

PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT AND VOCATION

By GEORGE CROFT

SINCE EARLIEST TIMES, the Church has been very consciously aware of the human characteristics which those who aspire to dedicate themselves in holy orders, or as religious, ought to possess. These characteristics have been in mind, one might say, since St Paul first gave them expression.¹ In most recent times, the apostolic constitution *Sedes Sapientiae* (1956) has said of religious vocation: 'The particular signs and motives of genuine vocation must be attentively weighed in those to be admitted to the novitiate . . . moreover, their physical and psychological fitness must also be investigated'. This same need was reiterated by the Council concerning seminarians (with especial mention of bodily and mental health),² and for religious,³ and yet further elaborated in *Renovationis Causam*.⁴ The scrutiny therefore of the human and personal characteristics of priestly and religious candidates in relation to their divine vocation is no novelty. What is relatively novel in our own time is the inclusion in this scrutiny of some explicitly psychological element. While psychological characteristics have always entered into enquiries made by ordinaries or by major superiors about candidates requesting admission, it is only relatively recently that the growing experience of modern psychological understanding could also be at the disposition of those

¹ 1 Tim 3, 1-13.

² 'All care should be taken to assess the intentions and the freedom of each seminarian in terms of his age and rate of growth; his spiritual, moral and intellectual suitability, and any possibly inherited defects or tendencies (*consideratis quoque dispositionibus forsitan a familia transmissis*) should also be taken into account'. *Optatam totius*, 6.

³ 'Religious . . . will not neglect the means which make for bodily and mental health'. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 12.

⁴ 'During this period of probation [postulancy or pre-novitiate] it is particularly necessary to find out whether the candidate for religious life is endowed with the qualities essential for reaching human and emotional maturity. There must be clear and hopeful signs that he will be able fully to assume the obligations of the religious state'. *Renovationis Causam*, 11; and cf 4, 7 and 8

concerned. Within the last twenty-five years or so, it has become increasingly common to provide for a psychological assessment of diocesan and religious candidates, either before entry into seminary or before admission to noviceship, or at some suitable time before ordination or final profession. By ten years ago, a very large number of dioceses, seminaries, and religious orders of men and women were making use of such procedures, to supplement the traditional methods of examination already in use. It is the purpose of this article to give a brief account of the origin, development, method, justification and fruitfulness of such procedures.

Origin of psychological assessment procedures

It was probably the research of the priest-psychologist, Dom T. V. Moore, published in 1936, that, as much as anything, first gave rise to explorations of the possible use of psychological methods in connection with priestly and religious candidacy.⁵ As a result of a survey about mental disorder among clergy and religious, he concluded that, though there appeared to be less over-all disturbance of a psychological kind among them than among the general population at the time, there was evidence that certain kinds of disturbance, notably alcoholic and psychotic, did occur more frequently among them than among corresponding groups of lay-folk. It is only relatively recently that Moore's research has been gone over again in detail, and it has now appeared that he may quite possibly have misread the data at his disposal, at least concerning the latter of his propositions about alcoholism and psychosis. In critical retrospect, it can be said that he was possibly over-anxious in what he concluded. Whatever, then, may have been the anxieties which first led to developing psychological methods in connection with priestly and religious vocation, they cannot be entirely shared at the moment. At the same time, it is evident that, because of the far-reaching consequences of the apostolic responsibility of priests and religious, any foreseeable problems of personal adjustment deserve careful attention in their own right. While there may not be certain evidence that such problems are unusually common among them, current experience suggests that there are quite enough to be getting on with. It is, then, to these that psychological attention is given.

⁵ Bier, W. (ed): *Psychological testing for ministerial selection* (New York, 1970), pp 47ff.

Psychological methods in candidacy

In practice, the psychological part of the enquiry about priestly or religious candidacy can either precede admission to seminary or religious noviceship, or can be undertaken at some time in the course of formation. There are reasons which can be urged in favour of either possibility; in fact, the former was considerably more widely adopted according to the results of a survey in 1962 (which did not include reference to work of this kind being carried on in the British Isles because, at the time, there was none).⁶ Whether the psychological enquiry comes before or after the beginning of formation towards priesthood or religious life, it has always been regarded as a supplement to, and not a substitute for, existing methods of academic, personal and religious enquiry undertaken with candidates, or with those in formation. The exact boundaries between a psychological enquiry and a religious one cannot, of course, be tidily or exactly drawn, though their context and purposes can certainly be distinguished in spite of overlapping contents.

Where the psychological enquiry is undertaken with candidates before the beginning or at the beginning of formation, it has proved a serviceable method to gather them together for a day or two after their application for admission. During this meeting they complete a number of psychological tests and interviews with a psychologist; the length of the meeting might be such as can be fitted into a residential weekend, or provide about eight or nine working hours in some suitable fashion. The subject-matter of the tests ranges from intellectual ability, through a survey of personal interests and aptitudes, to tests which invite, through questionnaire and projective methods, a direct or interpretable personal self-appraisal. This bears for the most part upon the principal motivations of the person in ordinary day-to-day dealings. It can be added that it has, in practice, been recognized from the beginnings of developing applied psychological methods of this sort that the psychologist need not be either a priest or a religious. This, of course can sometimes be a help in building mutual confidence, but it is not technically necessary.

In the time following the administration of these tests and interviews, a report is prepared by the psychologist, which bears upon

⁶ Coville, W. J.: 'Psychologists and the assessment of candidates for religious life', in *ACPA Newsletter*, Supplement No 60, November 1962.

the matters enquired into by the tests, and relates them as far as is possible to religious motivation and ideals, as well as to their concrete implications in relation to becoming and being a priest or religious. This report, in at least some of its components, can be shared immediately with the candidate and discussed with him or her, and subsequently sent to the ordinary or major superior who requested that this exercise be undertaken. Much the same method can be adopted where the tests etc., are undertaken at some point during the course of formation. The object of sharing the report as immediately as possible with the candidate is two-fold. More rarely, as a result of the tests and interviews, there begins to appear evidence of some degree of immaturity or personal unsettlement of a kind that might possibly be at variance with a prudent request for admission to a seminary or religious Institute, or of continuing in religious or priestly formation. At the same time, such information may not be of a kind that the psychologist alone would want to act on; and it is at this point that further interviews of a psychiatric kind might well be sought, in direct dealings with the person concerned. The more fundamental reason for sharing the results of the tests and interviews as soon as possible is to ensure that, in the most direct and clear fashion, the exercise is, and is seen to be, one from which the person round whom it principally centres can also learn something, and in a manner that minimizes possible misunderstandings due to the use of unfamiliar terminology and so on. In addition it serves as a check for the psychologist against any errors or misinterpretations which might arise from the use of solid, yet technically fallible, methods. It means, all in all, that the entire exercise results in something approaching the beginnings of personal counsel for the candidate, as well as an additional help to the ordinary, diocesan or religious, or major superior.

Technical background to methods used

As mentioned at the outset, the use of psychological enquiry for religious and seminary candidates has now quite a long history behind it. Since such methods were first introduced just after the war, and principally in the United States, a serious effort has been made by those who commanded the necessary technical resources to face and answer the question: what validity do these methods have? To answer this question, the results of one personality test administered to applicants before admission were, in a research connected with

the work of Bier,⁷ laid aside without any direct or indirect use being made of them. Some twelve years later, after several hundred candidates had completed the test and had been admitted, a retrospective analysis of the test items was made. The candidates were divided into two groups: those persevering at the time of the study, and those who after initial application had not been admitted or who had in the meantime left the seminary or religious Institute for objectively psychological reasons. The test answers were studied in relation to this criterion. It was found that, out of the five hundred or so questions that this test contained, about eighty distinguished between the two groups with technically adequate regularity.

The questions that did distinguish were found to cover several areas of personal adjustment. Most prominent among these questions, however, were those related to the ease and difficulty experienced by the men in relation to other people; also prominent were questions having reference to decisiveness and ability to tackle and carry out work in hand. Among sensitive questions were found to be items concerning relationship to family, and those concerning the breadth and scope of recreational activities and such like. There was a solid, if unexciting, usefulness about all this, not so much in the content of the items, which serve to confirm what might broadly speaking have been expected anyway, but rather in showing that in the combination of such items in a questionnaire, a valid connection could be shown to exist between the way the questionnaire was handled and the likelihood of perseverance of the seminarian or religious. At the same time, this study served to show that the extent of the valid operation of any one test is really quite small: its ability to detect, for example, those who would probably prove unsuitable, without making errors in the contrary direction, was no more than five per cent. Small as this contribution might be in the case of any one test, it means that a psychologist's evaluation, based upon several tests together (given that they all work with the same efficiency as the one validated in the research mentioned), as well as upon interview impression gained with and without technical assistance of tests, and with the perhaps further possibility of psychiatric interview in certain instances, is broadly based upon methods that can be accepted as valid.

⁷ Barry, W.: *An MMPI scale for seminary candidates* (unpublished M.A. dissertation), Fordham University, New York, 1959.

Other similar researches have been carried out since the one reported. They have likewise shown that scores and answers do relate validly to the positive perseverance or subsequent adjustment of those who undertake them. They have yielded other interesting data as well: for example, if candidates stress a mere sense of duty in what they ask to undertake, or express some preoccupation with personal salvation in their request for admission, neither is, of itself, a good prognostic for perseverance. Similarly, the reserve which amounts to indecision about choice of way of life, or a feeling that seminary or religious life 'ought to be given a try' are not associated factually with perseverance.⁸

Valid or not, psychological test and interview methods, and their hoped-for contribution, are far from infallible. Seasoned psychologists who use them are wont to say that, with the help of these methods, one out of three problem cases can be identified at the outset. The other two are likely to be missed, and only appear later. This may not be outstandingly good; but many religious superiors and ordinaries feel that it is, all the same, a contribution worth having.⁹

Concluding and current comment

From the foregoing it will be appreciated that the psychological technical aids that exist and can contribute to more thoroughly informed decisions about religious and seminary candidates have been tried, and not found entirely wanting. To the objection that, after all, these methods were first worked out in pre-conciliar days and largely in an american setting, it can be affirmed from current experience in the British Isles that evidence is accumulating for the view that, within their limits, test and interview methods can and still do have a valid contribution to make. Partly due to slender technical resources, however, this evidence is not yet available in published form. Pending this, the use of such methods appears positively prudent.

To anyone addressing themselves to practical or to theoretical questions concerning the psychological dimension of divine vocation, there is always somewhere present in mind the awareness, amounting at times to a nagging fear, that psychological methods of under-

Cf Vaughan, R. P., S.J.: 'A psychological assessment program for candidates to the religious life: validation study', in *Catholic Psychological Record*, vol I (1963), p 67.

Bier, *op. cit.*, pp 190 ff.

standing may come to oust truly christian and spiritual ones. It is for this reason that emphasis has been placed here on the fact that psychological methods are supplementary to, and do not replace, traditional ways of discerning vocation. A psychological contributor to deliberations concerning admission neither claims nor is given some special power of veto. Neither would a psychologist so contributing act on the supposition that, finally, there is some recognizably psychological priestly or religious personality-pattern, the presence or absence of which he can with certainty recognize. Rather he might say that, in the light of systematically compared information based upon shared and public past experience, he can offer suggestions about the probable ease or difficulty that lies ahead. His job is more akin, in sporting terms, to the informed calculation of odds than it is to the placing of bets, or the prophesying of winners or losers.¹⁰ The psychologist is no more a prophet than anyone else contributing to deliberation about admission and the subsequent decision. His activity, therefore, positively includes the acknowledgment that other considerations than psychological ones are needed for the discernment of divine vocation.

Such, then, are some of the elements that have gone to the development of psychological methods in the service of discerning priestly and religious vocation. If the new discovery yielded by them is slender enough, it is because the methods were not undertaken in the first instance with mere discovery in mind, but simply with an ascertainable and practical purpose within the life of the Church. Such methods will, in all likelihood, remain available, though they will undoubtedly modify as psychological and other techniques do. In the meantime, their use can be approached with the confidence that both their limits and their scope are appreciated by those who work with them.

¹⁰ Cf the criteria for choosing Matthias rather than Joseph in Acts 1, 20-26.