

## **A Proposed Psychological Assessment Protocol for Applicants to Religious Life in the Roman Catholic Church**

**Thomas G. Plante<sup>1,2,3</sup> and Marcus T. Boccaccini<sup>1</sup>**

---

*This paper proposes a psychological assessment protocol for applicants to religious life in the Roman Catholic church. While most Catholic religious orders, seminaries, and dioceses require applicants to complete some type of psychological evaluation prior to entrance into seminary, there is no established standard or protocol suggested for conducting these evaluations. The current proposed assessment protocol provides those conducting or receiving these evaluations with a comprehensive foundation from which they can add or delete components to meet their specific needs. Furthermore, the utilization of a standard clergy assessment protocol creates the opportunity for the establishment of a national database useful for conducting research concerning clergy applicants.*

---

Most Roman Catholic religious orders, seminaries, dioceses, and others in decision making roles concerning applicants to the priest or sisterhood, require applicants to complete a psychological evaluation prior to admission into the seminary. The purpose of the evaluation is often not to only decide who is accepted and who is not, but to help both the applicant and the vocations director better understand the psychological functioning of the applicant and identify issues that would be worth further pursuing

<sup>1</sup>Psychology Department, Santa Clara University.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Stanford University School of Medicine.

<sup>3</sup>Address correspondence to Thomas G. Plante, Psychology Department, 500 El Camino Real, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA 95053-0333. Electronic mail address: TPLANTE@SCUACC.SCU.EDU.

in the application and potential formation process. Generally, each religious order, diocese, seminary, or vocations director makes their own arrangements for what the evaluation should include and who should conduct it. Many turn to local psychologists or psychiatrists in their community to design and conduct these evaluations.

There is currently no generally recognized assessment protocol utilized in clergy applicant psychological evaluations. The current practice appears to be that each psychologist or psychiatrist performing these evaluations does so in a professionally isolated manner. Each evaluator decides which measures, if any, are appropriate, and the topics about which the applicant is asked during their interview. These mental health professionals frequently make decisions concerning the topics covered by the evaluation in consultation with vocations directors or other Church representatives. Considering the frequency with which these evaluations are conducted, it is curious that relatively few studies examining applicants to the Roman Catholic priesthood (Banks, Mooney, Mucowski, & Williams, 1984; Plante, Manuel, & Tandez, 1996), and only one examining female aspirants to the Roman Catholic Church (Celmer & Winer, 1990) have been published in the past 25 years.

The need to conduct adequate psychological evaluations has been made evident by research examining clergy who have been referred for residential treatment. In an examination of 29 men and 13 women referred for residential treatment at a therapeutic community for clergy, Keedy, Erdberg, and Sammon (1990) found that many of the referred clergy members had longstanding personality problems. They reported that thorough evaluations at the application, seminary, or novitiate level could have identified the need for help in these clergy members at a much earlier stage. Although the purpose of evaluating clergy applicants is not necessarily to screen out applicants who reveal symptoms of psychological distress, the fact that Keedy et al. (1990) felt strongly that many of the psychological problems manifested by subjects in their study could have been identified earlier suggests that the current practice of clergy applicant evaluations can be improved.

While the need for psychological screening of clergy applicants was greatly promulgated in the 1930s by a hypothesis that a prepsychotic personality type tended to be attracted to the priesthood (e.g., Moore, 1936), the current impetus for clergy applicant evaluation has been highlighted by the recent crisis in the church concerning sexual victimization perpetrated by priests (Berry, 1992; Isely & Isely, 1990; Plante, 1996). A number of studies have examined sexually offending clergy members (see Plante, 1996 for a review of this research), however, the dynamics of sexual abuse among clergy members is still not entirely understood. Early identification

of possible sexual offenders by means of a psychological assessment is perhaps one of the foremost goals of clergy applicant evaluators. Unfortunately, the quantity, and consistency, of research needed to be effective in making these types of predictive assessments does not exist.

Keedy et al. (1990) and others (e.g., Templer, 1974) have stressed the importance of using standardized assessment protocols when examining clergy populations in order to facilitate future researchers in their attempts to replicate previous clergy assessment findings. They have suggested that the current variation in assessment protocols utilized by clergy researchers has impeded the development of an empirical research base useful for the treatment, and possible prevention, of the types of problems they encountered among Catholic clergy members. In accordance with this viewpoint, a standardized clergy applicant evaluation protocol would serve to foster consistency across evaluations and would create an opportunity for the establishment of a nationwide clergy applicant database to conduct useful research concerning the psychological functioning of those wishing to enter religious life.

It is likely that some vocations directors may have specific questions or concerns in mind which they would like answered by the clergy applicant evaluation that may not be addressed by a standardized assessment protocol. Therefore, a single clergy evaluation protocol for all orders, dioceses, and geographical locations is unlikely to be suitable for all clergy evaluators all of the time. However, the development of a national clergy application protocol would help to provide those involved with clergy applicant evaluations with a solid foundation to build around. Vocations directors could add or delete measures from the protocol to fit their unique needs, while still retaining enough of the protocol foundation to ensure consistency and still allow for comparison to other clergy applicant samples.

No published articles have suggested an evaluation protocol for applicants to religious life, however, a significant body of research concerning psychological profiles and personality characteristics of various groups of clergy members and applicants to the clergy does exist. A relatively small number of research studies have investigated the psychological profiles of Catholic clergy in an effort to better understand the psychological and personality functioning of these individuals (e.g., Bier, 1948; Celmer & Winer, 1990; Keedy et al., 1990; Lhota, 1948; McCarthy, 1942; Moore, 1936; Plante & Boccaccini, 1997; Weisgerber, 1966).

Research has indicated that, while all Catholic priests cannot be universally characterized in terms of personality and psychological functioning, specific clergy personality trends based on group data do exist. Over one half of the studies examining Catholic clergy have utilized the MMPI, and reviews of this literature have elicited some identifiable clergy personality

patterns. Nauss (1973) reviewed MMPI profiles of both Catholic and Protestant clergy members and noted consistent elevations on the K, Hy (Hysteria), Pd (Psychopathic Deviate), Mf (Masculine-Femininity), and Ma (Hypomania) scales, low scores on the Si (Social Introversion) scale, and found that Catholic seminary students tended to be more introverted than Protestants. Nauss (1973) described the clergy personality as being characterized by reflectiveness, intuitiveness, nurturance, and cooperation. Dunn (1990) reviewed the professional literature concerning MMPI investigations with Catholic priests and noted frequent elevations on the Mf, Pt (Psychasthenia), and Sc (Schizophrenia) scales, leading to a description of Catholic clergy as perfectionistic, worrisome, introversive, and socially inept.

Other research has focused specifically on predicting successful applicants to the priesthood. In an examination of candidates to the Franciscan Order, Banks et al. (1984) examined a number of psychological variables in order to discriminate between those accepted and those rejected from admission, and those who persisted in the vocation and those who did not. Findings revealed that applicants who were accepted to the Order scored higher on indices of affiliation, aggression, exhibitionism, harm avoidance, play, and the MMPI Sc (Schizophrenia) scale, and lower on the MMPI Si (Social Introversion) scale and a measure of exhibition, than did applicants who were rejected. They also found that once accepted to the Order, those who persisted in the vocation tended to score lower on measures of dominance, nurturance, harm avoidance, and MMPI Sc and Pt (Psychasthenia) scales, and higher on measures of affiliation and the MMPI Si scale, than did those who terminated their vocation. Banks et al. did note the apparent paradox that some traits favorable to acceptance were not favorable to persistence (e.g., harm avoidance, schizophrenia). They suggest that the relationship of some predictors to success in both acceptance and persistence is nonlinear in nature, and point out that the purpose of predictive research is to identify such variables and "modify the intuition of evaluators in a (clergy) selection system" (p. 89).

While research on Catholic clergy and applicants to the priesthood has elucidated some personality characteristics associated with these positions, it lacks the consistency necessary to be functionally applied to issues such as identifying successful applicants to the clergy and the early identification of clergy members at risk for psychological problems. In addition, clergy researchers and clergy practitioners are often not the same individuals. Moreover, much of the work done in the community by clergy evaluators may never make it to the professional journals. Accompanied by the fact that the vast majority of studies examining clergy personality traits were conducted prior to the 1970s, and, thus, may not be relevant to today's

clergy, it is difficult to utilize the existing body of clergy research as a guide for working with current clergy populations.

The purpose of this article is to propose a generic clergy application protocol which may be useful to most vocation directors and other church personnel in making decisions concerning clergy applicants. While each diocese or order may have unique needs or interests which would result in either adding or deleting from this model, this protocol allows vocation directors to have a starting point or model from which to work. Furthermore, a common assessment program allows for the possibility to create a national clergy applicant database for research purposes.

### EVALUATION PROTOCOL

Several important factors have been taken into consideration during the development of this assessment model. First, only standardized tests which have demonstrated adequate reliability and validity are suggested. Furthermore, these tests have been used in numerous research studies, some of which have included clergy members. Second, these tests are readily available, generally inexpensive to purchase, administer, and score, and provide useful information to both the applicant and the evaluation team (e.g., psychologist, vocation director). Third, both projective and object assessment materials are utilized. Fourth, the entire protocol is efficient and cost-effective. Fifth, the procedure can be generalized to all religious orders for those wishing to become priests, brothers, or sisters in the Roman Catholic Church.

A consent form informing the applicant that a report will be sent to the vocations director is signed by the applicant at the beginning of the evaluation process. After the consent form is signed, the evaluation can proceed. The evaluation protocol includes five separate components.

1. Each applicant is asked to send a copy of their resume to the evaluator, as well as an autobiographical statement they often prepare as part of the application process. These are used by the clinician to gain an initial overview of the applicant's past history and motives for seeking admission to the clergy. Items from these materials also provide a springboard for further inquiry and discussion during the interview process.

2. During the initial session, the applicant completes a series of paper and pencil assessment devices. The first of these is the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2; Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989). The MMPI-2 consists of 567 true-false questions that comprise 3 validity scales, 10 basic clinical scales, and over 30 supplementary and additional subscales. The newest edition is normed on

1980 U.S. Census figures. The test is considered highly reliable and valid (Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989). Furthermore, the MMPI-2 has been shown to be reliable for use with clergy samples (Putnam, Kurtz, & Houts, 1996).

3. The second assessment measure the applicant completes is the 16 Personality Factors Questionnaire (16PF fifth edition; Cattell & Cattell, 1993). The 16PF is a well known and researched personality questionnaire that consists of 185 multiple-choice test items comprising 16 primary personality factor scales. Internal consistency reliabilities average about .74 with test-retest reliabilities averaging about .80 for two-week intervals and about .70 for two-month intervals. The newest edition (fifth edition) is normed on 1990 U.S. Census figures.

4. The third written assessment tool the applicant completes is the Forer Structured Sentence Completion Test (FSSCT; Forer, 1957). The FSSCT is a 100-item sentence completion test designed to examine attitudes, value systems, evasiveness, individual differences, and defense mechanisms. There are separate forms for males and females, and interpretation is assisted by a standardized checklist of frequent responses.

5. A semi-structured clinical interview, ranging from 1 to 1.5 hours in length, is then conducted. The interview is divided into two parts. The first part of the interview focuses on the applicant's psychosocial history. Topics covered during this portion of the interview include the applicant's age, health status, educational and career history, as well as the psychiatric, medical, religious, and relationship history of the applicant, their parents, and siblings. Applicants are asked to use one word to describe each parent, each sibling, and themselves. The applicant is also asked to generate a list of words others would use to best to describe them. During this part of the interview, applicants are also asked to give a personal and family history of psychological disorders, medical problems, hospitalizations, significant traumas, as well as any substance, sexual, or physical abuse.

The second portion of the interview focuses on the applicant's reasons for entering religious life and thoughts about the 3 major vows (e.g., celibacy, poverty, obedience). During this portion of the interview, questions such as "What factors led you to decide to enter religious life?" and "What are your reflections on the 3 vows?" are asked. Additional questions regarding the applicant's plans if not accepted to the seminary are also asked during this section of the interview.

The assessment measures take about three hours to complete. At the end of the evaluation, feedback is given to the applicant with the opportunity for questions to be answered. A report of the evaluation is then sent to the vocations director or other appropriate church representative.

This protocol has been successfully utilized with applicants from several religious orders, as well as with both males and females. Utilizing this protocol, Plante et al. (1996) noted that, similar to previous research examining Catholic clergy, successful applicants to a major Catholic religious order exhibited elevations on MMPI-2 K, Hy, and Mf scales. Applicants tended to be generally well adjusted, with, for example, low scores on MMPI-2 sub scales measuring anxiety (A and ANX), depression (DEP), anger (ANG), Type A personality (TPA), and obsessions (OBS). Furthermore, 16PF results indicated that the successful clergy applicants were bright, imaginative, sensitive, emotionally stable, trusting, forthright, and self-assured.

### ADVANTAGES OF USING THE PROTOCOL

The proposed clergy applicant evaluation protocol provides those involved with conducting clergy applicant evaluations and making decisions about clergy applicant status with a number of advantages that are not afforded by the current system of clergy applicant evaluations. First, the measures comprising the test battery of the protocol allow for the assessment of psychological functioning on a number of different levels. The MMPI-2 provides personality assessment, and, more importantly, screening for psychopathology. For example, the MMPI-2 includes scales for assessing depression, anxiety, social introversion, schizophrenia personality disorder, and other indicators of psychological functioning. The MMPI-2 also includes validity measures, such as lying and defensiveness, along with a number of subscales that are useful in clergy assessment (e.g., MacAndrews scale for alcoholism, Social Responsibility scale). While the MMPI-2 provides clinicians with an assessment of psychopathology, the 16PF complements the MMPI-2 by providing clinicians with a personality description emphasizing factors other than psychopathology. The 16PF includes a brief measure of intelligence (Factor B) as well as other scales of interest for evaluating clergy (e.g., sensitive, conservative, guilt-prone), and may be helpful in identifying potential dropouts and low achievers. The FSSCT is a projective test that complements the more objective self-report testing, such as the MMPI-2 and 16PF, and provides a helpful springboard for discussion in the interview. Issues regarding relationships, goals, mood, and other factors are often elucidated on the FSSCT.

Second, the combination of the semi-structured clinical interview with the aforementioned measures allows the clinician to examine not only applicants' psychological functioning, but also their motivations for entering religious life and their reflections on some of the issues involved with the

maintenance of a religious vocation. The interview can be tailored to examine the unique aspects of the individual, as well as provide a forum for the discussion of important issues in their psychosocial functioning (e.g., relationship conflicts, medical issues, and psychiatric history).

Third, this assessment protocol provides the consistency across evaluations necessary for the creation of a national clergy applicant database, and, moreover, encourages those conducting clergy applicant evaluations to share their findings through publication in professional journals. Researchers examining clergy members have expressed the need for more clergy research and the use of standardized measures in this research to encourage both the replication of findings and the application of these findings to relevant problems within the clergy (Keedy et al., 1990; Plante et al., 1996; Templer, 1974). The utilization of the proposed clergy applicant protocol will facilitate the accomplishment of both of these objectives.

### CLERGY APPLICANT RESEARCH

There are several reasons why the creation of a national clergy applicant data base would be beneficial to all those working with clergy. With the exception of Banks et al. (1984) study that attempts to discriminate between successful and unsuccessful applicants to priesthood, the clergy research that has been conducted is purely descriptive. While accurately describing personality trends among clergy members is important for understanding what type of people choose to become clergy members, this descriptive research cannot be applied for practical uses such as identifying successful applicants and clergy from unsuccessful ones.

The current protocol allows researchers to report on both successful and unsuccessful applicants to the clergy, thus enabling clinicians to identify characteristics associated with both groups of applicants. Furthermore, a clergy applicant database would allow for researchers to examine the psychological evaluations of unsuccessful clergy members, such as those who terminate their vocation or those who commit crimes such as sexual offenses, and potentially develop a psychological profile or identify a number of psychological factors that may be associated with these types of problems. This retrospective information could then be used potentially to identify future applicants who may be at risk for these behaviors. Screening out potentially problematic applicants is in fact one of the reasons why clergy applicant evaluations are conducted (Banks et al., 1984). The utilization of a standardized assessment protocol by clergy evaluators would greatly enhance the accuracy of this screening process.

Eventually, the compilation of clergy applicant data would permit researchers to compare an individual's scores to group data in order to assess the applicant's risk for potentially maladaptive behaviors. The need for this type of comparative analysis has been expressed by researchers who note that grouping subjects together for the purpose of describing a sample tends to cancel out, or de-emphasize, the extreme scores which may be useful in identifying maladaptive clergy personality traits (Keedy et al., 1990; Simino, 1978). Thus, given enough previous research, clinicians would be able to compare the scores of a single applicant to known clergy psychological profiles in order to aid their recommendations concerning the applicant.

While this evaluation protocol has only been used with Catholic clergy members, only slight modifications to the semi-structured interview are necessary to make it suitable for use with other religious denominations. Furthermore, although this protocol was designed to be comprehensive, it allows for the addition or deletion of measures in order to meet the specific demands of each clergy applicant evaluator. Finally, we would welcome any comments or suggestions concerning the proposed clergy applicant assessment protocol.

## REFERENCES

- Banks, S., Mooney, W. T., Mucowski, R. J., & Williams, R. (1984). Progress in the evaluation and prediction of successful candidates for religious careers. *Counseling and Values, 28*, 82-91.
- Berry, J. (1992). *Lead us not into temptation: Catholic priests and the sexual abuse of children*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Bier, W. D. (1948). A comparative study of the seminary group and four other groups on the MMPI. *Studies in Psychology and Psychiatry from the Catholic University of America, 7*, 107.
- Butcher, J. N., Dahlstrom, W. G., Graham, J. R., Tellegen, A., & Kaemmer, B. (1989). *Manual for the restandardized Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory: MMPI-2: An administrative and interpretive guide*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Cattell, R. B., & Cattell, H. E. P. (1993). Personality structure and the new fifth edition of the 16PF. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 55*, 926-937.
- Celmer, V. & Winer, J. L. (1990). Female aspirants to the Roman Catholic priesthood. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 69*, 178-183.
- Dunn, P. J. (1990). *Priesthood: A re-examination of the Roman Catholic theology of the presbyterate*. New York, NY: Alba House.
- Forer, B. R. (1957). *The Forer Structured Sentence Completion Test*. Los Angeles: Western Psychological Services.
- Isely, P. J., & Isely, P. (1990). The sexual abuse of male children by church personnel: Intervention and prevention. *Pastoral Psychology, 39*, 85-98.
- Keedy, P. J., Erdberg, P., & Sammon, S. D. (1990). The psychological assessment of Catholic clergy and religious referred for residential treatment. *Pastoral Psychology, 38*, 147-159.
- Lhota, B. (1948). *Vocational interests of Catholic priests*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press.

- McCarthy, T. J. (1942). Personality traits of seminarians. *Studies in Psychology and Psychiatry from the Catholic University of America*, 5, 46-92.
- Moore, T. V. (1936). Insanity in priests and religion. *American Ecclesiastical Review*, 95, 485-498.
- Nauss, A. (1973). The ministerial personality: Myth or reality? *Journal of Religion and Health*, 12, 77-96.
- Plante, T. G. (1996). Catholic Priests who sexually abuse minors: Why do we hear so much yet know so little? *Pastoral Psychology*, 44, 305-310.
- Plante, T. G., & Boccaccini, M. T. (1997). Personality expectations and perceptions of Roman Catholic clergy members. *Pastoral Psychology*, 45, 301-315.
- Plante, T. G., Manuel, G., & Tandez, J. (1996). Personality characteristics of successful applicants to the priesthood. *Pastoral Psychology*, 45, 29-40.
- Putnam, S. H., Kurtz, J. E., & Houts, D. C. (1996). Four-month test-retest reliability of the MMPI-2 with normal male clergy. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 67, 341-353.
- Simino, R. B. (1978). Careers in the clergy: The myth of femininity. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 38, 507-511.
- Templer, D. I. (1974). Review of personality and psychopathology research with clergy-men, seminarians and religious. *Catalog of Selected Documents in Psychology*, 4, 19.
- Weisgerber, C. (1966). The study of values in screening for a religious order. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 5, 233-238.