

Facing the Truth

Learning from the Past How the Catholic Church in Victoria has Responded to Child Abuse

Fact Sheet 10 Screening and formation

23 April 2013

Formation is the term for seminary training or more commonly the process of becoming a priest or a member of a religious institute. As awareness of child sexual abuse grew in the 1980s, the Church reviewed and strengthened its procedures for the admission and formation of future priests and religious. Formation is now one of the central elements in the prevention of any future abuse of children by Church personnel.

As a key part of their formation, consistent with principles set out in *Integrity in Ministry* and *Towards Healing*, seminarians are taught the Church's unequivocal condemnation of the sexual abuse of children, and the fact that such abuse constitutes a profound and fundamental betrayal of all that the Church believes in.

Candidates are made aware of the importance of caring for the victims of abuse and meeting their needs wherever possible. They are told that the Church's practice is to encourage victims to go to the police and they are also informed about the Church's *Melbourne Response* and *Towards Healing* protocols. Potential candidates for priesthood and religious life undergo an extensive screening process prior to being granted entry to a seminary. This screening includes meetings with the candidate, testimony of others regarding their suitability, and a comprehensive psychological assessment and medical examination by qualified practitioners. The assessment looks particularly at identifying any psycho-sexual pathology, especially paedophilia.

Applicants must receive a positive evaluation from each element of this screening before they can be admitted into a seminary formation program.

Any candidates who have previously enrolled in a different seminary must provide an account of their formation history, and the previous seminary must provide all relevant information regarding the candidate and their reason for leaving.

The strengthening of these admission procedures has been an important part of the Church's response to sexual abuse by clergy.

While the precise details of formation programs differ between seminaries in Victoria, there are common principles, including those set out in *Integrity in Ministry*, that guide all aspects of formation of candidates for priesthood and religious life. In addition, academic formation for candidates is provided in common at a small number of theological colleges. These courses are accredited by civil authorities and include topics such as responding to allegations of misconduct, maintaining personal boundaries, codes of ethics and codes of conduct, and *Integrity in Ministry*.

Seminaries have a strong emphasis on fostering psycho-sexual maturity and therefore provide candidates with specific theoretical and practical formation for healthy celibate living, respect for all, and the appropriate exercise of power. This is the most significant way that formation programs can contribute to the prevention of future sexual abuse of children.

The usual context for formation in Victoria is in the provincial seminary (for Diocesan seminarians) or in the seminaries or houses of formation of religious congregations. There are currently 16 such seminaries or houses of formation in Victoria.

Life during formation is very balanced. As well as undertaking academic studies, seminarians are expected to give attention to their psychological and spiritual wellbeing, and to their physical health. They are encouraged to remain in contact with family and friends, and are required to carry out regular supervised pastoral work in a range of settings outside the seminary. Seminarians are also

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www.facingthetruth.org.au

The Melbourne Response

Ph: (03) 9225 7979

www.cam.org.au/Melbourne-Response

Towards Healing

Ph: 1800 816 030 or (02) 9669 6218

www.catholic.org.au

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encouraged to form mature and healthy relationships with a range of men and women, and are educated in their awareness of appropriate boundaries in words and actions with both adults and children.

Candidates receive personal mentoring, supervision and ongoing spiritual direction. Open dialogue about sexuality and psycho-sexual development is encouraged as part of these relationships.

For those who experience difficulties in achieving and maintaining healthy psycho-sexual maturity, seminaries arrange professional psychological counselling. Reviews of the continuation of the candidature may also be carried out. In fact, all candidates for the priesthood and religious life are regularly reviewed and evaluated by formation staff, who consult a wide variety of people involved in the candidate's formation and ministry experience.

In the event of any sexual abuse being committed by a candidate, the appropriate legal steps would be taken and the person would be removed from the seminary.

All seminarians residing in Victoria are required to hold a valid Working with Children Check card throughout their formation.