

**Panel 6 – The Formation of Clergy and Religious
Discussion Points**

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1. Brendan Lovett, a Columban priest, once wrote, “The Church is not saying that to be a priest one has to be celibate. It could never rightly ask this. What it is saying is that only those who have first discerned the vocation to celibacy, may present for priesthood.” This provocative declaration takes us to the crux of the discussion about the selection and formation of candidates: How is the vocation to celibacy discerned, and how is this discernment presented as a criterion for selection of candidates? There is a danger of continuing to ordain and profess people who have never discerned whether they are vocationally celibate or not. They simply enter into a celibate commitment because it is a necessary part of 'the package.' These people can, thus, be committed to lives of quiet despair and frustration.
2. In formation and in ministerial life, the imagination of celibacy is foundational. How do people understand celibacy? What model is presented? From what model do people live? Presenting authentic, life-giving models for celibate is critical. Unhealthy models of celibacy can exacerbate sexual pathology; healthy models can identify and attend to sexual pathology.
3. At the core of celibate formation must be the enlargement of the person's capacity for authentic, lasting and healthy relationships, marked by intimacy and freedom. The sociology of institution, if is not understood and attended, may contribute to the isolation of individuals leading to the fragmentation of an individual's sexuality. The challenge is to imagine paradigms and structures of formation appropriate to people's experience.
4. Positively,
 - a. Today, seminaries and houses of Religious formation today are less regimented and less apt to dichotomise spirituality and sexuality.
 - b. The personal and the human are much more to the fore in the structures and content of formation.
 - c. Available resources, both in literature and in skill, are much more numerous and developed.
 - d. The age of entrants suggests a greater degree of sexual experience in candidates than in the past.
 - e. The private forum of counselling and spiritual direction is much better able to hold and to explore the sexual complexity of people's lives.
 - f. There is a large percentage of formators working tirelessly within the structures to which they have been appointed to enable and to assist people's human and vocational growth.
5. Notwithstanding,
 - a. Purposeful formation to celibate sexuality continues to run on the occasional discussion, or evening lecture, or once-in-awhile weekend seminar. When I began work in Australian houses of formation in the 1990s it was not unusual to meet candidates who had been in seminaries for six or seven years, or in Religious congregations for twice that time, who had never had input.
 - b. Formation to celibate sexuality has moved from a pre-Conciliar situation of silence about the matter itself. However, for some decades it moved to a new arena of silence: the private forum of spiritual direction and therapy. There can be a presumption about both the quality of accompaniment. Personal accompaniment, while an essential dimension of formation to celibacy, is insufficient on its own.
6. Two current approaches to formation can be identified:
 - a. The institutional demands the retention and development of a Tridentine model where the formation to orthodoxy is paramount, running on the Counter-Reformation model established in the 16th century to equip an hitherto uneducated clergy in the face of a hostile culture. The purpose is primarily the education to 'orthodoxy.'. As long as seminaries are principally Tridentine in their structure and content, the Church may have theologically literate priests, but priests struggling to be emotionally and sexually literate.
 - b. The second trend, itself still encased within intellectual formation, moves toward a new model in which the formation to 'orthopraxis' is at the fore.
7. Formation to priestly life is, in practice, primarily a matter of intellectual formation. Human and ministerial formation is squeezed into overcrowded academic programmes. This dominant focus on intellectual formation makes for long years of initial formation. There is a price to pay for this length:
 - a. Candidates drift into a kind of passivity peculiar to long-term formation; a kind of infantilisation becomes possible; clericalism, as an attitude of entitlement and status, emerges.
 - b. Ordination or Profession becomes the goal of formation, the culmination of the years of study,

rather than a life of actual ministry or religious community.

8. We are presented with a low number of priestly candidates and candidates for Religious Life. We are also presented with a group of people for whom sexual integration is a particular and painful and mostly secret struggle.
 - a. Given the pandemic breakdown of relationship in society, and the increasing sexualization of unresolved tensions in society
 - b. We should not think that younger people today are more sexually integrated, even though they may be experienced in sex.
 - c. Candidates may struggle with emotional literacy and a compartmentalised sexuality which can be dissociated from their spirituality.

9. We have yet to engage the challenges posed by the ever increasing and particular multicultural constitution of seminary life and Religious formation.

10. On this basis, the following recommendations are made:
 - a. There can be no change without a shift in paradigms. Until we begin to imagine seminaries primarily as places of ministerial formation, we can expect dysfunctional patterns within ministry to emerge. Theological education itself needs to be undertaken in pre-seminary contexts, thus enabling a shorter but more intense seminary period principally dedicated to the development of human, spiritual and ministerial skill. We need to be working towards de-institutionalising the environment of formation so as to enable normal and healthy relational lives to develop as naturally as possible.
 - b. Too much emphasis can be placed on initial formation rather than the possibilities present in viable structures of ongoing formation. Shorter periods of initial formation are possible if they are supported and developed by regular in-servicing. Newly ordained priests should be required to complete an annual six to eight week ongoing formation programme for the first five or six years of their ministry. Given the low numbers of ordinations this could be done nationally.
 - c. A national charter for seminaries, ascribed to by all members of the Conference of Bishops, is required which outlines basic priorities in formation, expectations regarding the suitability of candidates, the training and ongoing formation of staff, protocols for transfer of students from one seminary to another or from a Religious institute to a seminary, the minimum discernment processes required for pre-entry and pre-ordination.
 - d. The development of a public, comprehensive, systematic and sustained pedagogy on celibate sexuality should be required of all clerical and religious candidates alike. Such a programme requires at least a four semester course unit in which the anthropological, psychological, sociological and theological dimensions of celibate sexuality are fully treated. It also needs to include the dimension of personal accompaniment with registered supervisors. Such a pedagogy might begin to forge a new imagination of celibacy that is both meaningful and attractive and without which people will continue to be burdened and frustrated by inadequate images of celibacy.
 - e. Pre-seminary and pre-novitiate processes and structures require careful examination and development. Inadequate discernment in this phase generates problems in the processes of discernment right through to Ordination or Profession.
 - i. Older candidates, i.e., men and women over the age of 30, should be preferred.
 - ii. Psychological screening, though a critical and essential part of the process of discernment in selection of candidates, is not sufficient. However, this instrument can be fraught with ambiguity. Firstly, it is limited in the scope of what it can actually evaluate in the inner life of the subject. Secondly, results of screening are often in the hands of superiors and bishops not professionally trained or well informed in the human sciences. Thirdly, it is of little benefit to either the candidates themselves or their formation personnel unless resources and structures are in place to process, develop and integrate the initial material. Initial psychological assessment must be regarded first and foremost as one tool within a much larger context of formation. No amount of initial vocational assessment will, in itself, eliminate the possibility of abuse occurring in the Church in the future
 - f. Greater attention needs to be given to pre-ordination or pre-Profession discernment processes, including renewed psychological evaluation prior to these times of decisive commitment.