applicant for seminary formation.

The following components of a psychological evaluation and written report would be especially instructive:

1. Clinical interview (a structured interview of the applicant that is focused specifically on his mental health history)

2. Psychosocial and Psychosexual Interview (an interview that generally covers “birth to the present” of the applicant) remember earlier on, I spoke of identity in all its facets?

3. Intelligence Assessment (the applicant’s current cognitive functioning) This may or may not be necessary if candidates already have been in educational programs beyond high school

4. Psychological Testing (structured written, visual, or verbal measures administered to assess the cognitive and emotional functioning of the applicant)

5. Discussion Section (a written psychological assessment report that includes an overall summary, important areas of the applicant’s past that continue to inform his present emotional and relational life, and identification of the applicant’s strengths and areas for growth)

6. Recommendations (an assessment report that offers the applicant and admission personnel, concrete suggestions to help him move toward his greatest potential)

7. Oral Feedback Session (a meeting of the psychologist with the applicant and some admission person to discuss the results of the psychological evaluation)

In presenting observations, it is helpful if the psychologist translates psychological vocabulary into language understandable to both the applicant and to the admissions personnel, as well as to the major superior. In addition, the reporting should demonstrate cultural sensitivity to Catholic anthropology, the ethnic background of the applicant, and the demands of eventual formation for religious life.

**Contraindications**

In the end, the assessment will be most helpful if it identifies the positive traits the applicant possesses for a mature and healthy discernment of a calling to the religious life. On the other hand, there are those traits that work against someone journeying toward a mature and healthy discernment. I will refer to these as “contraindications.” You, as admission personnel, are to articulate for psychologists those human traits and qualities that contradict an authentic vocation to religious life/the priesthood.

Without attempting an exhaustive list, the following contraindications are provided as a guide to psychologists as they write their report on the applicant’s suitability: If you go back to the list of dispositions toward affective maturity it will help understand this list of contraindications here. The list below, refers to traits that work against the development of the dispositions of affective maturity.

1. Inability to be formed (blocks to growth and conversion); rigidity or inflexibility that precludes openness to guidance and influence

2. Psychopathology that cannot be managed easily with medication and that would disrupt or preclude healthy ministry (Depression, ADD, OCD etc)

3. Areas of serious emotional vulnerability, given the demands of religious life, priestly responsibilities, celibacy, and life as a public figure and man of communion

4. Personality traits and disorders inconsistent with or compromising healthy ministry

5. Pervasive developmental disorders that may lead to behaviors incompatible with the human formation traits and characteristics of healthy, religious life, priestly relationships, and ministry

6. Relations with self or others that are so damaged or shame-based that the person cannot relate or assume healthy leadership; insecure attachments are a risk for boundary violations

7. Significant troubles with addictive disorders or habits (drugs, gambling, porn)

8. Activity or inclination toward sexual activity with a minor or other traits that might indicate the person could be a harm to minors

9. Psycho-sexual disorders. History of psychopathic deviance, criminality, and unethical, illegal, and unconscionable behavior

11. Multiple physical and medical concerns that significantly impair the ability of the candidate to function responsibly

12. Intellectual limitations that would hinder either higher academic studies or the navigation of the complexities of leadership in community and parish life

13. Severe learning disorders and intellectual disability compounded with lack of intellectual curiosity. It may be discerned that an applicant needs some counseling and therapeutic services to address matters that are not entirely disqualifying for admission to the seminary.

The timely discernment of and attention to such problems that would hinder the vocational journey is of great benefit to the applicant, to the Congregation and to the Church. The report of the psychological assessment may recommend the postponement of admittance to the formation program, so that adequate therapy or counseling may take place. This is especially true when the applicant would require a significant duration (e.g., a year or more), frequency (e.g., multiple times per week), or intensity of therapy, which would limit the applicant’s ability to engage fully in the formation program. On the other hand, the report may recommend, for unresolved issues that do not require extensive therapy, the admission of the applicant while such therapy continues.

**Desired Qualities of the Psychological Professional Who Conducts Evaluations for Seminary**

Admissions Professionals in the field of psychology are educated in human behavior. They are taught to understand the unique emotional and relational components of human development in assessing applicants to the religious life. Their primary role is to provide information to the major superior, who along with the applicant is involved in the discernment process. Each formation program is to develop its own guidelines for psychologists. It is especially important to engage professionals who are licensed and have the appropriate clinical experience and expertise to conduct the testing and evaluation process and to provide appropriate interpretation.

Clinical experts are ethically bound to address only the areas in which they are properly educated, supervised, trained, experienced, and competent. They are to be outside consultants and **not part of the formation team**. It is reasonable to expect that the professional chosen for the evaluation of an applicant would be able to demonstrate an understanding and knowledge of Catholic tradition and ecclesiastical culture; be familiar with the criteria for inclusion and exclusion to Redemptorist initial formation; and evidence a respect for a vocation to the Catholic religious life and priesthood. It is critical, for example, that the psychological professional’s evaluation of the applicant for the formation program adequately reflects the Catholic understanding of the human person as:

 1. Transcendent being, created in the image of God.

2. Who is a unity of body and soul, rational, real, and relational

3. Whose flourishing will be realized in a life of committed self- giving through religious life or the priesthood

4. Whose happiness cannot be reduced to the mere satisfaction of needs.

Within this context, it is especially helpful that the professional is someone who is familiar with the Catholic teaching on the nature of religious life and the priesthood and have a clear understanding of what chaste celibacy for the sake of the Kingdom means. Without these understandings, the clinician may limit the scope of the interviews and may not be able to provide relevant feedback or appropriate recommendations about the test data obtained.

Psychological assessment is not a value-free endeavor. As was already stated above, culture, ethnicity, and race influence the perception, thoughts, behavior, and beliefs of both the evaluator and the applicant. The professional must be able to interpret correctly the results of psychological testing in light of the cultural background of the applicant. It is fair to say that, most of the psychological measures currently available to the professional were developed and originally scaled based on the responses of Caucasian US citizens as the control group for the development of interpretive norms. Using the same tests on applicants from other cultures or countries can sometimes distort the results. It is especially important that the psychologist be familiar with any cultural factors that may affect the reliability of the assessment findings. I do not know if there are any psychological tests available that were developed in Africa and even so, the cultural differences in Africa are very wide.

**Privacy and Confidentiality**

The natural right to safeguard one’s privacy and the right to a good reputation means that while a psychological evaluation may be necessary in assessing the applicant’s suitability for admission to the formation program, no one can be forced or coerced into undergoing psychological evaluation that violates an individual’s privacy. Therefore, as the Guidelines of the Congregation for Catholic Education make clear, before any attempt is made at undertaking a psychological evaluation, the applicant must give explicit, free, and informed consent.

Admissions personnel must have an articulated policy about how applicants are to be informed in advance of the nature of the process (what is involved in the interviews, standardized tests, etc.); who will be conducting the evaluation (the name and qualifications of the professionals involved); how the information will be used (to whom the report will be shown and its role in the admissions process); and how the information might be used in the future (in providing remedial assistance if the applicant is not immediately accepted or in assisting with the future formation of the seminarian who is accepted).

While the applicant retains the right to privacy, the Congregation and the Church also have the right and responsibility to choose only suitable applicants for admission to the formation program. This would seem to require a determination not only of the absence of serious defects but also of the presence of positive indicators of the candidate’s psychological health.

The psychological evaluation is therefore a tool to assist in such an inquiry, and it is lawful, provided that the applicant’s right to privacy is not illegitimately violated in the process.

A proper balance between the applicant’s right to safeguard his privacy and the obligation of the Church to judge a man’s suitability can be reached if the following additional principles are applied:

1. The motivations for requiring the psychological evaluation and the ways in which that requirement is communicated to the applicant are done in a manner that engenders trust and cooperation rather than fear and apprehension.

2. The applicant is able to approach a psychological expert who is either chosen from among those indicated (when this is possible) by the vocation director or chosen by the applicant and accepted by the vocation director.

3. The vocation director observes a careful vigilance that protects the privacy and reputation of the applicants.

4. Clear policies are enunciated concerning who will have access to any of the admissions materials, under what conditions, and the degree of confidentiality to which those persons are bound regarding the information, including the civil obligation they may have as mandated reporters of child abuse or neglect. (US law; it is worthwhile to find out what are your responsibilities by law regarding reporting incidence of child abuse)

5. There is a policy regarding how long records are kept, including after the non-admission of an applicant or the departure of the accepted applicant from the formation program.

**Role of Psychological Information in Formation**

The findings of the entire admissions process, if the applicant is accepted by the admission board, are to be shared with the formation team in a timely manner. The formation director may decide to share this material, including the psychological evaluation report, with the appropriate formation faculty. This report or an abbreviated version thereof may contain significant elements gleaned from the full psychological assessment but should avoid the most intimate details; it is appropriate that it include the assessor’s recommendations for the applicant to succeed in the formation program.

It is important for the formation program to articulate in its policy how this material is to be kept confidential and with whom it can be legitimately shared. In addition, this communication of the assessment findings may be made only when there is prior, explicit, free, and informed consent given by the applicant prior to the psychological evaluation.

Some ways in which the psychological assessment can be helpful to the formation team include the following:

1. To identify the presence of fundamental markers of human maturity

2. To highlight strengths and internal resources available for formation work and future pastoral ministry

3. To identify vulnerabilities that need to be addressed in the course of formation

4. To confront the candidate with reliable information about himself that he may be tempted to resist

5. To note factors that will influence how formation staff can most effectively work with the candidate and offer the support he needs

6. To help integrate the dimensions of formation, especially in reference to human formation, such as the importance of affective maturity for intellectual, spiritual, community, and pastoral formation

Religious life and priestly formation require the candidate to face the difficulties inherent in the development of moral virtues and the contraindications between his conscious aspirations and the life he actually lives. The entire formation team is there to assist him in this process. Thus, the psychological report can be of great assistance to the candidate and to those responsible for his formation. Obviously, the material above regarding privacy and confidentiality apply at the level of formation just as they do at the admissions level. Some additional principles may assist the formation program in this regard:

1. The candidate is himself a necessary and irreplaceable agent responsible for his own formation.

2. The candidate works to acquire the necessary affective maturity and training in freedom that is required of him in response to his vocation.

3. The formation atmosphere between the candidate and the formators is marked by openness and transparency.

4. Formators guarantee an atmosphere of trust for the candidate to provide appropriate self-disclosure and participate with conviction in the work of discernment and accompaniment, offering his own convinced and heartfelt cooperation.

**Retention of Records**

The retention of pre-admission psychological evaluation reports may become an issue especially with regard to the candidate’s early departure from the program of formation, due either to a voluntary withdrawal or involuntary dismissal. If a candidate was dismissed from a program of religious life or priestly formation, his application to return to the same or another formation program may not be considered for at least two years following dismissal. If a former candidate wishes to reapply after a voluntary departure, sufficient time must be given for an evaluation of his prior background and his new application. The length of time is to be determined according to the circumstances of each individual.

The departure of a candidate suggests the necessity to retain the original report of the psychological evaluation and any other observations pertaining to its application during his time in the formation program. The formation director is ultimately responsible for safeguarding these records. Generally speaking, no release of information is to be made without the consent of the candidate, unless legitimately ordered by a court of competent jurisdiction. Since there may be applicable civil laws concerning the confidentiality of a psychological evaluation, whoever has responsibility for retaining the records would be advised to consult civil legal counsel before any information is released.