Abstract

This exploratory study investigated the relative emphasis on formation directives and developmental psychology of young adulthood, in the thinking of seminary faculty about certain aspects of the education of candidates for the priesthood. The respondents held faculty appointments in Roman Catholic major seminaries in North America. As basis for the survey instrument the following elements were used: 1) a content analysis of Church documents on the formation of priests, and 2) literature of male psychodynamic developmental theory and psychopathology. The study focused on two key male developmental needs which seemed most likely to conflict with seminary formation activities: 1) intimacy/sexuality, and 2) autonomy/mastery. Selected by cluster sampling, 124 respondents (N=124) from 39 theological institutes participated in this study. Analysis of the data, using Factor Analysis and Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA), showed a valuing among the respondents of religious sublimations for intimacy/sexuality and autonomy/mastery, as handed down by the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to this 'traditional-religious' factor, the research showed varying degrees of psychological awareness among the respondents with regard to 'personal and ministerial integration' within the candidate for the priesthood. This awareness was significantly greater in seminary faculty with some training in psychology.

1. Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church in North America, as elsewhere in the Western Hemisphere, has been challenged over the last couple of decades by several synchronous developments which questioned its traditional leadership structures. These developments range from challenges concerning selection of priests, such as opening of the priesthood to married men and female candidates (Galot, 1984), to social developments such as a steady decline in ordinations and increase in resignations from priesthood (Schoenherr and Sorenson (1982). And these problems arise in the midst of a growing Catholic population in the United
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States (Hoge, Potvin & Ferry, 1984). The status quo has been even more troubled by a growing dissatisfaction among the active priests regarding their work assignments, and by highly publicized charges of paedophilia and of sexual involvement with adults, brought against a relatively few priests. (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1989)

These social changes and challenges regarding priesthood in the Catholic community have had their impact on the landscape of priestly formation in the United States: many institutes terminated operations, due to a dramatic decrease in enrolment, or were forced to collaborate in theological consortiums.

The focus of this paper is neither the enrolment decline nor the challenge to selection of only celibate male candidates. Rather, this research explored formation issues related to capacity to be faithful to the two central vows taken by every candidate for the Roman Catholic priesthood: celibacy and obedience. From a pastoral-psychological frame of reference, we were interested in the encouragement or the lack thereof, of necessary sublimatory compensations for normal young adult males who intended to assume the burden of these vows. With this question in mind, we worked from the suppositions that (1) the Church will not change admittance policies in the foreseeable future and yet at the same time (2) would like to ordain psychologically resilient men who are likely to lived contented and edifying lives as priests.

2. Review of literature

Recent research with regard to the formation of candidates for the priesthood in the Catholic Church of North America, shows an emphasis on (i) descriptive data gathering (Schoenherr and Sorensen, 1982), (ii) the changes in formation programs (Schuth 1989), and (iii) the general ‘profile’ of the contemporary seminarian (Potvin 1985; Hemrick and Hoge 1987).

Our inquiry uncovered no previous empirical research addressing the views of the staff and faculty members in the seminary and/or theological institute. These persons play a significant role within the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church with regard to training and evaluation of prospective clergy. Which psychological factors and which aspects of the theology of priesthood are perceived as highly important in the training and evaluation of candidates? And what psychological and theological leitmotifs can be found in the procedures used to evaluate candidates for the priesthood? These are questions that particularly interested us.

We performed as the foundation for this exploratory empirical study, (i) a content analysis of relevant Church documents, and contrasted (ii) selected areas of