

Prot. n. 589/97

CIRCULAR LETTER TO THE MOST REVEREND DIOCESAN BISHOPS AND OTHER ORDINARIES WITH CANONICAL FACULTIES TO ADMIT TO SACRED ORDERS CONCERNING:

Scrutinies regarding the Suitability of Candidates for Orders

I. *The Reasons for this Circular Letter*

1. Among the most important responsibilities of a diocesan Bishop and of other Ordinaries who have canonical faculties to admit to Sacred Orders is without doubt the canonical act by which they do in fact admit to Orders one of the faithful under their authority. This is true, with due allowance for the relative importance of the case, for the rite of admission of candidates to the Diaconate and the Priesthood and also for the rite of institution of lector or acolyte.

2. The fundamental principle in this matter consists in the fact that the competent authority must issue the official call in the name of the Church on the basis of a moral certitude that is founded upon positive reasons regarding the suitability of the candidate (can. 1052 § 1 with can. 1025 §§ 1-2 & can. 1029). A criterion of admission which sees the admission of one of the faithful merely as a stimulus or help to him is not sufficient, and admission may not take place if there exists a prudent doubt regarding the candidate's suitability (can. 1052 § 3 with can. 1030). By "prudent doubt" is meant a doubt founded upon facts that are objective and duly verified.

3. Although the call is a canonical act which pertains to a personal authority¹ it is clear that such an authority ought not proceed

¹ The personal authority to which reference is made here is, according to the *Code of Canon Law*, the diocesan Bishop or the Major Superior of a clerical Institute of Pontifical Right who is competent by reason of domicile (cf. the joint disposition of cann. 1016

merely on the basis of his convictions or intuitions, but should give a hearing to the opinion of persons and councils and not depart from these except on the strength of well-founded reasons (can. 127 § 2, 2°).

4. The act of discernment of suitability of a candidate is termed a "scrutiny" (can. 1051) and must be carried out for each of the four moments in the process of priestly formation: the admission, the ministries of lector and acolyte, the Diaconate, and the Priesthood. The "scrutinies" should, of course, also be held in the case of candidates to the permanent Diaconate. All the written documentation referring to each of the scrutinies must be conserved in a personal dossier for each candidate and the dossier must be transmitted, after the candidate's Ordination to the Diaconate, from the archives of the seminary or formation house to that of the diocesan curia or of the competent Major Superior.

5. In various cases when requests for dispensation from the obligations have been forwarded to it, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments has had occasion to note that the documentation concerning the scrutinies has not been found and therefore could not be incorporated into the informative process. In such cases, it would seem that the documentation was not kept with the necessary care.

6. Those who have the responsibility for admission to Orders know that this is not an easy matter. It is in fact possible that a deci-

and 102, 103, 107 § 1) and those who are equivalent in law to a diocesan Bishop (can. 134 § 3), that is to say, in conformity with can. 381 § 2, a territorial Prelate, the Abbot of a territorial abbey, a Vicar Apostolic or Prefect Apostolic, a Pro-Vicar Apostolic or Pro-Prefect Apostolic, an Apostolic Administrator, and additionally a Military Ordinary, the Prelate of a personal Prelature and the Diocesan Administrator, with the consent of the College of Consultors (can. 1018 § 1, 2), and also a Vicar General who has received a special mandate to this end.

sion made with a clear conscience could turn out later to have been mistaken without being in any way ascribable to negligence, imprudence or similar shortcomings. Nevertheless, it should be stressed that cases exist in which there has been negligence and imprudence constituting a grave moral responsibility for subsequent defections, in which grave harm is occasioned to persons and grave damage to the Church.

7. The initial selection of candidates for entry into the seminary should be done with care, since it is not rare, once this first step has been taken, that seminarians advance towards the Priesthood with the attitude that each subsequent stage is a consequence and necessary prolongation of the first (cf. can. 241 § 1).

8. In the case where a candidate comes from another diocese or from a Congregation or Institute of Consecrated Life, or has received one of the stages of his formation in more than one house, the causes and motives of such an unusual occurrence should be studied. Of particular importance are those cases in which a candidate has been expelled from a formation house or has been invited to withdraw: the reasons for such a decision must be sought in confidentiality from those who made the decision. The reasons should be given with the greatest possible objectivity, avoiding both ambiguity and the use of euphemisms.²

II. *The Nature of these Orientations and their Relation to the Code of Canon Law*

9. The orientations contained in this Circular Letter aim at providing an orientation based upon the experience of numerous dioce-

² Cf. the stipulation of can. 241 § 3; and also the Instruction issued on this subject by the Congregation for Catholic Education on 8 March 1996. Also to be taken into consideration would be any general decree approved by the competent Conference of Bishops and confirmed by the Holy See.

ses and of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. The intention is to facilitate the exercise of freedom in the candidate's assumption of the responsibilities that flow from the Sacrament of Holy Orders (can. 1026), and also a proper seriousness in the conducting of the scrutinies that should precede the different steps in the progress of a candidate towards Sacred Orders. Such orientations are not law in the strict canonical sense of the term - except of course whatever is already found in common or particular law - but are more in the nature of a strong recommendation with a view to ensuring the good of the Church. It seems more appropriate to dismiss a doubtful candidate, however great the need for clergy in a local Church or a religious Institute, than to lament the sadness, and not rarely the scandal, occasioned by abandonment of the ministry: *Do not be hasty in the laying-on of hands* (1 Tim 5: 22)

10. Prudence, which is one of the virtues necessary in the exercise of the responsibilities of government, urges that decisions of importance not be taken without first having heard the views of experts and those informed of the appropriate facts.

11. A judgment concerning the suitability of a candidate to receive the Diaconate as a transitory step on the way to the Priesthood includes a judgment as to his suitability for the priestly ministry. It is not possible to admit a candidate to the Diaconate in the face of doubts concerning his suitability for the Priesthood. For this reason the judgment reached by the scrutiny undertaken with a view to the Diaconate is decisive, and if positive could be changed in the course of the next scrutiny only in the light of new and grave precedents.

12. The authorities who enjoy the faculty of admitting candidates to Sacred Orders or to the instituted ministries should bear in mind the dispositions of canon law regarding the minimum age for the reception of Orders (cf. can. 1031 §§ 1-2), the intervals between the ministries and Ordination to the Diaconate (cf. can. 1035 § 2), the

need to make a spiritual retreat prior to receiving Sacred Orders (cf. can. 1039), and the studies which must be completed before receiving Orders (cf. can. 1032 §§ 1, 2). They should also bear in mind the dispositions regarding the impediments and irregularities for the reception of Orders (can. 1025 § 1 together with cann. 1041-1042).³

With this present Circular Letter are enclosed five enclosures, prepared by the Congregation with a view to facilitating its concrete application.

Rome, 10 November 1997

✠ Jorge Medina ESTÉVEZ
Archbishop Pro-Prefect

✠ Geraldo Majella AGNELO
Archbishop Secretary

ENCLOSURE I

Documentation for each candidate

The following documents should be kept in each candidate's personal file:

1. The certificate of canonical Matrimony of the candidate's parents.
2. The certificates of the candidate's Baptism and Confirmation (cf. cann. 1033; 1050, 3^o; 241 § 2).
3. Certification (at least in summary form) concerning the studies of the candidate before he began his formation in preparation for Holy Orders (can. 1050, 1^o).

³ Also relevant to the subject of this Circular Letter are cann. 1015-1020, 1024, 1029, 1033-1037, 1050-1052.

4. Certification concerning the different steps of the candidate's ecclesiastical formation, including explicit reference to the evaluations of the candidate and the votes he received (cf. can. 1032, §§ 1 & 3).

5. A sheet listing pertinent personal and family information of the candidate and including the candidate's photograph.

6. Civil certificates that might have some connection with formation for Holy Orders, e.g., those pertaining to military or civilian service.

7. A medical certificate attesting to the health of the candidate following from the medical examination which preceded the candidate's entrance to the seminary or house of formation (cf. cann. 1051, 1° and 241 § 1).

8. A psychological report, to be required only if there exists be a just reason (can. 1051, 1°).⁴

9. A written request by the candidate, with which he seeks admission to the seminary or house of formation.

10. A written report of the rector of any previous house in which the candidate has spent time in formation (can. 241 § 3).

11. Letters of recommendation (to be sent directly to the seminary and not through the candidate) from any priests who may have helped the candidate in his vocational discernment (can. 1051, 2°).

12. The certificates issued by the diocesan curia pertaining to the man's admission as a candidate for Holy Orders, to the conferral of the ministries, to Ordination to the Diaconate and Ordination to the Priesthood.

13. The documentation of each scrutiny.

⁴ Letter of the Secretary of State, 6 August 1976 (Prot. n. 311.157), with the *Nota Indicativa* concerning "L'uso e l'abuso dei metodi psicologici proiettivi e di altro tipo"; *Monitum* of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (The Holy Office), 15 July 1961, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 53 [1961], p. 571.

14. In the case of candidates for the Permanent Diaconate who are already married: the certificate of canonical Matrimony and a written and signed document from the candidate's wife in which she declares her consent to the Ordination of her husband and her own clear awareness of the meaning of diaconal ministry (cf. can. 1050, 3°).

ENCLOSURE II

Documentation for the Scrutiny for each (Liturgical) Stage in the Candidate's Progress toward the Priesthood

1. A written request of the candidate with which he asks to be admitted to the rite in question. It is necessary that this request be composed by the candidate personally and written out in his own hand and may not be a copied formulary, or worse, a photocopied text (cf. can. 1034 § 1).

2. A personal report of the rector of the seminary or of the house of formation. The report must be detailed, making use of the general lines of the model found in Enclosure V (cf. can. 1051, 1°).

3. A collegial consultation of the priests entrusted with the formation in the seminary or the house of formation.

4. A consultation of the candidate's own pastor.

5. A consultation of the priest in charge at the place or in the institution where the candidate assists in pastoral work.

6. Other information that the rector of the seminary or house of formation considers necessary to gather.

7. The opinion of the candidate's class companions, given in an absolutely secret and personal form, in which a positive or negative opinion concerning the suitability of the candidate is expressed clearly, together with reasons for that opinion.

8. For the Diaconate and the Priesthood, the outcome of the canonical banns proclaimed a sufficient length of time in advance in the parishes where the candidate has had extended residence (can. 1051, 2°).

ENCLOSURE III

Commission for Orders and Ministries

1. It is appropriate that in every diocese or Institute of consecrated life there be a stable group of priests making up the Commission for Orders and Ministries, which, in collegial session, studies the past record of each candidate for Orders or Ministries.

Only priests endowed with experience, sound doctrine, and considered judgment should belong to this Commission, and they should be appointed by the Ordinary for a specified term.

Some members could be members of the Commission *ratione officii vel muneris*.

2. The Commission can establish its own method for the study of the past record of the candidate.

3. The collegial session should be presided over by the Ordinary or by his delegate.

4. In the conduct of the sessions of the Commission there needs to be the utmost freedom in order that each member is able to express his own opinion in accordance with his conscience.

5. The meetings of the Commission by their nature will be held in closed session.

6. The discussion or the study of the information concerning each candidate must end with a vote, that can be secret if any of the members so request, and in which an answer is to be given to the question of whether or not to recommend to the Bishop or the competent Superior acceptance of the candidate's request to be admitted to the respective liturgical rite.

7. The opinion of the Commission is not binding upon the Bishop or Superior, however it is an act having great moral value, and should not be set aside except for grave and well founded reasons (cf. can. 127 § 2).

8. The affirmative or negative opinion of the Commission must be registered in the personal file of the candidate, with an explicit indication of the result of the vote.

9. It is the place of the Bishop or Superior, or of whomever he delegates, to inform the candidates of the decision taken.

10. A positive decision of the Bishop or Superior must be expressed in the form of a Decree of Admission (cf. can. 1034 § 1) issued a sufficient length of time in advance (i.e., not less than one month) of the date of institution or Ordination.

ENCLOSURE IV

Procedures to be Observed Prior to Ordination to the Diaconate and the Priesthood

1. Before a candidate receives Ordination to the Diaconate or the Priesthood the following acts must be accomplished and the appropriate attestations signed:

a) Prior to Ordination to the Diaconate the candidate must make the Profession of Catholic Faith in the presence of the diocesan Bishop or his delegate, or before the Major Superior, and must sign it by his own hand (can. 833, 6).

b) Prior to Ordination both to the Diaconate and to the Priesthood the candidate must take the oath of fidelity.⁵

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Profession of faith and oath of fidelity, 1 July 1988, in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 81 (1989) 104-106.

c) Prior to Ordination both to the Diaconate and to the Priesthood the candidate must make a personal declaration concerning his own freedom to receive Sacred Ordination and concerning his own clear awareness as to the obligations and commitments implied by that Ordination for his whole life, especially the obligation of sacred celibacy (can. 77 § 1) in the case of those who are not called to the permanent Diaconate after marriage. Such a declaration must be written in the candidate's own handwriting and expressed in his own words, not copied from a formula (cf. cann. 1026, 1028, 1036).

It is appropriate that such acts be public and that they take place in the sight of the Catholic people, during the celebration of Holy Mass, after the homily.

2. The three documents just mentioned must be conserved in the personal dossier of the candidate, together with the documentation of the Ordination.

3. It should not be permitted that the candidate's family or the parish community presume his future Ordination before admission has taken place on the part of the competent authority, and especially that dates be published or preparations made for the Ordination celebration or the "First Mass". Behavior of this kind can constitute a form of psychological pressure which must be avoided in every way possible.

ENCLOSURE V

Some Guidelines for the Preparation of Reports Concerning Promotion to Orders (can. 1029)

1. Physical health and mental balance. Sufficient human maturity. Any negative precedents in the family as to mental health, alcoholism, or drug addiction.

2. Natural virtues: honesty, spirit of hard work, prudence, constancy, firmness of convictions, spirit of sacrifice and of service, abil-

ity to get along with others and work with them (cf. cann. 245 § 2; 275 § 1).

3. Doctrine: knowledge of Catholic doctrine and adherence to it. Orthodoxy of faith. Firm convictions concerning positions contrary to the Magisterium as advanced nowadays by certain groups, such as, for example, radical ideologies, the ordination of women, certain opinions regarding sexuality morality and ecclesiastical celibacy. Understanding of the nature and purpose of the ecclesiastical ministry.

4. Studies: interest in ecclesiastical studies; success in examinations in this field. Love for Sacred Scripture. Interest in formative reading. Concern to know the documents of the Magisterium of the Church. Ability to exercise the ministry of the word (can. 762).

5. Obedience: readiness to accept decisions of superiors. Confidence in the hierarchy of the Church. Observance of Church laws (can. 273).

6. Behavior regarding material goods: respect for the goods of the Church; detachment; moderation in use of own goods; sensitivity to the poor and those who suffer (can. 282 § 1).

7. Celibacy: clarity of ideas on its nature and positive significance. Full acceptance of celibacy not only as an unavoidable condition for receiving Orders. Sufficient affective maturity and clarity of male sexual identity (can. 1024). Balanced behavior towards women: prudence, emotional self-control, propriety of behavior. Language, conversation, addiction to television (cann. 277 § 2; 285 §§ 1-2).

8. Supernatural virtues: spirit of faith, love for Jesus Christ and the Church, practice and spirit of prayer, love of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Love for the Eucharist and daily participation at its celebration. Celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours. Recitation of the Holy Rosary. Regular recourse to the Sacrament of Penance. Apostolic zeal. Love of the Liturgy. Spirit of self-denial and mortification (cann. 245 § 2; 246).

9. Balanced judgment in evaluating situations and making practical decisions in consequence. Capacity for rational planning.

10. Community spirit: ability to get along with others and work with them. Readiness to accept rational planning of work. Sensitivity in the face of suffering and misery of others.

11. Presence of defects: duplicity? selfishness? avarice? ambition? lack of regard for celibate chastity? arrogance? lack of honesty? difficult character? laziness? lack of responsibility? stubbornness? socio-economic resentment? personal untidiness? excessively active? comfort-seeking? concern for material advancement of own family? aggressiveness? hypocrisy? alcohol or drug addiction? abnormal affective tendencies? effeminate manner? pride? individualism?

12. Spiritual direction: if regular and with whom (cann. 239 § 2; 240 § 1).

13. Other observations.

14. Overall judgment regarding acceptance of the request for admission to Orders.