

Seminarian screening aims to prevent abuse

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SANTA CLARA, Calif. -- When the U.S. bishops adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People in 2002 to put an end to the sexual abuse of children by priests and others in the church, they committed to using "adequate screening and evaluative techniques in deciding the fitness of candidates for ordination."

Such screening most often includes psychological testing and analysis, something that psychologist Thomas Plante has been doing for dioceses and religious communities for 25 years.

Psychological screening can't provide a 100 percent guarantee that once ordained, a man won't subsequently abuse children, said Plante, who has screened nearly 700 seminarians. But it goes a long way toward ensuring that only men who are emotionally healthy and least likely to engage in aberrant sexual behavior are admitted to the priesthood.

"Through screening we can make sure that anyone with a predilection to harm kids is prevented from entering ministry," said Plante, a professor of psychology and director of the Spirituality and Health Institute at Santa Clara University here.

Plante was part of a recent university conference on sexual abuse in the Catholic church held to mark the 10th anniversary of U.S. bishops' child protection charter, commonly called the Dallas Charter.

Plante, who is also adjunct clinical professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University School of Medicine, likens the screening to the medical tools a physician uses to help identify health risks. "It's like a psychological x-ray," he said.

He's looking for factors that would make the candidate unfit for priesthood or religious life -- violations of emotional boundaries; lack of impulse control; over-controlled hostility; addiction to drugs, alcohol, pornography or gambling; poor social skills; and depression.

After analyzing the results of standard psychological tests, Plante meets with the candidate to review the findings and to discuss their implications for ministry. He delves deeper and looks for deviations that didn't surface during the testing. "They tell me stuff," Plante told *NCR*. In one case, he recalled, the candidate looked great on paper, but during their conversation it became clear the man was not psychologically fit for ministry.

Since many abusers have also been sexually abused, he inquires about whether that experience is part of a candidate's history.

Plante delivers his assessment to the major superior or seminary rector, but "I never tell them who to take and who not to take," he said.

In one instance about 15 years ago, his evaluation was ignored and a man was ordained who later went on to

abuse children. "His file showed I'd warned about this," said Plante, whose books include *Sin Against the Innocents: Sexual Abuse by Priests and the Role of the Catholic Church* and *Bless Me Father For I Have Sinned: Perspectives on Sexual Abuse Committed by Roman Catholic Priests*.

The U.S. bishops' revised Program of Priestly Formation, adopted in June 2005, states that a candidate should have a "proven capacity to function competently in ordinary human situations without need to do extensive therapeutic or remedial work to be fully functioning," as well as a psychosexual maturity "commensurate with chronological age."

According to a 2009 study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 81 percent of seminary rectors and 77 percent of diocesan vocation directors said the assessment of such psychosexual development was taken "very much" into consideration when admitting a candidate to priestly formation.

Additionally, 74 percent of rectors and 80 percent of vocation directors weighed "very much" the candidate's capacity to be celibate, and 63 percent of rectors and 53 percent of vocation directors said the candidate's sexual experience was a very serious consideration.

Eighty percent of the psychologists participating in the CARA study said the candidate's capacity for empathy should be considered very highly, but only 54 percent of rectors and 51 percent of vocation directors ranked it as a high priority even though the Program of Priestly Formation lists "genuine empathy" as a key component of a suitable candidate.

Studies by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice into the nature, scope and causes of clergy abuse found that priests who had been treated for sexual abuse of minors exhibited intimacy deficits, often having "emotional congruence" with teens, and manifested problems with stress, obesity, alcohol and gambling -- all risks factors that Plante is keen to uncover.

Plante said one of the major challenges today is how to effectively screen non-English-speaking candidates, as well as priests ordained outside of the United States who want to come here to study or work.

To start, many countries do not have criminal records that can be checked and psychological testing is nonexistent or less thorough than in the U.S. This reality, Plante said, is a "fatal flaw" in the assessment process of international priests.

About 50 percent of the newly identified abusers in recent years were seminary trained and ordained in foreign countries that do not have the same formation programs and screening used in the U.S., said Plante, who serves on the U.S. bishops' National Review Board.

For men born outside of the United States but raised and educated here, a "reasonable and appropriate evaluation" is possible, Plante said, as long as the assessment takes cultural differences into consideration.

Plante recalled a young man whose tests showed a high level of defensiveness. However, when Plante talked with him, he discovered that it was not culturally acceptable for the man to answer certain questions easily. "We have testing norms, but we must view them cautiously because the test results could be culturally or language driven," Plante said of working with foreign-born candidates.

Some screening tests are available in Spanish, and Plante refers Spanish-speaking candidates to professionals he knows can do the assessments. But, he said, psychologists fluent in other languages are not likely to be skilled in the kind of testing and interviewing needed to identify issues related to sexual abuse and ministry. For example, "there is nothing in Vietnamese and that's a problem," he said. "We do our evaluations with one hand tied behind our back. We don't have a solution for this yet." As a result, sometimes he must say, "I'm not as

confident as I would like to be."

Because many of the abusers committed their first criminal sex act at least one year after ordination, Plante reiterated that seminary education must include serious focus on psychosexual development and how to maintain appropriate boundaries and impulse controls. And, he said, seminary officials must remain constantly alert to signs of potential deviancy, including attraction to pornography.

Likewise, he said, the entire Catholic community needs to remain vigilant about adherence to safe environment guidelines that make it nearly impossible for potential abusers to gain inappropriate access to children.

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