

F R . S C O T T G A R D N E R , S S P X

# VALIDITY IS NOT ENOUGH



**PART 1**

## The Vocation and Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders

### **Another one of “those phone calls”**

They generally come in one of two forms: “Father, there’s a new priest, Fr. So-and-So, saying Mass near my house; is it okay for me to go?” or “We’ve got a chapel, and we’re thinking of hiring Fr. Such-and-Such, who was just ordained by Bishop Peregrinus. Do you think we should hire him?”

These calls are always difficult to handle. The Church is quite obviously in a state of crisis in which faithful Catholics are often called upon to make great sacrifices and travel long distances to have access to the traditional sacraments, sound preaching, and accurate teaching. When good people are traveling for hours to reach Mass, or when they are simply too far from any established mission to go there at all, it is painful to be obliged to disappoint them when a new opportunity seems to present itself. Alas, this is what we priests of the Society of Saint Pius X must often do when confronted with such questions.

### **The Society’s position on such “independent” ordinations**

Despite widespread calumnies to the contrary, the Society of Saint Pius X does not consider itself the “only pebble on the beach.” Especially in the early days of Archbishop Lefebvre’s

expansion into the United States, but also to a certain extent today, there were and are numerous sound priests—mostly older—who have been forced out of their dioceses or religious orders through no fault of their own, merely for their refusal to compromise with the modernism which has ravaged the human element of the Church and corrupted the faith of millions. All honor to them, and may they receive the reward of their labors on the Day of Judgment!

However, the question of those priests who have sought out ordination from one of the plethora of “independent bishops” at large in the United States today is much more delicate. Their number is always increasing, and it has increased quite rapidly during late 2008 and early 2009.<sup>1</sup> If it were always a question of solid, well-formed, single men, ordained by a bishop who has a stable relationship with them as superior to subject, the situation would be much better than that which we so frequently find.<sup>2</sup>

## Tales from an ecclesiastical House of Horrors

Indeed, there are widespread instances of such ordinations which are simply astonishing. The author knows of two men (one married) who were ordained explicitly to exercise their Orders privately. One bishop offered to ordain two married men the first time he met them. (They declined.) Another bishop is reported to have ordained a twelve-year-old boy. Determined to “have a vocation” regardless of their former superiors’ thoughts on the matter, numerous men who had tried their vocations at established traditionalist seminaries and left before reaching ordination have sought out ordination from “independent” bishops. Worst of all, from time to time there circulate rumors of this or that bishop’s having committed the sin of simony,<sup>3</sup> offering the grace of Holy Orders for a fee.

## Vigilance—according to the mind of the Church—is the key

Clearly, the sin of calumny is both grave and frequent. Not all such reports and rumors are necessarily true, but the number of confirmed cases of grave abuses of the Sacrament of Holy Orders must make today’s Catholics vigilant. Traditional Catholics are, by and large, fairly vigilant when there is a question of *Novus Ordo* abuses, but some of them tend to relax their vigilance when it comes to traditionalist abuses.<sup>4</sup> This can be extremely perilous.

## Scylla and Charybdis

Two main currents of thought compete for the attention of serious Catholics in the midst of today’s crisis. They are opposite extremes, and, not surprisingly, many people vacillate between these extremes. When these currents of thought are described, it is easy to see why balance (or, in other words, virtue) is needed.

On the one hand, when looking at the chaos which reigns in the Church at large, it is tempting to adopt a legalistic attitude: “The modernists have broken all the rules, so we must keep them all to the letter; then we will be fine!” On the other hand, the *laissez-faire* spirit is also quite enticing: “Rule 2b: The Church is in crisis; therefore, we can do whatever we want!” Both attitudes are deadly. It matters not whether we perish on the shore or in the whirlpool; we shall perish still. Whether we put all of our faith in the letter of “the rules,” absolving ourselves of having to live the Faith integrally, or we regard “the rules” as merely so much window-dressing, we will still end by doing exactly what we want—and by rationalizing our behavior, thus cutting ourselves off from the very possibility of repentance if that behavior is sinful.

## The straight and narrow path between the two perils

Bringing these currents of thought to bear upon the issue of priestly ordinations outside the normal channels of dioceses or religious orders in 2009, one can hear the legalists cry out in horror that any ordination could ever take place outside of the letter of the (new) Code of Canon Law.<sup>5</sup> Yet, with the normal legal channels of the Church effectively closed to Tradition, one is also faced with the *laissez-faire* multiplication of the “independent” ordinations noted above. What is the solution?

A wise priest once declared emphatically to the author that “The Catholic religion is the religion of *reality*.”<sup>6</sup> One must admit that it is unrealistic to place so much emphasis on the letter of the law when souls are suffering—indeed, dying—from the lack of sound and holy priests made available through the normal legal channels of the Church. Canon Law exists for the good of souls and the good of the Church. Any law which undermines that end ceases to bind the conscience to the same extent that it undermines it. Even if the normal canonical channels do not facilitate the ordination of sound and holy priests for the good of souls, bishops are still *capable* of ordaining, of setting aside the letter of the law in favor of its purpose—its “spirit.”

However, it is also unrealistic to jettison the entire canonical heritage of the Church simply because the strict application of the letter of the law is impeding the ordination of the sound and holy



priests who are so urgently needed for the good of souls. “Canon Law is the accumulated prudence of the Church”;<sup>7</sup> circumstances such as the current crisis do not justify going beyond the “mind of the Church” simply because the letter of the law no longer supports its purpose.

### **“Sentire cum Ecclesia”**

The only possible reconciliation between the two perilous extremes of legalism and the *laissez-faire* spirit—and the only way one can properly evaluate the question of traditionalist priestly ordinations today—is to learn to think with the Church. Fortunately, we are not required to make a long or complex study, nor are we expected to wait for the Holy Ghost to infuse the answers into our minds. The 1917 Code of Canon Law and subsequent legislation on the subject of ordaining priests can still be referenced. Along with examining the principles and practices which flourished before the Second Vatican Council and the crisis of the priesthood, we will be able to apply the accumulated prudence of the Church to the question of ordinations outside the normal channels. In short, we will be able to think with the Church, even if such thinking is painful and complicates answers to “those phone calls.”

The author’s principal aim in this article is to examine what the Church, in her accumulated prudence, requires of a man who is to be ordained. After looking briefly at the requirements for valid ordination—a subject which is of course crucial even if only preliminary—we shall see which positive

characteristics the Church seeks in a future priest and which warnings or even prohibitions she makes concerning some qualities which may disqualify an ordinand. In other words, we shall learn not only what makes a man a *valid* candidate for ordination, but what makes him a *suitable* candidate—what will make him not only a validly ordained priest, but a sound and holy one. In this way, it will be easier to discover the answers to the questions so often asked in “those phone calls.”

### **Validity and lawfulness**

One of the biggest—and, unfortunately, one of the most common—mistakes traditional Catholics make in questions concerning the sacraments is to confuse the issues of validity and lawfulness. To some, “valid” means “good or pleasing,” and, likewise, “bad or displeasing” means “invalid.” Nothing could be further from the truth. For a sacrament to be “valid,” the only requirements are that a minister capable of conferring that sacrament applies the necessary form to the necessary matter, with the intention of “doing what the Church does.” To put it another way,

minister+form+matter+intention=sacrament.

The sacrament “worked.” Grace was poured out “by the very work.”<sup>8</sup> The infant who was an enemy of God because of Adam’s sin becomes the adopted child of God when water is poured over him by anyone at all who has the intention (however confused it may be) of “doing what the Church does” and who says “I baptize you in the Name of

the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” while he is pouring that water. Such baptism is to be presumed valid<sup>9</sup> even if it takes place in a bad context.

The Church has established laws for conferring the Sacraments precisely to prevent them from being abused by bad circumstances even though they are valid. Sacraments may certainly be valid but unlawful; what is valid is not always good for souls. “Lawfulness” means either that all of the Church’s laws were followed in conferring a sacrament, or that one or more of them was allowed by Church authorities to be disregarded for a proportionally serious reason, always for the good of souls.<sup>10</sup>

To illustrate the difference between “validity” and “lawfulness,” let us continue to take the example of infant baptism. Suppose that an infant, the child of Satan-worshippers, was perfectly healthy, but that his pious Catholic grandmother (with every good intention, but no prudence) baptized him secretly while bathing him. Was the baptism valid? As long as she poured water over him while saying, “I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” with the intention of “doing what the Church does,” the baptism was certainly valid. The infant is now in the state of sanctifying grace, and he is (at least radically) a member of the Catholic Church. There is an eternal mark in his soul—the character of Baptism. It was valid, so it must be good!

No! This newly-baptized child has practically no expectations of being brought up as a Catholic. He is (secretly and unknown even to himself) a member of Christ, but he will, in all likelihood, be raised as a Satan-worshipper. Satan-worship is bad enough in itself, but Satan-worship as carried out by a baptized person is a great abomination. This child, if he ends up in hell, will suffer more keenly because of the eternal mark of Christ in his soul. His baptism was valid—no doubt about it—but it was not lawful.


Why? Because the Church’s law forbids the baptism of infant children of unbelievers except when they are in danger of death. The Church’s “accumulated prudence” tells us that such baptisms usually have the long-term result of harming the souls of these children rather than helping them, and, consequently, Catholics are forbidden to baptize the healthy children of unbelievers. Many more such Church laws exist—for the Sacrament of Baptism and for all of the others—because Holy Mother Church wants to ensure not only that the Sacraments “work,” but that they are fruitful in souls.

Since the Church has established laws for the (at least hopefully) fruitful administration of the sacraments, it behooves all sacramental ministers to follow those laws for the good of the souls to whom they are ministering. They must be concerned not

only with the validity of the Sacraments they confer, but with making sure that they are lawful.

The same principle holds true in the conferring of Holy Orders, and, in fact, Holy Mother Church is even more concerned, so to speak, with the validity and lawfulness of Holy Orders because this sacrament has such a far-reaching influence on souls.

The priest must not receive Holy Orders for himself primarily, but for others. His ministry will influence untold numbers of souls—for good or ill—and the Church, following St. Paul’s exhortation, will not allow bishops to “impose hands lightly on any man,” lest they “be partaker in other men’s sins.”<sup>11</sup> The Church considers the personal responsibility of an ordaining bishop for a new priest’s soul and for the souls that the new priest will influence—again, for good or ill. She has thus made some fairly stringent guidelines, through her “accumulated prudence,” for the lawful conferral of Holy Orders, and anyone—whether bishop or ordinand—who lightly sets these guidelines aside is imprudent, to say the least.

Sad experience has shown what great havoc imprudent ordinations can wreak at every level: from individuals and families to parishes and dioceses, even to the Church and civil society at large. A prudent consideration of these laws, established by Mother Church for the good of all her children, can help serious Catholics in our time to avoid the disasters which follow in the train of imprudent, unlawful ordinations. 

**(To be continued.)**

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<sup>1</sup> One such bishop is reported to have ordained no fewer than 17 men to the priesthood during that time period.

<sup>2</sup> There are other factors involved, such as sedevacantism, which we need not address in this article, but which certainly have a bearing on the situation.

<sup>3</sup> See Acts 8:9-29.

<sup>4</sup> One of the most frequent questions about “independent” ordinations, “Is he validly ordained?” misses the point entirely. In this view, if he is a priest, he is a good priest by definition, regardless of the abuses which his ordination may have entailed. This attitude discloses an extreme lack of vigilance, along with a curious form of legalism (“But it’s valid!”) mingled with a *laissez-faire* spirit (“We’re home free! No need to inquire further.”)

<sup>5</sup> Consider the attempts to pressure the Society of Saint Pius X not to confer any ordinations in Germany earlier this year.

<sup>6</sup> Rev. Fr. James Buckley, a priestly collaborator of the Society of Saint Pius X in the 1990’s.

<sup>7</sup> Thanks to Rev. Fr. James Doran for this elegant and lapidary definition, from his course of Canon Law at St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary, Winona, Minnesota.

<sup>8</sup> *ex opere operato*

<sup>9</sup> See the response of the Holy Office concerning marriage cases, December 28, 1949 (Dz. 2304). The (rebuttable) presumption is for the validity of baptisms conferred by people with confused or even wrong intentions, as long as the valid form and matter are used.

<sup>10</sup> “The Sacraments are for men,” is a theological axiom.

<sup>11</sup> I Tim 5:22.

# PART 2

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# VALIDITY IS NOT ENOUGH



## The Vocation and Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders

In the previous installment, we discussed the difference between the validity of a sacrament (whether it “worked” or not) and its lawfulness (whether the sacrament, as given here and now, is likely to be fruitful for souls according to the accumulated prudence of the Church). Now it remains for us to apply the general ideas of the validity and lawfulness of the sacraments to the specific question of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In this section, we shall see the requirements for a valid ordination and the warning signs which the Church has posted in order to screen out men who, as sad experience has shown, will be unlikely to become good priests.

## Validity: Only the Starting-Point

For an ordination to be valid on the part of the one being ordained, it is necessary only that he be a baptized male who has at least the habitual intention of receiving the Sacrament of Holy Orders.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this presupposes that the bishop conferring the ordination is himself validly consecrated, that he uses the essential form, and has the intention of doing what the Church does. These are the only requirements for a valid ordination; sometimes, however, a particular valid ordination could indeed be a bad idea. Stalin could have received Holy Orders validly if he had so desired, and if he had been able to find a bishop to ordain him.<sup>2</sup>

## Lawfulness: The Warning Signs

For an ordination to be lawful, however, all of the Church's requirements must either be met or, at the discretion of the legitimate authority, dispensed for a greater good. The lawful ordinand must be free from irregularities and impediments, and he must possess all the positive qualities required by the Church in order for the bishop to judge that he has a Divine vocation. A detailed look at all of these negative warning signs and positive qualities will help us to see why so many modern traditional ordinations simply do not meet the Church's criteria.

## Irregularities: Serious Dangers Ahead!

First, the ordinand must be free from any irregularity. "Irregularity" is a technical term which refers to certain disqualifications which the Church imposes, either because of a defect on the ordinand's part or because of an offense which he has committed. Irregularities are, of their very nature, permanent. Unless dispensed by the proper authority, they prevent a man from receiving orders and prohibit him from exercising any orders he may have already received—and any orders which he may receive in the future. They are extremely serious prohibitions, and, in order for an irregularity to be legitimately dispensed, the positive qualities of the ordinand in question must be very great.<sup>3</sup>

First among the irregularities arising from a defect in the ordinand is illegitimacy. A man whose parents were never married is not normally able to be ordained. This may seem harsh to us today, but consider that the priest must be a spiritual father. Even though it is no fault of his, the young man who has never experienced "normal" family life will be hard pressed to act as a father himself, especially if his own father has deserted the family. Noble exceptions are found, but exceptions are only

recognized as exceptions because we perceive that there is a rule to be followed.

Bodily and mental defects may also constitute irregularities, depending on their severity. The old manuals speak of men who are hunch-backed or who have an uncorrected club foot or cleft palate, but any bodily defect which may make the future priest an object of ridicule or prevent him physically from carrying out the priesthood in a dignified and worthy manner will ordinarily prevent his ordination. Blindness or deafness would also normally hinder the exercise of the priesthood in a serious way.

Mental defects, ranging from an inability to complete the normal studies, to instability, to outright mental illness, make a man irregular for an even greater reason. The powers of the priesthood are truly awesome, and they must not be allowed to be exercised by anyone who cannot do so competently and sanely. Under the same general heading, epilepsy has also prevented candidates from seeking ordination because of the unpredictable nature of the attacks and the danger that the Blessed Sacrament might be endangered.

While it is possible that a widower can become a holy and edifying priest, the fact of having been married more than once makes a man irregular for Holy Orders. To understand this, it is helpful to note that second marriages, while allowed by the Church, have always been considered exceptional.<sup>4</sup> The Church's ideal for future priests is virginity, in perfect imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Men who are not virgins may certainly be ordained, but men who have been married more than once are held to be unsuitable for the priesthood because of the implication of sensuality.

Another of the Church's disqualifications for Holy Orders is known as "infamy of law." This means that the ordinand has officially lost his good reputation, and he, therefore, has a bad reputation, by the law itself. People only become "infamous at law" by breaking certain grave Church laws in a public way. As an example, anyone who commits sexual sins with anyone under the age of sixteen (of either gender) incurs this infamy,<sup>5</sup> but there are many other examples.

The last of the irregularities on account of defects is the one arising from what is called the "defect of leniency." The priest is the minister of Christ's mercy, and it is unbecoming that anyone who is perceived as seriously unmerciful should be ordained. A man incurs this irregularity only in the context of the criminal law: The judge and jury who pass a death sentence are all considered irregular, as well as the executioner himself and his immediate assistants. Even though a particular sentence was perfectly just, it is still unbecoming for such a

person to become a priest because of the probable repugnance of the faithful.

The irregularities considered so far arise from defects in the potential ordinand; we must now turn to irregularities which a man may incur because of his own sins. Chief among these sins which bar a man from the priesthood are apostasy, heresy, and schism. Apostasy means the deliberate abandonment of Christianity. Heresy denotes wilfully believing teachings contrary to the Catholic Faith. Schism flows from one's refusal to be in communion with the Pope or with others who are in communion with him.

These sins are only possible for the baptized, and the corresponding irregularities generally only bind those who were Catholic beforehand. It is easy to see why a man who has wilfully left the Church would be unsuitable for ordination, even after he happily comes back. The priest is the man of faith *par excellence*, and a grave sin against the Faith (by apostasy or heresy) will always place a question-mark over the firmness of his convictions.<sup>6</sup> The priest must be a man of the Church, and a man's rebellion against the Divine constitution of the Church (by schism) will inevitably found suspicions that he might rebel again, given the right circumstances. The Church cannot normally take such a risk; even priests who leave the Church are normally held to these irregularities when they return; and Catholics who leave the Church and are ordained by another body with valid orders are almost always received back into the Church as laymen.

Another irregularity arises from one's sin in receiving the Sacrament of Baptism from a non-Catholic, outside the case of necessity. This presupposes that one has reached the age of reason and that he knows that the Catholic Church is the true Church of Christ. Such a man would be under the same suspicions and uncertainties as those who are guilty of heresy and schism, and his ordination would normally be unwise for the same reasons.

The Latin Church has always preserved the discipline of clerical celibacy—a tradition going back to the early Church and probably of Apostolic origin. As noted above, virginity is the ideal, in perfect imitation of Our Lord. Clerics in major orders voluntarily renounce their natural right to marry, and they are thereafter bound by an invalidating impediment from ever marrying. Subdeacons, deacons, priests, and bishops are incapable of marrying validly unless dispensed by the Holy See as a part of the process of laicization.

Any cleric in major orders who nevertheless attempts marriage becomes irregular. He is, therefore, prohibited from exercising any order which he has received, and he is prohibited—for even greater reason—from receiving further orders.

Putting the question of ideals and Apostolic tradition aside, the scandal of the faithful alone would make any further ordination of such a cleric profoundly imprudent.

The same irregularity binds any man who attempts marriage while either he or his putative spouse is bound by a valid marriage bond or religious vows. Such an abuse of the Sacrament of Matrimony would be bound to cause the suspicion that the prospective priest would not scruple to abuse other sacraments, or even to attempt marriage again after ordination.

Relating to the irregularity from the “defect of leniency” above, the irregularity arising from homicide or cooperation in abortion is most serious. “Homicide,” here, means either that a man has directly killed someone else or that he has been the guilty cause of the other's death.<sup>7</sup> In order for a man to be barred from the priesthood by the irregularity for abortion, his level of cooperation would have to be such that he would also incur the excommunication for this crime.<sup>8</sup>

Closely related to the irregularity from mental defect, already discussed, is the irregularity incurred by a man who has mutilated himself in some serious way or attempted suicide. Aside from the physical defect which might arise from self-mutilation, the question of the underlying motivation for such an act would normally raise serious questions about a man's suitability for Holy Orders. It is the priest who must teach others that the body is the “temple of the Holy Ghost”; how can he do this credibly if he has maimed himself? No one doubts that suicide is often the result of true mental illness—or even chemical causes in the nervous system. Nonetheless, it also results from the sin of despair. The priest must be a man of hope, radiating this hope to others, and a past suicide attempt can easily undermine this aspect of his ministry.

The last two irregularities for Holy Orders can only be incurred by clerics; both relate to abuses of the clerical state. For the same reason that homicide gives rise to an irregularity, the clergy are forbidden to practice medicine or surgery. The constant possibility that patients will die hangs over the clerical physician or surgeon. Even if a death is not his fault, it will bring discredit on his priesthood, and people are always ready to talk. For this reason, all clerics are forbidden to act as physicians or surgeons. If a patient dies during such a forbidden practice, the cleric falls under the irregularity.

The final irregularity arises from the abuse of a sacred order.<sup>9</sup> If any cleric presumes to exercise solemnly a sacred order which he has not received, he thereby becomes irregular. (An example would be for a deacon to hear confessions and simulate giving absolution or for a lector to give Benediction with the Blessed Sacrament.) He also incurs

irregularity by exercising a sacred order he has received if he is under a canonical prohibition from doing so.

## **Impediments: Causes for Serious Concern**

The next group of warning signs about prospective priests are the impediments. These are generally less serious disqualifications from ordination, and they are by nature temporary, since they can go away by themselves without dispensation after a time. Nevertheless, the Church has made it unlawful to ordain a man who falls under any of these impediments because of the serious concerns they raise. Dispensations from impediments were given more readily than dispensations from irregularities in the past, but there still had to be some outstanding positive qualities in an ordinand by which the concerns about negative qualities could be overcome.

The Catholic son of a non-Catholic was impeded from receiving orders because of a concern that he might not have sufficient Catholic convictions. Indeed, one such priest, now deceased, was known to the author; even up to the year he entered the seminary, in the 1950's, he was trying to decide whether to become a Catholic priest or a Protestant minister. This did not bode well for his future, but, again, noble exceptions abound. This issue, like the other impediments and the irregularities, must be worked out with those who have the charge of forming future priests.

A man who is bound by a valid marriage bond is impeded from ordination in the Roman Rite, for reasons already touched upon. The Holy See has been known to dispense this impediment in some cases. Traditionally, however, such men were required to separate and live chastely, with the consent of their wives.

Clerics who exercise offices or burdens forbidden to the clergy are impeded from receiving further orders until they resign the offices or lay down the burdens. These are typically cases of business administration or trusteeship which involve serious responsibility and require that there be an account given of money or property. The point of this impediment is that the clergy should concentrate all of their time and efforts on the service of God<sup>10</sup> and that, in the event of a fiduciary mistake or financial failure, no one should be able to hold the priest up to reproach.

Though it is scarcely common in Western countries today, being a slave—in the proper use of the term—is an impediment to orders. Such an impediment would cease upon gaining one's freedom.

In a similar vein, a man who is subject to an obligatory period of military service which he has not yet served is impeded from receiving orders. This obviously binds those who are currently enlisted as well as those who are subject to the peace-time military draft in the future. Military chaplains are not bound, nor are clerics who are drafted in war-time.





Validity is truly not enough. The Church has told us for centuries which warning signs to heed in order that an ordination may be lawful and have a greater chance of glorifying God and sanctifying souls. We ignore those signs at our peril.


Neophytes—the newly-converted—fall under an impediment which forbids their reception of holy orders until their new faith has been sufficiently tested, in the judgment of the relevant diocesan bishop or religious superior. Far too often, a convert’s zeal pushes him farther and faster than he should prudently go, and Holy Mother Church insists on slowing such a man down during such a momentous discernment as trying a vocation.

The final impediment to ordination is the so-called “infamy of fact.” This corresponds to the irregularity of “infamy of law,” discussed above. Those who are infamous at law have officially lost their reputations as a legal consequence of some serious offense, and this state is permanent. A man who is infamous in fact, on the other hand, has merely behaved (or has been seen to have behaved) in such a way as to bring discredit and ill repute upon himself.<sup>11</sup> Such behavior could certainly be serious, but it would reflect a more mundane or “garden-variety” level of scandal than the more serious offenses necessary to incur infamy of law. A man who is infamous in fact is bound by the impediment only as long as his reputation is still bad, in the judgment of the diocesan bishop or religious superior who has to make the decision.

## The Point of These Warning Signs

This section has, perforce, been a sort of catalog of negative points about young men who may aspire to the priesthood, and this may seem too rigorous during a situation such as the one Holy Mother Church finds herself in today. Nevertheless, one must not see all of these impediments and irregularities as so many obstacles to navigate around or so many hoops to jump through. Practically every one of these warning signs has been placed on the road to the priesthood because of the Church’s long and sad experience of human frailty among the clergy. The Church certainly looks for a great number of positive qualities in future priests. The candidate who shines brightly in one or more of those positive areas may well be able to overcome some of the dangers indicated by the impediments and irregularities, but the dangers remain.

Statistics, thankfully, never tell the whole story about anything, but it would be grossly imprudent of the Church—or of a superior acting in her name—to press on with the ordination of a man who sets off multiple warning bells by falling under the disqualifications established for ordinands in Canon Law. How much more reckless would it be for such a superior not even to investigate, or to “dispense” without taking account of the positive qualities which would be necessary to overcome the dangers! This is, unfortunately, what may have happened with far too many of today’s “emergency” ordinations.

Validity is truly not enough. The Church has told us for centuries which warning signs to heed in order that an ordination may be lawful and have a greater chance of glorifying God and sanctifying souls. We ignore those signs at our peril. 

(To be continued.)

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<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas holds that even a baptized male infant could be validly ordained, although he would have to accept the obligations flowing from ordination when he is old enough before they would be binding on him.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, he had been a seminarian as a young man.

<sup>3</sup> It may help us to consider that irregularities and impediments are not punishments *per se*, but protections for the priesthood itself.

<sup>4</sup> In the Eastern Church, the rite for second marriages is penitential.

<sup>5</sup> Needless to say, if this irregularity had been enforced, many of the recent clerical scandals would have been prevented because, after a first offense, guilty priests could never have exercised their priesthood again—except perhaps privately, after a prolonged period of penance.

<sup>6</sup> Such a man, still in a Protestant sect and even in a Protestant seminary, approached the author for help in pursuing a vocation to the Catholic priesthood. When told that he could not be sure of being accepted as a candidate for the seminary, he chose to remain where he was.

<sup>7</sup> *E.g.*, the crimes of felony murder, voluntary manslaughter, or conspiracy to commit murder.

<sup>8</sup> In technical language, formal cooperation or close material cooperation would be necessary.

<sup>9</sup> “Sacred orders,” canonically speaking, are the subdiaconate, the diaconate, the priesthood, and the episcopate.

<sup>10</sup> “Cleric” comes from a root which means “the portion” [of the Lord].

<sup>11</sup> The criterion is that one has lost his reputation in the opinion of upright and reliable Catholics.

FR. SCOTT GARDNER, SSPX

# VALIDITY IS NOT ENOUGH



## The Vocation and Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders

We have now seen all of the factors which must be taken into account to ensure the validity of ordination, and we have gone through the unpleasant catalog of the warning signs—the irregularities and impediments—by which Holy Mother Church has indicated danger ahead. It remains now to see the positive qualities which young men must possess in order to give a reasonable foundation to the judgment that they are truly called by God to the sacred priesthood, for His glory and the salvation of souls.

### **The Twofold Vocation: Divine and Ecclesiastical**

Before proceeding to the positive qualities themselves, it is necessary to dispel a serious misconception about “having

a vocation.” *Vocation* means “calling”<sup>1</sup>; one who has a vocation has been called. Too often, even in traditional circles, one is tempted to think that “having a vocation to the priesthood” means experiencing some sort of emotional desire to become a priest.<sup>2</sup> This desire can indeed accompany a true vocation, but it need not. Many fine priests have experienced no such emotional desire to become priests, and many men who have such a desire do not have vocations.

This confusion seems to result from having imbibed just a bit of the Protestant spirit whereby one ends up following the emotional impulses of the soul as if they were infallible signs of grace at work—or as if they were grace itself. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Grace is an essentially supernatural reality. It cannot be “felt” with the senses, experienced by the emotions. Certainly, the actual graces sent by God to direct us can, by His permission, cause an emotional response within our souls, but practically *anything* can cause an emotional response within our souls! An emotional desire for the priesthood—indeed for anything holy—can come either from God, from the devil, or from our own nature.<sup>3</sup> One must attempt to *discern* the origin of any emotional movements in the soul before basing any important action on them, especially such an important action as becoming a priest.

Vocation to the clerical state is...an act of Divine Providence whereby God selects some above others for His priesthood and prepares them with suitable gifts for the worthy exercise of priestly duties. For this reason, and because this sacrament has been instituted not so much for the recipient as for the common good of the faithful, one who is conscious of a lack of vocation or who has made insufficient inquiry or who is in serious doubt about his vocation is liable to grave sin in approaching the reception of Holy Orders. (Halligan, *The Administration of the Sacraments* [1962], 376)

Since the emotional desire for the priesthood in an unreliable guide, how is it possible to tell if one is being called by God? It is customary to speak of certain “signs of a vocation,” objective factors which can already point out a man’s suitability as a candidate for the seminary. Among those commonly named are reasonably good physical and moral health, reasonable intellectual ability, and an upright intention (namely, the willingness to put oneself at God’s disposal for His glory and the salvation of souls).

This is precisely why the seminary is the place for *trying* one’s vocation. *Try* is not used here in its common meaning of “attempt,” but in its older meaning of “test.”<sup>4</sup> A young man concretely enters the seminary because he has asked for permission to do so and because the superiors have judged that sufficient signs of a vocation are objectively present in him, but the entire process of seminary formation

contains a major element of trial. The candidate for Holy Orders tests his aptitude for the priestly life, and he is tested—not only in his studies—by those who have charge of his formation.

The object of these combined tests is to determine whether an otherwise apt young man’s intention to become a priest is in line with God’s will. In other words, the “trial” aspect of seminary formation is to allow the superior to form a judgment—a judgment not only about the aptitude of the candidate but about whether God is calling him to the priesthood. Discovering the interior Divine vocation, which God gives mysteriously and invisibly to those whom He chooses, is the object of the trials of the seminary.

If a candidate for Holy Orders requests ordination, his superior must make a judgment based upon the cumulative results of years’ worth of seminary trials. If he judges that, after all, the young man has a Divine vocation, he recommends the candidate for ordination by his proper bishop.<sup>5</sup> If this bishop agrees, then the candidate’s *ecclesiastical* vocation is sure. Strictly speaking, this ecclesiastical vocation to the priesthood only comes during the ordination ceremony itself, when the archdeacon calls the ordinand’s name and he answers, “*Adsum*”; “I am here.” Until this point, no vocation is certain, but the formal calling of the candidate by the representative of the Church hierarchy is considered both to reflect and to guarantee the Divine vocation of the ordinand.

Following the chanting of the Litany of the Saints, with the ordinands prostrate on the floor, the ordaining bishop asks the archdeacon, “*Scis illos esse dignos*”; “Do you know them to be worthy?” The archdeacon then responds, “*Quantum humana fragilitas nosse sinit, et scio, et testificor ipsos dignos esse ad hujus onus officii*”; “As far as human frailty allows to know, I both know and testify that they are worthy of the charge of this office.” All of this presupposes the considered judgment which has been made, over the course of a serious formation, of the ordinand’s aptitude and upright intention. It is not an overstatement to say that such a judgment is morally impossible without, as was stated earlier, a stable relationship between the ordinand and his superior and a reasonably complete seminary formation.

Here is the crux of the problem: In most, if not all, of the irregular traditional ordinations, there is a lie told officially and liturgically during the rite itself. If there has been no prolonged seminary formation, the one presenting the candidates for ordination can scarcely claim both to *know*, “as far as human frailty allows,” and to *testify* that the candidates are worthy.

How can anyone expect the Holy Ghost to confirm what is thus done? How can anyone expect God to bless the apostolate of a bishop who “lays

hands lightly” on a man of whose vocation he cannot be sure, or of a priest who so rashly accepts ordination without heeding the voice of God, as expressed objectively through centuries of canonical regulations whose purpose is precisely to verify the presence of a Divine vocation?

## Suitability in Detail

### Physical and psychological well-being

More is necessary in a candidate for Holy Orders, generally speaking, than a mere absence of bodily defects. The physical demands placed on the typical traditional priest in the 21st century are very great; long hours, multiple apostolates, and heavy travel combine to age a new priest quickly. At the very least, decent health and a certain degree of energy are of inestimable value to the priest.

The absence psychological problems is only the beginning of the story when one comes to evaluate a candidate for the priesthood. Not only must a young man be free of serious mental illness; he should be notably balanced. There needs to be solid proof both of his sound judgment and his common sense.<sup>6</sup> All candidates for Holy Orders must be observed carefully for signs of psychological problems, and, if there is suspicion of such problems, experts should be consulted. While such scrutiny should obviously not be used as a weapon against otherwise apt candidates, as has often happened in conciliar seminaries, it has its proper place in the discernment of the vocation. Whatever the case, a superior must be convinced of a candidate’s good psychological health, his balance, his solid judgment, and his common sense before advancing him to Holy Orders.

### Intellectual excellence

While an average intellectual ability is considered to be an initial sign of a vocation, a man who asks to be ordained a priest must already possess a great store of theological and philosophical knowledge, and a thorough knowledge of—and competence in—the Latin language is indispensable for learning what is required. Other important subjects such as Sacred Scripture, canon law, and patrology complete the priestly formation, but secular subjects should in no way be omitted from a well-rounded seminary program.<sup>7</sup>

The popes of the early to mid-20th century were adamant that the priest must be a man of learning, not only in order to refute false arguments against the Faith and to teach true doctrine to the faithful—the priest must seek the source of his union with Christ in the contemplation of the sacred sciences.<sup>8</sup> St. Pius X wrote:

All those who are preparing in the quiet of the seminary for the exercise of the sacred and difficult functions of the priesthood must take timely steps to see that they are equipped with the rich resources of learning. (*Sacrorum Antistitum*)

Pope Pius XI warned that, even for religious priests destined not for the external ministry but for the cloister, the sacred sciences are necessary:

Anyone who undertakes the sacred ministry without training or competence should tremble for his own fate, for the Lord will not suffer his ignorance to go unpunished; it is the Lord who has uttered the dire warning: “Because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will reject thee, and thou shalt not do the office of priesthood to me” (Osee 4:6). (*Unigenitus Dei Filius*)

Finally, Pope Pius XII states that,

In conformity with Our Apostolic duty, We have insisted earnestly on the importance of a high standard of intellectual training for clerics. (*Menti Nostrae*)

The example of St. John Vianney is sometimes brought up to argue that piety and a quite basic knowledge are sufficient for an ordinand in a time of crisis. After all, the *Curé d’Ars* never even learned Latin properly! The answer is that the exception proves the rule—the fact that something is seen as exceptional shows that there *is* a norm.

The fact of the matter is that this Saint’s primary handicap was his inability to learn Latin well; he certainly studied philosophy and theology using manuals written in French. He learned the material, rather slowly, under the patient tutelage of his own pastor, who believed so much in his vocation because of his other outstanding qualities. The fact that the holy Curé received special infused knowledge directly from God is another factor often overlooked by those who claim his example as a justification for downplaying the importance of intellectual competence among the clergy in a time of crisis.

### Moral excellence in general

If intellectual suitability is crucially important for the future priest, moral suitability is even more necessary. Living fairly consistently in the state of grace and practicing some virtues well may be sufficient for a new entrant to the seminary, but, the closer the approach to Holy Orders, the greater holiness is required of a candidate.

Clerics are bound to lead a more saintly interior and exterior life than the laity, and to give them the example by excelling in virtue and righteous conduct. (1917 Code of Canon Law, c. 124)

A candidate for the priesthood must not only enjoy a good reputation and be free from gross external sins; he must live habitually in the grace of God and consistently show a high degree of solid virtue, especially in the area of chastity. How can any of these things be known with a moral certainty

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unless the candidate has lived for a long period with the one who must make the judgment of his suitability?


### Chastity: the *sine qua non*

Among the gifts of grace and nature of which there must be positive proof in order to recognize a Divine vocation to the priesthood, chastity must be singled out as the “*sine qua non*” condition. (Sacred Congregation of Seminaries, *Reserved Instruction*, July 1, 1955)

As stated above, virginity, in imitation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is the ideal for the priest, and perfect chastity is the ancient standard. Like other virtues, chastity in the cleric must not merely reflect the absence of deviation. Heroic virtue is required of an *alter Christus*. Chastity must be

proven or tried, in that there must be positive evidence of its presence...consequently, the seminarian must be a person of proven purity, solidly possessed, profoundly appreciated, and zealously cherished. (Halligan, *Administration of the Sacraments*, 379).

The Church has traditionally taken severe measures against unchastity among priests, and it was always seen to be easier and better to “weed out” seminarians who have difficulty keeping chaste than to deal with the problems arising from sensual priests. Before the Second Vatican Council, detailed instructions from Rome told superiors how to handle problems of chastity among seminarians—which sins were automatic disqualifications, which level of chastity was necessary for promotion to which level of the seminary, *etc.* Superiors, spiritual directors,

and confessors all had their roles to play. How is such a discernment practically possible outside a seminary—or at least outside a stable relationship over time between a superior and an ordinand? The fact is that it is scarcely possible at all, and the propensity of some “independent bishops” to ordain men of untried chastity—or even married men—is one of the clearest signs of their departure from the “accumulated prudence of the Church.” 

### (To be continued.)

Rev. Fr. Scott Gardner, ordained for the Society of Saint Pius X in 2003, is currently assigned to St. Mary’s Assumption priory in St. Louis, Missouri, where he coordinates the work of the St. Raymond of Peñafort Canonical Commission. He is also the United States District Chaplain for the Third Order of Saint Pius X, and he serves the Society’s Chicago mission, Our Lady Immaculate, on weekends and holy days.

<sup>1</sup> From the Latin *vocare*, meaning “to call.”

<sup>2</sup> “Having a vocation is like a cup of hot chocolate [*sic*],” said one conciliar seminarian in the *Winona Daily News* during the late 1990’s.

<sup>3</sup> See the works of St. John of the Cross.

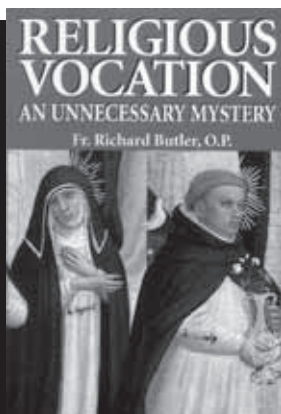
<sup>4</sup> As judges “try” cases by testing the arguments of one side against those of the other

<sup>5</sup> Or by the proper bishop’s delegate.

<sup>6</sup> Scarcely enough can ever be said of the necessity of common sense, especially when it comes to the question of giving or receiving Holy Orders. In fact, almost the whole study of this subject can be summarized by saying, “Use common sense in deciding whom to ordain or whether to receive ordination.”

<sup>7</sup> “[I]t is Our most earnest wish, that in literary and scientific studies, future priests should at least be in no way inferior to lay students who follow corresponding courses...” (Pius XII, *Menti Nostrae*).

<sup>8</sup> Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre insisted that priests must find their spirituality in the *Summa* of St. Thomas and in Holy Mass.



## Religious Vocation: An Unnecessary Mystery

Fr. Richard Butler, O.P.

The question of discerning a vocation is agonized over by many generous young Catholics today. A solid Thomist, who wrote this book in 1961, Father Butler shows that this type of question shows a totally wrong approach to a religious vocation—an approach that began with misguided theology in the 20th century, which then trickled down to the popular level, confusing both aspirants and spiritual directors.

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FR. SCOTT GARDNER, SSPX

# VALIDITY IS NOT ENOUGH



## The Vocation and Suitability of Candidates for Holy Orders

Having seen almost all of the Church's major requirements which must be met before a bishop can lawfully confer Holy Orders, we must now examine some of the other standards which have been set. Although these criteria are less momentous than most of what has gone before, they have been established for good reasons. We shall consider these reasons briefly.

### **Canonical Age**

It was noted earlier that one bishop was reputed to have ordained a 12-year-old boy. Anyone who has ever been around 12-year-old boys (or has been one himself) should realize what a bad idea this is. Holy Mother Church traditionally forbade bishops to ordain any man under 24 to the priesthood.<sup>1</sup> The reasoning behind these age restrictions is based on more than merely ensuring that an ordinand's studies have been completed. It is necessary that a priest be fully mature and apt to exercise his spiritual fatherhood—not to mention the awesome powers of the priesthood—in a truly manly way. In exceptional cases, bishops can ordain men who are slightly younger, but, again, there must be a corresponding level of maturity and virtue in order to dispense from the Church's standard.

## Confirmation

Just as a man ought to be fully formed physically and psychologically before ordination, and just as he must be solid in virtue, he must also be a real adult spiritually. The Church thus requires that a man be confirmed before receiving Holy Orders. The Sacrament of Confirmation makes one a spiritual adult and strengthens one for the adult states of life: priesthood, religious life, or marriage.<sup>2</sup>

## The State of Grace

The state of sanctifying grace is required for the lawful reception of Holy Orders, as it is for all of the sacraments of the living. Obviously, there is no way for anyone to be absolutely certain about the state of one's own soul in that regard—much less about anyone else's. A moral certainty is all that is required, but that certainty can scarcely be reached by an ordaining bishop who has no seminary staff to rely upon for recommendations. Seminarians themselves must be open with their directors about their struggles as well as their progress, and, although the directors cannot normally use the knowledge obtained in direction to aid the superiors in external governance, they can and sometimes must advise seminarians not to receive orders. This sort of guidance is not normally possible in the context of irregular ordinations such as the ones which have become increasingly common.

## Observance of the Right Sequence of, and Intervals between, Orders

The Church has insisted for many centuries that each order conferred upon a man be actually exercised before he receives the next order, so that there must be intervals between the various orders he receives on the way to the priesthood. With even more reason did the Church insist that a man receive *each* of the orders without skipping any. One sometimes hears of irregular cases where the “independent bishop” ordains a man to the diaconate before the priesthood, but the contrary practice seems much more frequent: Lay men are ordained directly to the priesthood without any previous orders. The Church did allow a bishop to dispense from the intervals between some of the minor orders (as is the common practice in the Society of St. Pius X), but the intervals had to be observed between the major orders. The rationale for this is not so much that the seminarian will learn how to sing the Epistle or serve Mass properly as to observe his continuing progress in virtue and learning as he approaches closer to the altar.

## Retreat, Oath, and Profession of Faith

The reception of the Sacrament of Orders is such an important event in any man's life that it must be preceded by a proper and immediate spiritual preparation. Thus, Holy Mother Church requires an ordinand (or even a man who is about to receive the clerical tonsure) to go on retreat for a specified number of days. At the end of the retreats before receiving each of the major orders, the cleric was required by St. Pius X to take the Oath Against Modernism and to make the Profession of Faith of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council.<sup>3</sup> The author has never heard of such a retreat in the context of the irregular ordinations we are examining.

## The “Title of Ordination”

Because the Church must be solicitous for the material support of the clergy, and because no priests are to be ordained where there is no need for them, such support must be ensured before a man can be ordained lawfully. The assurance of support, known as the “Title of Ordination,” was required before a man could be ordained, and if the title was lost before promotion to the next order, another was required. Religious clerics held the “Title of Poverty,” signifying that their order would look after their needs. Diocesan clerics held the title of a particular benefice (normally a parish) or of “Service to the Diocese,” provided that they had made an oath of stability—that they would not try to transfer to another diocese. Clerics in a society of common life, such as the Society of St. Pius X, held the title of “The Common Table,” meaning that all of their material needs would be supplied by the society.<sup>4</sup> The mechanics of this assurance of material support are not as important as the principle: that the clergy, who dedicate their lives to the service of God, should not have to pursue a secular career in order to survive. Not only are the titles ignored, but the principle itself is mostly ignored in irregular ordinations.<sup>5</sup>

## Technical Prerequisites

We come, finally, to some technical prerequisites which must normally be in place in order for an ordination to be lawful: the examination, the “banns” of ordination, and the testimonial letters<sup>6</sup> which may be necessary. While these are, in themselves, rather less important than what has gone before, they still have their place in keeping in touch with the prudence of the Church and in preventing the disasters which can follow easily from impulsive ordinations.

Every candidate for Holy Orders must be examined comprehensively to establish his sufficient knowledge of the sacred sciences. Individual

It is only necessary to look around at the veritable avalanche of disasters following from imprudent ordinations to see the source of so much evil. That source is not God.

superiors of ordinands may require even more extensive examinations than those given as a matter of course to all seminarians. Getting passing grades in the seminary courses and staying out of trouble have never been sufficient, in themselves, to qualify one for ordination. How much less qualified would those men be who have never studied the sacred sciences at all!

Just as marriage, which is also a sacrament influencing the common good, must normally be announced publicly before it takes place, the “banns” of ordination must be published in the parish of origin of each candidate.<sup>7</sup> The bishop of an ordinand may require this announcement on an even wider basis if he so chooses. The purpose is not only to inform the faithful but to seek out knowledge of any hidden impediments or irregularities which may hinder the proposed ordination.

As in the case of the banns of marriage, this announcement is part of the “due diligence” which must be performed in order to avoid sacramental train wrecks. This is never (or at least rarely) done in the case of irregular ordinations; indeed, they are regularly conducted quite secretly or at least discreetly. Such a procedure is repugnant to the public nature of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which, as has already been said, is not given primarily for the priest himself but for the good of the whole Church.


## Validity Is Not Enough: For the Church and for Souls

We come, at long last, to the end of this exploration of the requirements put in place by Holy Mother Church in order both to promote and to safeguard the welfare of souls by the right selection and formation of future priests. Hopefully, by seeing how extensive and detailed the Church’s prudential guidelines are, one can begin to appreciate the enormous risk—even the enormous presumption—a bishop or an ordinand takes when setting aside the traditional discipline. Admittedly, there have been, and presumably always will be, exceptions to one or another of the canonical standards, but it is a hallmark of our time—and a hallmark of blinding pride—always to consider oneself exceptional!

It is only necessary to look around at the veritable avalanche of disasters following from imprudent ordinations to see the source of so much evil. That source is not God. However kind or otherwise commendable such a priest or bishop may

be, if he has received—or given—holy orders to a man, or in a way, not willed by God, he is in great danger. He puts souls in danger. He must, somehow, come to his senses and seek a way out by petitioning Rome for laicization. He must further do serious penance. He must not neglect to repair the harm he may have done to souls, and he must not stand on his dignity—the dignity of an order that has been usurped. These may seem like harsh words, but the reality is harsher, and God is just as well as merciful!

For the faithful, it is time to wake up to the danger that such irregular ordinations pose to the common good of the Church. Validity is not enough! “Valid” is not the same thing as good or fruitful. Men who have no vocations, who do not know how to conduct themselves, much less how to form others, are circulating all over the place. They might represent less of a danger to the Church if they were not priests, for they are priests who have taken the priesthood to themselves, by themselves. They have, as likely as not, received this priesthood from bishops who have behaved likewise. Although they may be friends or even relatives, do not fall into the trap. In that way lies anarchy, chaos, and finally madness.

The ultimate answer lies in common sense, enlightened by Faith: examine the fruits and trust only those who can show good fruits. These fruits will be the result of God’s blessing on those who follow the accumulated prudence of the Church, who is our mother and teacher. 

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The author wishes to acknowledge as his primary source the following invaluable book: Halligan, Nicholas, O.P. *The Administration of the Sacraments*. Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1963.

<sup>1</sup> The limits were 22 for the diaconate and 21 for the subdiaconate. The 1983 Code has raised the limit for priests to 25 and deacons to 23.

<sup>2</sup> This has nothing to do with the common adage that confirmation makes one a “soldier of Christ.” Being a soldier is normally consequent upon being an adult, and confirmation primarily gives one a supernatural adulthood. See St. Thomas’s reasoning in *S.T.*, III, Q. 72, art. 1.

<sup>3</sup> The new code still requires a Profession of Faith but not the Oath.

<sup>4</sup> This is still the practice in the Society of St. Pius X, despite the fact that the new code has a different set-up.

<sup>5</sup> One man who contacted the author was considering receiving ordination so that he would not have to drive a long way in order to assist at Mass; he had no intention of quitting his job.

<sup>6</sup> The only thing to note about these letters is that they may be required in the case of a man who has lived in more than one diocese since growing old enough to incur irregularities or impediments. Their purpose is to help to establish his freedom from these.

<sup>7</sup> This is not necessary for a religious ordinand.