



## **Leading Men Through the Call to Priesthood at Various Age Levels**

### **Introductory Discussion Topics**

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#### **Introduction**

Priests play a vital role in journeying with young men who are discerning the call to the priesthood. The discernment process extends beyond evaluating external qualities and skills; it involves a profound interior journey of listening to God's voice. The priest's task is to guide these men as they seek to understand God's will for their lives, helping them grow in virtue, deepen their relationship with Christ, and discern a potential call to the priesthood.

The Program for Priestly Formation 6 offers a comprehensive framework for identifying the qualities to look for in a seminary candidate. Guidance from priests helps men cultivate these qualities by encouraging the development of genuine friendships, a life of personal prayer, active participation in the sacramental life of the Church, and a commitment to serving the parish community. Accompaniment involves supporting these men not only in spiritual and pastoral growth but also in intellectual, emotional, and human formation.

Priests act as mentors and spiritual fathers, helping these men ask the right questions, navigate doubts, and confront any fears regarding their vocation. Through prayer, conversation, and example, priests can assist in discerning with freedom and clarity whether God is calling them to the priesthood. The priest's own witness to the joy and sacrifice of the priestly life serves as a powerful influence, inspiring men to open their hearts fully to the Lord's call.

This guide aims to support priests in accompanying men on their discernment journey, providing a resource to encourage, counsel, and pray with them as they seek to follow God's will.

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## The New Stages of Seminary Formation

The Program for Priestly Formation 6 (PPF6) was approved by the Vatican's Congregation for Clergy in 2022 and officially came into use in the United States on **August 4, 2023**. This new edition reflects updated guidelines and emphasizes a more structured approach to seminary formation, incorporating the four key stages of development for seminarians: **Propaedeutic, Discipleship, Configuration, and Vocational Synthesis**. These stages guide the seminarian's development from initial discernment to full integration into the life and ministry of a priest. Each phase emphasizes growth in human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions, ensuring a holistic preparation for priesthood.

1. **Propaedeutic Stage** – A foundational period dedicated to deepening the seminarian's relationship with Christ, fostering a spirit of prayer, and grounding him in the essentials of the faith, while detaching from technology.
2. **Discipleship Stage** – Focused on growing as a disciple of Christ, this stage emphasizes human formation, spiritual growth, and academic development in theology.
3. **Configuration Stage** – The seminarian is further shaped to conform to the heart and mind of Christ the High Priest, with more intensive theological studies and pastoral training. The ordination to the transitional diaconate occurs at the end of this stage.
4. **Vocational Synthesis** – With his studies and seminary formation complete, the deacon moves from the seminary and spends a final six months in a non-academic setting, engaging in ministry, preparing for ordination and life as a priest.

These stages ensure that candidates are well-prepared for the sacred duty of priesthood, embodying a deep commitment to Christ and His Church.

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## Qualities of a Seminary Applicant

To enter this formation process, a seminary applicant should exhibit essential qualities that align with the goals of the PPF6. He must show an ability to form and sustain friendships, a deep desire to serve others, and an openness to growth and conversion in all areas of life. A strong spiritual foundation is critical, demonstrated by a consistent routine of prayer, participation in Mass and Confession, and active involvement in parish life. Additionally, he should possess intellectual capabilities, such as critical thinking and effective communication skills, alongside a genuine enthusiasm for the Church's mission and a

desire for the priesthood rooted in service to God and the Church, rather than personal ambition

## **Practical Advice to Develop these Qualities**

### **1. Form and Sustain Friendships**

- **Practice intentionality in relationships:** Reach out regularly to friends, making time for meaningful conversations. Work on being present and attentive in social interactions.
- **Develop empathy:** Listen actively and seek to understand others' experiences. Practice putting others' needs before your own to strengthen bonds.

### **2. Desire to Serve Others**

- **Volunteer regularly:** Engage in acts of service, such as helping at a food pantry, visiting the sick, or participating in parish ministries.
- **Seek opportunities to help daily:** Look for small ways to serve in everyday life, like assisting a neighbor or offering to pray for someone in need.
- **Reflect on the example of Christ as a servant:** Meditate on Gospel passages that show Christ's service to others and seek to imitate His humility and generosity.

### **3. Openness to Growth and Conversion**

- **Embrace ongoing self-improvement:** Regularly seek feedback from a spiritual director, mentor, or friends on areas where you can grow.
- **Commit to regular examination of conscience:** Reflect daily on your actions and attitudes, identifying areas for growth and bringing them to Confession.
- **Be open to constructive criticism:** View correction as an opportunity for growth rather than a setback. Work on being teachable.

### **4. Develop a Consistent Spiritual Routine**

- **Set aside daily prayer time:** Dedicate specific times each day for personal prayer, Scripture reading, and meditation.
- **Participate in the sacraments regularly:** Attend Mass at least on Sundays and Holy Days, and go to Confession monthly, if not more frequently.

- **Pray the Liturgy of the Hours or the Rosary:** These structured prayers help cultivate a disciplined prayer life and draw you closer to the life of the Church.

## 5. Be Active in Parish Life

- **Participate in parish ministries:** Volunteer as a lector, altar server, or in youth and adult formation programs.
- **Join parish events and groups:** Engage in Bible studies, retreats, or social events to connect with other parishioners.
- **Take on leadership roles as appropriate:** Be a responsible and supportive leader when opportunities arise, showing your commitment to the community.

## 6. Cultivate the Ability to Share Your Spiritual Life

- **Participate in group faith discussions or Bible studies:** Share insights and experiences and learn from others' spiritual journeys.
- **Practice articulating your faith:** Be open about your beliefs and experiences when appropriate, expressing how Christ has influenced your life.
- **Seek spiritual direction:** Regularly meet with a priest or spiritual director to discuss your spiritual growth and discernment.

## 7. Develop Critical Thinking and Communication Skills

- **Engage in theological and spiritual reading:** Read books on Church teachings, philosophy, and spirituality to deepen your understanding of the faith.
- **Practice writing and speaking about your faith:** Write reflections or give talks at parish events to improve your ability to communicate effectively.
- **Participate in discussions on important issues:** Approach topics with charity and an open mind, seeking to understand different perspectives.

## 8. Practice Sensitivity and Openness to Others

- **Develop active listening skills:** Pay full attention to people when they speak, making them feel heard and valued.
- **Serve those in need:** Engage in outreach to marginalized communities, demonstrating compassion and openness to different life experiences.
- **Grow in emotional intelligence:** Recognize your own emotions and understand others' feelings, using this awareness to respond with compassion.

## 9. Foster Enthusiasm for the Church's Mission

- **Stay informed about Church activities and initiatives:** Read about the latest Church news and local parish happenings.
- **Participate in evangelization efforts:** Share your faith with others and invite people to church events or services.
- **Reflect on the Church's mission to evangelize and serve:** Meditate on how your life can contribute to the Church's broader mission.

## 10. Desire Priesthood for the Right Reasons

- **Discern your motivations honestly:** Regularly reflect on why you feel called to the priesthood and discuss these motivations with a spiritual director.
- **Focus on serving God and the Church:** Center your discernment on how you can best serve the people of God rather than seeking personal fulfillment.
- **Pray for purity of intention:** Ask God for the grace to desire the priesthood for the right reasons and to surrender any selfish motivations.

Cultivating these virtues will help you grow into a well-rounded candidate for seminary, embodying the qualities that align with the Program for Priestly Formation.

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### Discernment Guidance for Various Age Groups

#### High School

#### Ages 14-18

Key Focus: Building a foundation of prayer and openness, while connecting with role models and getting involved in the Church.

#### 1. Open Heart to God's Will

- **Message:** Encourage young men to pray daily for God's guidance, asking, "Lord, what do You want me to do with my life?"
- **Concrete Action:** Invite them to journal moments where they feel a sense of peace, especially when thinking about the priesthood.

- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.”* (Proverbs 3:5-6)

## 2. Exploring Prayer and Sacraments

- **Message:** Encourage deeper participation in the Sacraments—especially Mass, Confession, and Adoration.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest attending a weekly holy hour and making regular Confession.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“When you call me, and come and pray to me, I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart.”* (Jeremiah 29:12-13)

## 3. Role Models

- **Message:** Point them toward priests who are joyful and fulfilled in their vocations.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest they have a conversation with their parish priest about his vocation story.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“Keep on doing what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me. Then the God of peace will be with you.”* (Philippians 4:9)

## 4. Getting Involved

- **Message:** Encourage involvement in parish activities like altar serving, youth ministry, or service projects.
- **Concrete Action:** Have them start altar serving or join the parish youth group.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”* (1 Peter 4:10)

## 5. Understanding the Call

- **Message:** Explain that discernment is like “dating”—exploring if priesthood is God’s call for them.
  - **Concrete Action:** Encourage them to spend extra time in prayer, considering where God is leading.
  - **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.’”* (Matthew 4:19)
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### College Ages 18-24

Key Focus: Seeking guidance, balancing studies and discernment, and deepening prayer to understand God’s call.

#### Seeking Guidance

- **Message:** Highlight the importance of a spiritual director to help with discernment.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest contacting the diocesan vocations director for an initial conversation.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“Listen to counsel and receive instruction, that you may be wise in your latter days. Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.”* (Proverbs 19:20-21)

#### Developing a Prayer Routine

- **Message:** Encourage daily prayer and Scripture reflection, focusing on the question: “What is God calling me to?”
- **Concrete Action:** Introduce methods like Lectio Divina, suggesting 15 minutes of daily prayer.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.”* (Psalm 119:105)

## Discernment Retreats

- **Message:** Recommend attending discernment retreats to experience seminary life and meet other discerners.
- **Concrete Action:** Invite them to a “Come and See” weekend at the seminary.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** “But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.” (Luke 5:16)

## 4. Balancing Studies and Discernment

- **Message:** Assure them they can continue their education while discerning, integrating both paths through prayer.
- **Concrete Action:** Help them schedule time for prayer and reflection amidst their academic and personal commitments.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** “*And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.*” (Colossians 3:17)

## 5. Considering Priesthood Seriously

- **Message:** Encourage them to consider the priesthood as a real possibility, not just a fleeting thought.
  - **Concrete Action:** Suggest a silent retreat or extended prayer weekend to focus on discernment.
  - **Scriptural Encouragement:** “*Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'*” (Matthew 9:37-38)
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## Early Adulthood

### Ages 25-35

**Key Focus:** Taking concrete steps forward in discernment, evaluating personal mission, and overcoming fears.

#### 1. Taking Steps Forward

- **Message:** Invite them to shadow a parish priest or visit a seminary to get a firsthand look at priestly life.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest contacting a priest to spend a day observing his ministry.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” (James 1:22)*

#### 2. Evaluating Personal Mission

- **Message:** Help them identify what activities bring them the greatest sense of joy and fulfillment.
- **Concrete Action:** Ask them to reflect on whether they find joy in serving others and living a life of sacrifice.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” (John 15:16)*

#### 3. Life Balance

- **Message:** Discuss the challenges of celibacy, offering stories of priests who found fulfillment in that call.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest reading a book like *“The Courage to Be a Priest”* to address common fears.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“I want you to be free from anxieties. The unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to please the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 7:32-33)*

#### 4. Financial and Practical Considerations

- **Message:** Reassure them that dioceses often provide financial assistance for those discerning the priesthood.

- **Concrete Action:** Suggest they speak to their vocations director about practical concerns like student loans.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” (Matthew 6:33)*

## 5. Courage to Respond

- **Message:** Encourage them to take the leap of faith, trusting God will guide them.
- **Concrete Action:** Share inspiring stories of saints who overcame challenges in their discernment.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” (Joshua 1:9)*

## Mid-to-Late Adulthood

### Ages 35+

**Key Focus:** Reflecting on life experiences as preparation, addressing family considerations, and finding support in community.

#### 1. Past Experience as Preparation

- **Message:** Reassure them that God has been preparing them through their life experiences for this moment.
- **Concrete Action:** Encourage them to reflect on how their professional and personal experiences could enrich their priesthood.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28)*

#### 2. Late Vocations

- **Message:** Share examples of saints and priests who were called later in life.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest they read stories of late vocations, such as St. Augustine or Cardinal John Henry Newman.

- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men.’ And when they had brought their boats to land, they left everything and followed him.” (Luke 5:10-11)*

### 3. Discernment as Mature Decision

- **Message:** Highlight how their maturity and life experience provide wisdom in discernment.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest regular meetings with a spiritual director to navigate their discernment with clarity.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.” (1 Corinthians 13:11)*

### 4. Family and Social Considerations

- **Message:** Discuss how their current family or social responsibilities can be taken into account in the discernment process.
- **Concrete Action:** If they are widowed or have adult children, suggest speaking with their vocation director about special programs for their circumstances.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.” (Matthew 19:29)*

### 5. Exploring Priesthood with Support

- **Message:** Encourage them to join a discernment group or find a community for mutual support.
- **Concrete Action:** Suggest participating in retreats or joining local discernment groups specifically for older men.
- **Scriptural Encouragement:** *“Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow...” (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10)*

## **Conclusion**

Accompanying young men in their discernment of the priesthood is a profound and rewarding responsibility. This guide aims to equip priests with the tools needed to mentor and support candidates as they navigate their vocational journey. By fostering growth in the essential qualities outlined in the Program for Priestly Formation 6 and guiding men through the new stages of seminary formation, priests play a crucial role in shaping the future leaders of the Church.

The process calls for patience, prayer, and wisdom, as well as a deep understanding of each man's unique path toward discovering God's will. Through this accompaniment, priests not only help men discern a potential call to the priesthood but also inspire a deeper commitment to Christ, regardless of the outcome. May this guide serve as a valuable resource in the mission to nurture authentic vocations, ultimately strengthening the Church and its service to the world.