Intimacy and Healthy Affective Maturity

Guidelines for Formation

Kevin P. McClone, M.Div., Psy.D.

A crucial aspect of healthy religious formation involves assessing a candidate's capacity for intimacy and affective maturity. The Vatican statement, *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood*, (hereafter noted as *Guidelines*) brought the issue of healthy relationships and affective maturity to the forefront. What does testing and assessment reveal about a candidate's capacity for close interpersonal relationships? How does someone on a formation team use the results of such testing as a tool to foster the growth of a candidate? Knowing that healthy relating and connections with self, others and God are crucial to effective and fulfilling pastoral ministry, how does one help a candidate grow in this capacity? To what extent is this issue one on which a candidate's readiness for ministry should be judged? In this article, I will explore various capacities that help to foster greater intimacy and affective maturity. Next, I will explore various obstacles to developing healthy intimacy and affective maturity and end by offering practical implications for lay, clergy and religious formation personnel in assisting the candidate's growth in intimacy and healthy relating with self, others and God.

In my work both as director of the Institute for Sexuality Studies and providing weekly seminars at the Institute for Religious Formation at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, I hear many questions from clergy, religious and lay ecclesial formation personnel dealing with ways to better identify, assess, and enhance a candidate's capacity for healthy intimacy and affective maturity. As I listen to their questions, it becomes clear that there is often some confusion on their part as to just what intimacy and affective maturity means.

The word intimacy is derived from two Latin words. *Intimus* refers to that which is innermost, and the word *intimare* means to hint at, announce, publish or make known. Combining these meanings leads us to see the process of intimacy as "making known that which is innermost." Thomas Malone notes in his book, the *Art of Intimacy*, that the outstanding quality of the intimate experience is the "sense of being in touch with our real selves." To risk self-disclosure presupposes a certain self-awareness and self-intimacy that allows me to share who I am. Affective maturity involves having the relational skills to more effectively identify, understand and express my real feelings with the diversity of persons that make up the contemporary church while having a growing capacity to listen, understand, and empathize with their experiences.

Some questions for candidates to explore to better understand their capacity for intimacy and affective maturity might be as follows: How well do I know myself with a balanced sense of my strengths and weaknesses? Do I know myself well enough to share my authentic self with others? Do I like the person that I am becoming? Do I esteem myself? Do I have close friends with whom I can deeply share? Am I comfortable being alone with myself as well as being with others? How am I growing in my intimacy with God? How do I relate to women? How do I relate to men? How can I be more my real self while relating to other persons? How comfortable am I relating to those in authority? What obstacles stand in the way of my growth in healthy intimacy and affective maturity? Am I comfortable with my own sexuality and do I seek to integrate it respectfully in the commitments that I make?

I. CAPACITIES FOR HEALTHY INTIMACY AND AFFECTIVE MATURITY

When exploring key capacities for healthy intimacy and affective maturity a core place to begin is looking at one's capacity for healthy relationships. To be an effective pastoral minister in the diverse church of today is to be relational. This implies the growing capacity to relate in more honest and conscious ways with oneself, with others and with God. These various relational dimensions are interconnected and influence each other's growth. For example, to the degree that I become more in touch with my true self, I grow to be more authentic in my relationships with others and my intimacy with God deepens. In sum, intimacy demands a more active engagement in taking the necessary risks to grow in self-intimacy, interpersonal intimacy and intimacy with God. The formator may inquire: to what degree does this candidate demonstrate a growing capacity to relate to a wide diversity of persons that make up the contemporary church in a way that builds deeper connection, tolerance for diversity and support?

Self-Awareness

Another key set of skills for healthy relating and affective maturity involves the growing capacity for deepening self-awareness. The formator must know how to evaluate the person in his totality, not forgetting the gradual nature of psychosexual development (*Guidelines*, II, 4). He or she must see the candidate's strong and weak points, as well as the level of awareness that the candidate has of his or her own family of origin history and its impact on his/her life. Healthy intimacy indeed presupposes certain reflective self-awareness. When I interview and assess candidates for religious life or lay formation, I always ask some questions related to their own self-awareness, such as: how well do they feel they know themselves? What do they see as their key strengths and weaknesses? Do they seem to have a healthy balance of awareness of both their unique strengths and limitations?

An Internal Locus of Control

Candidates who seem to present the most challenges are those who are still struggling to discover themselves and as a result rely too much on others to discover who they are. In other words, they may have more of what psychologists refer to as an external locus of control versus a more internal locus of control. Individuals with a high internal locus of control believe that outcomes result primarily from their own behavior and actions. They have a sense of agency which tends to make them more accountable and responsible for their behavior. Those with a high external locus of control by contrast believe that powerful others, fate, or chance primarily determine outcomes. So those with a high internal locus of control take more ownership of their behavior and are more active in seeking information and knowledge

concerning their situation rather than blaming others. As a result, such persons are better equipped to tackle life's challenges, transitions, and wounds in ways that foster healing and growth.

The Vatican document aptly speaks to this need for an internal locus of control that encourages candidates to take responsibility for their own healing and growth process:

> Among the candidates can be found some who come from particular experiences–human, family, professional, intellectual or affective–which, in various ways, have left psychological wounds that are not yet healed and that cause disturbances. These wounds, unknown to the candidate in their real effects, are often erroneously attributed by him to causes outside himself, thus depriving him of the possibility of facing them adequately (*Guidelines*, III, 5).

Ultimately growth in healthy intimacy and affective maturity involves naming, claiming and embracing old hurts and negative scripts from families of origin and making conscious decisions to act with integrity.

Ultimately growth in healthy intimacy and affective maturity involves naming, claiming and embracing old hurts and negative scripts from families of origin and making conscious decisions to act with integrity.

Capacity for Self-acceptance

I may have some adequate knowledge of my psychosexual history but to what degree have I accepted this unique self that I am coming to know more deeply? One aspect that I feel is crucial here is the willingness to embrace one's wounds, mistakes and limitations. Most of us have both hurt and been hurt by others as we grow in our relational lives. It seems to me that those who are growing in healthy intimacy have learned through time to become more accepting of their strengths but also of their wounds and limitations and have let go of the need to live up to other's expectations. This inner freedom allows for greater spontaneity and less self-consciousness. Many developmental psychologists will report that it is impossible to accept the love of others until you love your own self. If others love you and you do not love your own self, sooner or later you will regard them as misguided, stupid, or suspiciously needy. And eventually you will treat them that way. That will make it that much harder for them to love you, and so your fears will be confirmed. You are right. You are not lovable. So "intimacy requires a level of self-awareness and of vulnerability which exposes you-to-yourself" (Dowrick, pp. 47-48).

Many young people coming in for psychological testing often present as overly virtuous and may be invested in wanting to "look good." As a result, many may tend to avoid looking at weaknesses, mistakes, or areas of growth as if that makes them less acceptable. As the Congregation for Catholic Education aptly points out, "there is a possible tendency of some candidates to minimize or deny their own weaknesses. Such candidates do not speak to the formators about some of their serious difficulties, as they fear they will not be understood or accepted (*Guidelines*, III, 8). Others cling falsely to the notion that their weaknesses pose obstacles to the religious life. Sometimes it is growing up in an alcoholic family, or being the victim of abuse or neglect that leaves them feeling vulnerable. Clearly coming from dysfunctional or addictive families of origin poses certain risk factors and perhaps in some cases raise red flags, yet the real key is how those individuals respond to these wounds and life challenges. Do they seek help from others? Do they feel their painful feelings but not get stuck there? Do they give in to fear, anxiety, depression, shame and self-doubt? A measure of future performance in dealing with life's challenges is past success in working through hardships and difficulties.

Change and growth involve confronting life's challenges head on with a spirit of honesty and empathy rather than giving in to fear, self-doubt or anxiety.

Growing Self-esteem

Nathaniel Branden defines self-esteem as the reputation one has with oneself. So it will be important to learn how candidates really feel about themselves. Do they genuinely like the person they are becoming or do they feel inadequate, shameful, or unworthy? How we see ourselves has a great impact on what we bring to our relationships and religious communities. How does a formator assess one's sense of self-esteem? Certainly there are more formal measurements like the Sixteen Personality Factor (16PF) and MMPI-II and other tests that help along with a clinical interview and behavioral assessments in assessing levels of self-esteem. Formators can assist candidates in their efforts to grow in self-esteem by providing creative opportunities to gain meaningful ministry and relationship experiences that allow them to expand their comfort zones. So the candidates who are more reserved may be challenged to take more initiative in the community; busy candidates may be encouraged to slow down and develop their more contemplative side; and perfectionist candidates may be challenged to accept their weaknesses and limitations as pathways to grace and compassion with self, others, and God.

Establishing a Healthy Identity

Many candidates for ministry and religious life devote a great deal of energy discovering to a fuller extent who they are. To the degree that this preoccupies more of their time, energy, and internal resources, they will have less capacity to fully engage in healthy relationships with others and in pastoral ministry. Fear of being known more fully or living out of half-truths inhibits one's capacity to be more fully connected to self, others, and God. By contrast when candidates deeply value their identity and see it as gift they become freer to be authentic in life-giving ways. Psychosexual maturity involves a gradual acceptance and embracing of one's unique sexuality and sexual identity rather than being caught in the extremes of either relationship avoidance or compulsivity in relationships. Both extremes take root in attitudes of denial, fear, anxiety and shame.

Dealing with Change

One of the signs of growth is a person's capacity to deal with change. Here one looks at particular coping strengths candidates possess in dealing effectively with loss, stress and change. I often look for resiliency in their psychosexual journey and take a close look at what persons do with the sufferings and trials of life. While no one can predict what the future will hold, there is some awareness that effective pastoral ministry will involve the capacity to deal more effectively with suffering, conflict, differing personalities and uncertainty in more compassionate ways. Change and growth involve confronting life's challenges head on with a spirit of honesty and empathy rather than giving in to fear, self-doubt or anxiety.

Relational Flexibility

Recent resiliency research highlights the reality that suffering and hardship in one's family of origin are not destiny but often can lead to success in life and ministry when those wounds are embraced and persons grow through suffering, loss and tragedy. This will demand a certain relational flexibility and adaptability which are key to affective maturity. An obstacle here would be rigidity, whether in extreme liberal or conservative mind-sets that don't allow space for meaningful dialogue with those who may have differing views. Indeed a growing compassion and tolerance for others from differing perspectives is one of the hallmarks of psychosexual maturity. To live is to change and living well is to change often.

Healthy Solitude

A final intrapersonal skill to assess is the candidate's capacity for healthy solitude. Stephanie Dowrick explores this primacy of solitude in developing healthy intimacy and points out that your connections with others can only be as rewarding as the connection with the "someone" with whom you live every moment of your own life: your own self. Knowing you can enjoy your own company is a vital precursor to being able to enjoy other people's company without feelings of panic and neediness. Indeed, coming to value our own company precedes believing that one can matter to other people.

Separateness and autonomy are key to healthy adult intimacy and affective maturity. I can't be together with you unless I have some sense of autonomy and separateness that I often discover in moments of solitude. Navigating solitude draws us deeper into our true self, unveiling the masks and shadow selves that only serve to block spontaneity, freedom, and authentic loving. To what degree does this candidate demonstrate a growing appreciation of solitude, contemplation and reflection? Thomas Merton was fond of saying to his monks that they don't go to the desert to get away from people but to draw closer to them. For many lay ministers finding time for solitude may be a particular challenge yet is crucial to effective relational ministry. Many clergy and religious women and men too can run from solitude into busy lives that keep them from developing their more contemplative side.

II. GROWING IN DEEPER CONNECTION WITH OTHERS

How does the candidate bring skills of self-intimacy such as self-knowledge, self-acceptance and self-esteem to bear on relating more effectively with others? When we enjoy and value who we are becoming, we are freer to relate in less self-conscious ways with others. Are candidates less fearful of what others may think, knowing deep down that he or she is lovable, a person of dignity and worthy of respect? Are candidates aware that they need not have it "all together," that everyone has natural human weaknesses and limitations? Indeed grace and growth in the spiritual life often flow from embracing our imperfections rather than seeking perfection.

Indeed grace and growth in the spiritual life often flow from embracing our imperfections rather than seeking perfection.

Sharing One's Authentic Self

Developmental theorists writing on intimacy suggest that any healthy adult intimacy involves the capacity to share more of one's authentic self with another. This presupposes not only a certain self-knowledge but also skills of self-disclosure and taking the risks to share with trusted others. Communication skills can be further developed through learning how to listen well and growing in ability to empathize with others. Given the critical importance of healthy communication to pastoral ministry, how can we better understand, assess, and foster growth in clergy, religious or lay candidates to ministry? Formators can first model healthy communicating in their own capacity to self-disclose in appropriate ways as well as in the way they listen, attend to, and seek to understand the candidate's experience.

Interpersonal competencies stress the importance of listening, empathy and being open to the whole range of human feelings and experiences with a compassionate ear. Indeed today there is a growing appreciation in the workplace, schools and in ministry that affective skills and emotional intelligence skills are key to successful relationships. Gerald Arbuckle speaks of these sets of skills as having "affective competency" that allow one to achieve deeper intimacy across cultures (Arbuckle, p. 22). People with affective competency keep sharpening their own human sensors of listening, empathy and feeling. It is

hard and painful work that involves becoming aware of one's own cultural values and prejudices and how these block one's ability to listen to others. In other words, it is not easy. I am challenged to deepen my own self-knowledge, knowledge of the other, and the capacity to communicate my authentic feelings to others and at the same time, risk being misunderstood.

Capacity for Trust and Mutuality

A central building block to intimacy and affective maturity is the growing capacity to trust. Having close relationships of mutual trust frees us to be more real, to let go of the need for pretense and trust revealing our true selves. Yet many candidates may have real core issues with trust rooted in past relationships that left them hurt or wounded. Growth in trust and mutuality may involve inviting candidates to enter into trusting relationships with formators, spiritual directors and in some cases support groups to further develop relational skills. This is part of the mystery behind the success of many twelve-step recovery groups where so many who felt lost, alone and fearful found hope and trust in the support, acceptance, and shared vulnerability of other group members. Likewise many priests have found in the context of priest support groups and other friendships the freedom to grow and deepen their own affective potential through intentional commitments of mutual support. Trust takes time to develop and involves hard work and a willingness to risk.

Balanced Self-Care

Love of others is tied to healthy love of self as reflected in the capacity for balanced self-care. Growth in healthy intimacy and affective maturity implies a growing capacity to care for oneself in all dimensions: body, mind and spirit. Listening to one's needs for balance, harmony and wholeness are key. Many religious and clergy have discovered the hard way through burnout and various overdependencies that not attending to self-care can have disastrous consequences. Lay ecclesial ministers may also struggle to balance care of self and family needs with ministerial demands. What are some ways to both assess and assist candidates at risk for such excesses? One might explore how the candidate's past experiences reflect a balanced lifestyle of activity, interests and self-care. For example, does he or she have hobbies that energize him or her? Do they eat, drink and sleep well? Is there balance between ministry and rest, prayer and spiritual development? How have they utilized spiritual direction and counseling? What do they do for fun or in their free time?

Listening

Listening well is essential to intimacy. How is this person growing in capacity for listening and attention? To truly connect with self, others and God we need to hear what is being revealed in these encounters. A block to listening is anything that impedes our capacity to attend fully to the voices of self, others and God. For many candidates, listening is blocked because they had few models of healthy listening growing up. We learn how to listen from those who listened well to us. Listening is the fundamental skill for relational pastoral ministry. It is a critical communication skill that formators can both attend to in candidates and model in their own mindful listening to what candidates say both verbally and nonverbally.

III. KEY OBSTACLES TO GROWTH IN HEALTHY INTIMACY AND AFFECTIVE MATURITY

There are many obstacles that threaten to block these capacities for healthy intimacy and affective maturity that must be recognized and faced by candidates to clergy, religious life and lay formation. I will highlight some of the key obstacles and suggest ways to address them. Areas that have been previously mentioned as obstacles include strong affective dependencies; notable lack of freedom in relationships with others; excessive rigidity of character and uncertain sexual identity.

Facing One's Mortality

Facing our human limitations and ultimately, death, is no easy task and many avoid these uncomfortable realities. Sometimes drawing close to others in deeper ways comes as we more fully embrace our finite and limited nature. To face our mortality is to know that we have limits and acceptance of these limits does not so much bring death but rather new life. The great paradox here is that letting go and accepting our

limitations we become more alive by becoming more real. Grace and healing come through woundedness, not by seeking to avoid suffering, pain, and loss.

Pain

Patrick Collins notes that fear of pain can block self-intimacy whether that pain is from childhood or other family of origin experiences (Collins, p. 33). Many things prevent connection: unintentional drift through busyness and commitments; avoidance due to the fear of getting too close; inability or lack of desire to resolve conflicts that arise; prior unresolved hurtful relationships; lack of empathy and feeling unsafe, particularly if previous disclosures are brought up as weapons in a later conversation. Many candidates and perhaps formators as well find dealing with conflict something they would rather avoid. It is often a source of discomfort and depending on one's family of origin could bring feelings of greater dread and panic. Yet, real connection often flows out of relationships that have been able to successfully negotiate conflict and confrontation. Most married couples discover this and often remark that moments of deepest intimacy came by working through marital conflicts.

Unhealthy Communication

Unhealthy communication can be a block to healthy intimacy and affective maturity. Communication helps foster greater connection and communication is fundamentally a learned set of skills and behaviors. Who were your role models for communication from your family, relationships and religious communities? Many candidates are challenged in this area having grown up in families where the predominant messages led to more secrecy, denial, and avoidance of sharing real feelings than authentically embracing them. This is certainly the case in many alcoholic families where the predominant messages are don't talk, don't trust and don't feel. A candidate who is struggling to know herself or himself better has to break through these deeply ingrained messages and uncover more life-giving scripts that tell him or her it's OK to feel feelings, to express them openly and to trust and draw close to others in appropriate and respectful ways.

Candidates who have learned through their mistakes, trials and errors to deal with conflict are better equipped to face the many changes and challenges they will inevitably face in ministry or religious life.

Conflict and Confrontation

Dealing effectively with conflict and confrontation are key intimacy skills and signs of growing affective maturity. Candidates who have learned through their mistakes, trials and errors to deal with conflict are better equipped to face the many changes and challenges they will inevitably face in ministry or religious life. Some candidates know their weaknesses but lack the assertiveness to risk sharing their true feelings. They fail to assert what they want, how they feel, or deal effectively with conflict. Confrontation without care is control, and so learning to confront others must be rooted in genuine care for the spiritual good of the other if it is to be successful. In my experience many lay ministers and formators have great difficulty learning to confront with care and yet this is crucial in developing intimate relationships.

Fear

Fear is probably the biggest obstacle that I hear whenever I ask persons what holds them back from growing in intimacy and affective maturity. Fear of rejection, fear of conflict, fear of failure and fear of being embarrassed are the most common fears. Whatever the fear, the reality is that intimacy demands the courage to risk reaching out to others in faith, and trust that one will fundamentally not be crushed in the process. Courage is born out of the conviction that one

The formator must know how to evaluate the whole person in his or her totality, not forgetting the gradual nature of psychosexual development.

is loved and love conquers fear. Growing in healthy intimacy is about becoming more real. Many fears of rejection are rooted in past relationship wounds. To become more real involves facing the shadow parts of ourselves. Here the obstacles may be shame, false pride, perfectionism, low self-esteem and anxieties of all sorts. These and other obstacles block the light of truth and keep our true self hidden, preventing real connection with self and others.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR FORMATION

What implications can we draw from these reflections that may assist the process of clergy, lay ecclesial and religious formation? First of all, the formator must know how to evaluate the whole person in his or her totality, not forgetting the gradual nature of psychosexual development. Body, mind, spirit, social, cognitive and affective dimensions all are to be taken into account. Formation personnel must see both the candidate's strengths and weak points or areas of growth. The formator must discern the candidate's capacity for managing his or her own behavior in responsibility and freedom (*Guidelines*, II, 4). In order to more effectively evaluate and foster affective maturity in candidates for priesthood, religious life and lay ministry some key guidelines may be helpful to explore.

Formation personnel can assess growth in healthy intimacy by taking a closer look at a candidate's overall relational history. This history will seek to uncover the strengths and weaknesses candidates possess in their relationship with themselves, with others, and with God. The formator can assess the pattern of relationships and friendships with both women and men. Special attention can be paid to the length of those relationships, the quality of interaction and what they have learned through those experiences about themselves, others and relationships in general. In other words healthy relationships should ultimately lead one to greater growth and change and if not, why not? We might look further at how each of these relationships began and ended. Did these relationships reflect qualities of mutual respect or were they more selfish pursuits, more of what Erik Erikson described as the "need-seeking hungry kind," where persons try to discover their own identity in another?

Other aspects to explore when evaluating candidates for pastoral ministry and religious life might be as follows: How have these candidates dealt with suffering, loss and periods of loneliness and transition in their lives? Have they denied these sources of suffering, or embraced them openly? Have they developed a capacity to cope with the stressors of life and to seek guidance from others? One priest in ministry for some thirty years told me that he always felt a certain pride in not needing help from anyone and being fully self-sufficient. It was only after an emotional breakdown that he painfully came to discover that this wound of self-sufficiency served to keep God and others at a distance. When he was able to let go of control and of having to do it all, he was open to ask others for help and his weakness became his major source of healing, growth and more authentic relating with himself, others and God. We might ask, then, to what degree do these candidates demonstrate they have grown through past failings, sufferings and losses? Do they view mistakes in relationships as opportunities and stepping stones to grace, change and growth or as burdens to be either avoided or denied?

Formators perhaps can best foster growth in candidates by being aware of how they themselves have developed greater self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-acceptance in their own psychosexual journey in relationships. Truly, experience is often the best teacher. Looking into their own growth process formators may see how being encouraged to reflect deeply, take risks, try new ministries, and face new challenges helped them to grow in confidence and

esteem. It is this wisdom born out of their own reflection and rich life experiences that will guide the growth of candidates in compassion and in truth. Candidates grow by being able to relate to formators who have sought to integrate their own pain and struggles growing up in their relational lives. So, formators can assist greatly by the attitude they personally model with regard to dealing with their own limitations and weaknesses. By modeling acceptance and encouraging growth-enhancing opportunities in community, ministry and studies they can foster candidates' own growth and acceptance of their whole selves. Formators can model balanced self-care that reflects their genuine reliance on God and others; they can model both healthy communication and an appreciation for solitude and holistic living

If there is low self-esteem or unhealthy patterns that seem to block genuine growth, candidates may need more professional help to unlock destructive negative tapes from the past and substitute more affirming self-talk. We grow by being challenged to go beyond our comfort zones. Growth comes through risk and learning from one's mistakes. We grow through challenging the best within us, not by avoiding risk or running from pain and conflicts. Ultimately candidates get better at change by being given opportunities to change and the support and encouragement they need to risk growing in relationships with self, others and God.

RECOMMENDED READING

Arbuckle, G. "Cross-Cultural Pastoral Intimacy." *Touchstone*, Vol. 17 No. 2, Winter 2001; reprinted in *Human Development*, Spring 2002.

Branden, N. *Six Pillars of Self-Esteem*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994.

Collins, P. *Intimacy and the Hungers of the Heart*. Dublin: The Columba Press, 1991.

Congregation for Catholic Education. *Guidelines for the Use of Psychology in the Admission and Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood*. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20080628_orientamenti_en.html.

Dowrick, S. *Intimacy and Solitude: Balancing Closeness and Independence*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991.

Kurtz, E. & K. Ketchum. *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. New York: Bantum Books, 1992.

Malone, T.P. and T. Patrick. *The Art of Intimacy*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1987.

McClone, K. "Male Intimacy: Men's Longing for Intimacy and Connection." *Touchstone*, Vol. 17 No. 2, Winter 2001; reprinted in *Human Development*, Spring 2002.

McClone, K. "The Gift of Sexuality: Its Challenge and Blessing within a Life of Vowed Celibacy." *Horizon*, Vol. 29 No. 4, Summer, 2004.

Kevin P. McClone is a licensed clinical psychologist and Director of the Institute for Sexuality Studies located on the campus of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He has worked for more than twenty years in the teaching, counseling and health care fields.