

# THE PATH OF PRIESTLY FORMATION

The journey of priesthood generally does not begin with a sudden epiphany nor does it end on the day of a man's ordination. It is a process of discovery, discernment, formation, and continued enrichment so that the man who enters this vocation is capable of responding to God's invitation. The following information is intended to serve as a tool for men who are considering the priesthood and to educate everyone as to how the Church accomplishes the important work of preparing and supporting priests.

**1**  
**DISCOVERY**  
 BAPTISM:  
 THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Considering the possibility of priesthood for many seminarians and priests began when they were boys or young men; some were older when they discovered the possibility to serve in this vocation. But much of the invitation, regardless of one's age, is found in a number of experiences that take place in the family, the parish or a catechetical setting. Whether it is a married couple who models the Christian faith and encourages their children to think about a religious vocation or it's a special presentation that is offered in grade school, many priests have cited these as foundational in "planting a seed." For others, it's a matter of personal experiences with holy and joyful priests who make the priesthood attractive. It may also be a fellow parishioner who suggests that a gifted man ought to think about the priesthood. Regardless of each man's reason, it seems the most influential factors for a man to embrace this possibility are: family support, priestly example, a personal invitation or a vocation program in childhood or adolescence. The idea is that a "culture for vocations" should be promoted in all areas of ecclesial life. The Diocesan Vocation Office and seminaries of the Catholic Diocese of Cleveland offer a number of programs and opportunities for young men to discover the possibility of priesthood and young adults to think about religious vocations. Some of these initiatives are:

- Annual Vocation Awareness Week observances
- Discovery Days (grades 6-8)
- Parish Vocation programs (any grade/age level)
- Youth Ministry programs (presentations or visits to the seminary)
- High School Visit Days (arranged by schools and Seminary Vocation Office)
- Young Adult Conferences (workshops or panels)
- *Where Are You Going?* Retreats (for men and women 18-40 years old)
- Seminarian Outreach Sunday (October)

**2**  
**DISCERNMENT**  
 HONEST DIALOGUE  
 WITH THE CHURCH

One of the most serious misunderstandings about any call to religious vocations is that it is merely one's personal decision. While one may have an inner inclination toward a vocation, discernment cannot happen on one's own. Rather, discernment requires potential candidates to be in prayerful dialogue with God and with the Church. This dialogue is especially important because today *"there is...a certain tendency to view the bond between human beings and God in an individualistic and self-centered way, as if God's call reached the individual by a direct route, without in any way passing through the community"* (*Pastores dabo vobis*, no. 37). In his discernment, a man does not begin by applying to the seminary. He would first work with a vocation director to help him seek personal clarity through a number of conversations, reflections and experiences offered to him. The director and the discernor may embark on this path for several months or even years. As the man addresses significant questions and concerns for himself, the vocation director assists him by equipping him with healthy tools for discernment. The director would also serve him by identifying traits and qualities that suggest the possibility of priesthood or may raise significant concerns that suggest otherwise. The relationship between the man and the director is built on trust and openness to God's divine will. The following programs and opportunities are offered to men in the Diocese of Cleveland who are discerning with the Coordinator of Vocations for Diocesan Priesthood:

- Borromeo Vocation Awareness Weekend (overnight experience for high school jrs. and srs.)
- Saint Mary Vocation Awareness Weekend (overnight experience for college or older men)
- Dinners with the Bishop (an evening at the seminary with Bishop Lennon for dinner and conversation)
- Crossing the Threshold Series (monthly evening program for men 22+ years old to discuss relevant topics about priesthood)
- Seminary Visits (arranged between prospective candidate and director)

**3**  
**SEMINARY  
 FORMATION**  
 CASTING THE NET

With the satisfaction of the vocation director, those men who are convinced they are ready to continue discerning God's call in a formal setting are encouraged to apply to the diocesan seminary. It is in this context that the man's prayerful dialogue with God and with the Church is expanded to include a community of fellow discerners under the supervision of a formation team who assists the diocesan bishop (or religious superior). With the direction of the U.S. Bishops' *Program for Priestly Formation* (PPF), the seminary helps each candidate grow in the areas of human, intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral formation. Each seminarian receives the service of a faculty advisor, spiritual director, and a formation team who oversee the growth and maturation of each candidate as he progresses. It is important to stress that the evaluation of each candidate greatly depends on his age, background, and level within the formation program. The seminary journey is a process of experiences over a number of years before the candidate and the bishop reach the conclusion that he is being called to the priesthood. Equally important is the man's freedom to leave the seminary at anytime during this process without feelings of shame or disappointment. The man who is ready to enter the seminary receives an application packet from the Vocation Director. Depending on his academic background, a man will either apply to Borromeo Seminary (the undergraduate program) or Saint Mary Seminary (the graduate program). Men who have a Bachelor of Arts or Science (or equivalent) but do not have the requisite undergraduate philosophy and religious studies coursework will participate in a pre-theology program sponsored by the graduate school. The process of application for all diocesan candidates include:

- Thorough reporting of all personal information
- A personal biography
- Letters of recommendation
- Academic transcripts from all prior institutions
- Physician's report
- Psychological screening and reports
- Criminal background check
- Interview with admissions board
- Sacramental records

**4**  
**ON-GOING  
 FORMATION**  
 A LIFE-LONG PROCESS

Formation is an ongoing and essential component for a priest to be a man of communion and affective shepherd for God's people. *"The fact is that God continues to call and send forth, revealing his saving plan in the historical development of the priest's life and the life of the Church and of society. It is in this perspective that the meaning of ongoing formation emerges. Permanent formation is necessary in order to discern and follow the constant call or will of God"* (*Pastores dabo vobis*, no. 70). Hopefully, as a man moves through his graduate studies and years of formation, he properly perceives ordination not as an end but, rather, as a pivotal experience in his journey of personal formation. The seminary, with all requirements in place and competent personnel who are ready to assist in priestly formation, must declaratively state its inability to prepare a priest for every possible demand placed upon him in ministry. The administration can only help each candidate to establish future habits of study, prayer, and formational involvement well beyond ordination. This includes the deepening of his human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral skills required throughout his entire life of active ministry. So important is ongoing formation, the Church prescribes policies at the universal and local levels in a spirit of safeguarding this vital aspect of a priest's growth. Some of these policies address the priest's need for continuing education, retreat experiences, spiritual enrichment, pastoral skills enhancement, and a variety of opportunities that will benefit the entire Church community. The Diocese of Cleveland provides these and other opportunities for each priest:

- Mentoring programs (especially for newly ordained priests and new pastors)
- Pastor training seminars (available to priests discerning pastorates)
- Annual clergy convocation (usually held in October)
- An allowance for continuing education conferences and/or material
- Regular workshops and programs
- Days for annual retreat experiences
- Days of recollection
- Presbyteral Day of Sanctification and Chrism Mass with the bishop (Tuesday of Holy Week)
- Sabbatical leaves (arranged by an individual priest and the diocesan bishop). *According to diocesan policy, each priest is annually allotted five days away from his assignment for a retreat experience and five days for continuing education.*