

‘Affective maturity’: Cornerstone of a healthy priest

— Twenty-seventh in a series. —

In the spring of 1992, following the fall 1990 Vatican Synod of Bishops that addressed “the formation of priests in the circumstances of the present day,” Pope John Paul II issued the apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (“I Will Give You Shepherds”), in which he outlined four major areas of formation for priests: human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral.

All are necessary, the pope said, but he gave particular emphasis to the first:

“The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation.’ This statement by the synod fathers expresses not only a fact which reason brings to our consideration every day and which experience confirms, but a requirement which has a deeper and specific motivation in the very nature of the priest and his ministry” (n. 43).

Pastores Dabo Vobis detailed a broad range of qualities necessary in the human formation of a priest, notes Msgr. Helmut Hefner, president and rector of St. John’s Seminary in Camarillo, where these four major areas are often referred to as “pillars” of formation.

And as the pope suggested, the human component — particularly in the context of preventing the sexual abuse minors — is paramount at St. John’s, even before a candidate for priesthood is admitted to the seminary, Msgr. Hefner points out.

“We pay close attention to the human formation of the individual, both in the application process and in the admissions process, as well as here at St. John’s,” says Msgr. Hefner, ordained from St. John’s in 1969 and its rector since 2001. “John Paul used the phrase ‘affective maturity,’ which he called ‘the result of an education in true and responsible love.’ We use the term ‘psychosexual maturity,’ but both reflect a stable, firmly grounded sexual life. That is what we seek to determine in the interview process of candidates before they even set foot in the door.”

In this process — including interviews with Vocations Office directors and seminary officials as well as staff psychologists — “you weed out those who are likely to be sexual offenders because you discover the warning signals: for example, an unclear sexual orientation, an interest in juvenile or non-age-appropriate activities, a lack of adequate peer relationships, whether that person was himself a victim. These are among the indicators of psychosexual immaturity, and psychosexual immaturity is present in those who are sexual abusers.”

This process has been in place at St. John’s since before 2002, as has the presentation of lectures and workshops on knowing “appropriate boundaries.” Since then, when the sexual abuse of minors by clergy became headline news across the U.S. Msgr. Hefner agreed that, “there has been a tremendous leap in

consciousness by students and faculty here of the problem.”

Thus, St. John’s performs background and fingerprinting checks on prospective candidates before admission. During the school year the seminary requires VIRTUS® Awareness training for students and priest faculty (those who are or may be working with minors), and the subject of sexual abuse is addressed in class.

Additionally, “once they are here, we pay attention to how they relate with their peers,” says Msgr. Hefner, “because people need solid, healthy friendships with their peers to handle the pressures of leading a celibate life.”

Students are required to meet regularly with their spiritual directors and formation advisers, and encouraged to be open about difficulties they face in any area, whether it be coursework, family issues or spiritual or emotional distress.

“We have a staff psychologist, and if a student has an issue — on anything — he can go see him,” says Msgr. Hefner. “Because what is at stake is the effective preaching of the Gospel, and before you can be an effective, spiritual, pastoral minister, you need to be an emotionally healthy human being.”

The results of more intense scrutiny have been encouraging. “In the last 20 years, we have ordained 155 priests for the Los Angeles Archdiocese, and of those, two have been accused of sexually abusing a minor,” says Msgr. Hefner. “Of course, even one is too many, but this statistic shows that something we are doing here is working well.”

Msgr. Hefner adds he is especially encouraged by the responses he receives from prospective priesthood candidates to his question, “Why are you applying at this time when there is so much negative PR about the church, about priests?”

“I receive some very edifying stories from these students,” he observes, “especially when you consider what they are leaving behind. In many cases, they have good careers, good homes, good salaries in order to pursue what they believe to be their call to the priesthood. They know the damaging effect this has had on the church, but they want to be part of the solution, not the problem, and they don’t want to see this repeated.”

Such response, he adds, makes Seminary and Vocations officials more determined to properly ensure that each candidate is formed well in those “four areas” addressed 14 years ago by Pope John Paul.

“If you don’t have a psychosexually healthy human being,” Msgr. Hefner says, “you cannot have a good priest.”

This weekly series of feature stories, commentary and analysis is compiled and edited by an advisory group to the Media Relations Office of the Archdiocese, through which the articles are distributed.