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# *NRVC Code of Ethics for Vocation Ministry*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Through Baptism, God calls each person to a life of love and holiness through single, married, ordained, or consecrated life and to service in the Church and in the world. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are called to be professional ministerial leaders, seeking to offer the highest quality of service possible.

Vocation ministers are entrusted with the privileged and sacred responsibility of assisting others in living their baptismal call to holiness as a disciple of Jesus Christ and the discernment of their potential call to a vowed or ordained life of service to the Church and world. An effective exercise of this ministry requires a faithful witness of one's own vocation, an understanding of the various vocations within the Church, and a faith rooted in Jesus Christ, who in his teaching, witness, and invitation, zealously called women and men to share in the Reign of God. As important as they are, strong faith and good will are not enough to conduct vocation ministry competently. Vocation ministry requires education, professional development, and a commitment to ethical and professional standards.

## **PURPOSE OF CODE OF ETHICS FOR VOCATION MINISTRY**

This Code of Ethics for Vocation Ministry sets forth the principles, responsibilities, and expectations for vocation ministry—that is, for vocation promotion with inquirers, accompaniment of discerners, and assessment of applicants for admission to formation in religious life and societies of apostolic life. This document is reinforcing the value that vocation ministry is a shared responsibility of religious leadership, vocation ministers, vowed members, and prospective candidates to religious life. It is intended to serve as a guideline for religious institutes and societies of apostolic life in their vocation ministry for meaningful, ethical, and effective vocation ministry.

For practical purposes, this document will use the term, candidate, to refer to all inquirers, discerners, and applicants. The term, religious institute, includes societies of apostolic life.

## **FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES**

The ethics of vocation ministry are guided by these foundational principles:

1. Gospel values, the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the Great Commandment
2. Respect for human dignity, interculturality, human rights, and social justice
3. Collegiality, subsidiarity, mutuality, and collaboration
4. Personal and professional integrity

## **NRVC VISION AND MISSION STATEMENTS**

VISION STATEMENT: To set the world ablaze with the fire of God's love through the prophetic, joyful witness of religious sisters, brothers, and priests as radical disciples of Jesus.

MISSION STATEMENT: The National Religious Vocation Conference is a catalyst for vocation discernment and the full flourishing of religious life as sisters, brothers, and priests for the ongoing transformation of the world.

### **I. RESPONSIBILITIES OF LEADERSHIP FOR VOCATION MINISTRY**

The support of leadership in religious institutes is essential for effective vocation ministry especially in the following three areas:

- A. FIRST AREA, TO LEAD AND ANIMATE THEIR CONGREGATION OR PROVINCE, IN PARTICULAR, TO:
  1. Believe in a future of religious life and in the charism of the religious institute.
  2. Demonstrate their vibrant interest in religious life through meaningful action.
  3. Support and challenge the membership to greater authenticity and integrity in their religious lives.
  4. Assist the religious institute to embrace the Gospel values of belonging, dignity, and justice.
  5. Be realistic about the future of the institute and its capacity for attracting and retaining new members.
  
- B. SECOND AREA, TO APPOINT AND PREPARE SKILLED VOCATION MINISTERS, IN PARTICULAR, TO:
  1. Select for vocation ministry those who
    - a. Are vibrant members of the Church and their religious institute, or lay vocation.
    - b. Have a passion for vowed religious life and believe in its future.
    - c. Have a strong background in Catholic theology and spirituality.
    - d. Are able to clearly articulate their faith and the life and charism of the institute.
    - e. Possess personal and professional maturity.
    - f. Can work with others in assessing candidates fairly and astutely.
    - g. Are intentionally mindful of the dominant culture within the religious institute and its impact upon new candidates.
  2. Support vocation ministers by
    - a. Providing a job description listing responsibilities, channels of accountability, and realistic goals.
    - b. Providing adequate resources in ministry (time, budget, formation, education, and support).
    - c. Meeting with the vocation minister on a consistent and scheduled basis.
    - d. Clearly articulating the expectations and behavioral objectives of the vocation minister.

- e. Evaluating the ministry of the vocation minister and the effectiveness of the vocation ministry.
- f. Emphasizing and implementing ways of working collaboratively.
- g. Communicating child protection policies that address interactions with minors at vocation promotion events, in accompaniment, and discernment.
- h. If the vocation minister is a layperson, orienting him or her to religious life: the culture and charism of the religious institute.

#### C. THIRD AREA, TO ADMIT CANDIDATES INTO THE FORMATION PROGRAM

(Canon 597; 641-645). THEY DO THIS BY:

1. Updating and implementing admission processes and policies.
2. Ensuring confidentiality and the use of consent release forms.
3. Clearly articulating criteria for admission, including criteria for age, gender identity, education, financial debt/obligations, sufficient physical and mental health, immigration status, marital/parental status, new Catholics, and psychological assessment.
4. Giving testimony about former candidates or members who are seeking admission into another religious institute, always balancing the demands of veracity and appropriate confidentiality and the common good (Canon 645). Issues pertaining to sexual abuse are not maintained in confidence.

## II. RESPONSIBILITIES OF VOCATION MINISTERS FOR VOCATION MINISTRY

Vocation Ministers bear the primary responsibility for vocation ministry in promotion, accompaniment, and assessment. Their relationship to their religious institute and commitment to personal and professional development, is an essential ethical responsibility as a vocation minister.

#### A. IN PROMOTION, ACCOMPANIMENT, AND ASSESSMENT, TO:

1. Respect and reverence the inherent human dignity of each person, made in the image and likeness of God, coming from diverse backgrounds regarding: age, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status, physical abilities, education, culture, and ethnicity.
  - a. Be culturally mindful of the candidate, especially when she or he is from an underrepresented culture in the religious institute, e.g., by age, ethnicity, language, or national origin.
  - b. Honestly assess the capacity of one's religious institute in its ability to provide resources to welcome and incorporate historically underrepresented candidates and members. Good will is necessary, but not enough in this regard.
  - c. Address language competence to ensure communication among the candidate, the vocation/formation personnel, and the religious institute.
2. Clearly present the identity, life, and charism of the religious institute.
3. Become knowledgeable of, recognize, and affirm the various forms of consecrated life as they are expressed in the Church to assist candidates in identifying religious charisms that may meet their interests and expectations.
4. Clearly present admission criteria, such as age, immigration status, debt,

education, and health.

5. Make responsible use of the resources of the religious institute.

6. Explain and maintain the proper role of the vocation minister to the candidate and the religious institute.

7. Maintain appropriate boundaries, avoiding dual relationships and the appearance of mixed roles with candidates. The relationship between vocation minister and candidate is professional and not based on personal friendship. The vocation minister is an agent for the religious institute and its leadership, and not an agent for the candidate. All communication and interaction with the candidate should be guided by this principle. In other words, the vocation minister always operates in the external forum and cannot serve as a spiritual director or confessor of the candidate.

a. During their time of discernment and formation, all professed members of the religious institute, especially the vocation minister and the major superior, are in a position of trust and power vis-à-vis a candidate. The power differential is real, and it is the responsibility of the vocation minister, leadership, and members of the institute to maintain proper boundaries. They should be familiar with the policies regarding boundaries with others set by the religious institute. If they are unsure how to proceed, they should consult with their major superior.

b. The vocation minister or any other professed member involved in the discernment or formation process does not serve as confessor, counselor, or spiritual director for the candidate.

c. All professed members, especially the vocation minister and the major superior, in their respective roles serve the needs of the candidate. The candidate does not serve the personal needs of the professed member or lay vocation director.

d. Unhealthy emotional relationships or sexual intimacy between a professed member and a candidate is not only a violation of vowed chastity, but also a grave breach of ethical conduct. There is no place for such relationships in religious life or in vocation ministry.

e. Meeting times and places should be appropriate and balance the need for confidential communication with the need for safe, neutral spaces, e.g., the vocation office or another office in a ministry center. Never meet in a private area such as a bedroom, even if it is a designated guest room. All office doors should have a glass panel or be left partially open during meetings with candidates.

f. If meetings are conducted electronically, meeting times should be appropriate and the virtual background must be professional in appearance, with the avoidance of bedroom furniture and bathroom fixtures.

g. Vocation ministers must be prudent in their use of self-disclosure of personal and congregational information with candidates.

h. If a vocation minister is already in another professional relationship with a potential candidate (as teacher, counselor, spiritual director, etc.), s/he will not serve as vocation minister for that candidate, as dual roles present a conflict of interest. S/he will discuss the matter with leadership so that another

vocation minister may be assigned to that candidate.

**B. IN ASSESSMENT, TO:**

1. Ensure that the people entering the religious institute's formation program have the health, suitable character, and adequate maturity, as well as the skills and potential to live religious life with integrity according to the religious institute's charism and tradition (Canon 642).
2. Ensure the establishment and use of procedures so that the application and assessment of candidates obtains all and only the information proper to each level of the person's discernment, acknowledging the growth of trust and clarity over time.
3. Ensure that the candidate understands the progressive nature of the discernment, assessment, admission, and formation processes.
4. Ensure the right to minimum intrusion and privacy (Canon 220).
5. Safeguard against biases, the assessment for admission should involve multiple people including face-to-face interviews with more than one representative of the religious institute. In addition, letters of recommendation from a minimum of three personal references (including at least one from a family member) and two professional references, for a total of five references, be included as part of the application requirements.
6. Promptly and clearly communicate to the candidate any decision regarding their application.
7. Respect and support any candidate with reasonable prospects for a future in the religious institute, including accommodating language, culture, health, and disabilities; and recommending therapy when indicated.
8. Respect the reality that the religious institute is not primarily a therapeutic community, and therefore, to acknowledge when long-term therapy should occur prior to a reconsideration of admission.

**C. IN PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, TO:**

1. Live a balanced vibrant religious life: prayer, ministry, leisure, personal relationships, community responsibilities, etc.
2. Be responsible to religious leadership with clear lines of accountability and reporting to demonstrate the responsible use of time and resources, as well as decisions regarding candidates.
3. Develop professional competence in vocation ministry by
  - a. Using the NRVC curriculum and resources.
  - b. Acquiring necessary education, skills, and formation.
  - c. Enhancing interviewing and assessment skills, ecclesiology, sexuality, theology, ethics, and canon law.
  - d. Embracing intercultural humility as a lifelong pursuit.
  - e. Understanding the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations in regards to anticipatory ministry sites for candidates.
  - f. Participating in ongoing professional and ministerial development.
4. Make use of supervision and mentoring and a system or network of spiritual, emotional, and professional support in ministry.

5. Maintain respectful relationships with other vocation ministers by:
  - a. Maintaining and promoting high professional and ethical standards among vocation ministers.
  - b. Respecting the diversity of charisms and the freedom of discerners in pursuing their vocation (Canon 219).
  - c. Respectfully confronting one another regarding unethical conduct and reporting any concerns to appropriate authorities.
  - d. Reporting criminal incidents of sexual abuse of minors as required by law.
  - e. Exercising discretion in communicating about candidates, balancing their right to privacy, their freedom to pursue their vocation, and the good of the Church, the people of God and individual religious institutes (Canons 219, 220).
  - f. Obtaining the testimony of the local ordinary, the major superior of the religious institute, or the rector of the seminary regarding the admission of clerics or those who had been admitted in another religious institute, or in a seminary (Canon 645).
6. To maintain professional standards in vocation ministry by
  - a. Maintaining professional boundaries always.
  - b. Maintaining appropriate confidentiality regarding personal information of candidates.
  - c. Maintaining set "office hours" for availability with candidates.
  - d. Establishing and adhering to vocational records management policy.

D. IN RELATIONSHIP WITH ONE'S OWN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTE, TO:

1. Build and maintain strong relationships with their leadership and the sisters/brothers of the religious institute.
2. Build a supportive vocation culture by:
  - a. Maintaining regular, open, honest, and respectful relations and communications with one's leadership about the
    - i. admission processes, policies and criteria;
    - ii. the work of vocation ministry;
    - iii. prospective candidates;
    - iv. vocation trends and best practices.
  - b. Relating to members of the religious institute by:
    - i. Informing them of contemporary vocation trends;
    - ii. Providing resources and opportunities for community engagement.

E. IN VOCATION MINISTRY WITH MINORS, INCLUDING VOCATION PROMOTION PROGRAMS WHERE YOUTH ARE PRESENT IN PARISH AND SCHOOL VISITS, FAIRS, RETREATS, AND CONFERENCES, TO:

1. Ensure the protection of minors by requiring anyone who is promoting vocations by:
  - a. Requiring anyone who is promoting vocations by ministering to minors to have current Safe Environment training.
  - b. Following the religious institute's child protection policies that address interactions with minors, including following all requirements regarding the

number and types of adults necessary for ministry to minors.

2. Safely communicate with minors by:

- a. Requiring vocation ministers who are working with minors discerning religious life to have written parental consent for ongoing contact and clear expectations in writing concerning communication, events, meetings, etc. This includes contact via phone conversations, emails, social media platforms, videos, chats, text messages, and letters.
- b. All in-person meetings held in open, visible spaces, with prior parental approval.
- c. All correspondence including electronic communications must be from a professional address and congregational social media platforms. A vocation minister should never "friend" a minor on their personal social media sites.
- d. Avoid any type of private messages by including another responsible adult, e.g., a parent, a teacher, youth minister, etc., in any personal contact with minors through email, text, or social media.
- e. Following all safe environment boundaries and policies for all discernment appointments and visits with minors in any venue.

### **III. RESPONSIBILITIES OF MEMBERS FOR VOCATION MINISTRY**

Vocation Ministry is the responsibility of the entire religious institute. Members of the religious institute bear their responsibility for vocation ministry by:

- A. Living religious life vibrantly and witnessing joy, authenticity, and fidelity in religious life.
- B. Promoting vocations and recommending names of potential candidates who meet the criteria for admission.
- C. Respectfully welcoming candidates, especially people from varied cultures with a willingness to learn together aspects of interculturality.
- D. Being open to assuming a role in the congregation's vocation ministry team and vocation promotion events by sharing one's vocation story, community charism, mission, and ministries.
- E. Meeting candidates in a public place in full view of others. If alone with a candidate, encourage other members of the religious institute to randomly drop in or pass by the interaction occasionally.
- F. Avoiding physical affection and inappropriate behavior during interactions.
- G. Respecting the vocation discernment and assessment process, and the boundaries and confidentiality required.
- H. Respecting and supporting those serving in leadership and in vocation ministry by cooperating with them in their efforts to utilize contemporary vocation trends and effective methods of engagement.

#### **IV. EXPECTATIONS OF CANDIDATES**

Candidates do not have reciprocal obligations to a professional and ethical code of conduct in vocation ministry. There are, however, some expectations of them that the vocation minister may assume and directly request regarding the candidate's own participation in the discernment process, namely to:

- A. Engage in discernment with honesty and integrity.
- B. Follow-up in a timely manner with suggestions or requirements from the vocation minister.
- C. Inform the vocation minister when s/he no longer desires to continue the discernment/application process.
- D. Take responsibility for his/her own discernment and make use of assistance and resources.
- E. Meet the requirements of the application process candidly and honestly.

#### **V. VOCATION RECORDS MANAGEMENT POLICY**

Leadership and vocation ministers share the responsibility for the creation and management of all records and policies associated with vocation ministry. The Vocation Records Management Policy should address:

- A. Creating, accessing, and securely retaining of all vocation documents.
- B. Valuing and respecting the dignity and privacy of individual candidates, needs of the religious institute, and the people of God, balancing the need for confidentiality and the need for due diligence in gathering information in the admission of a candidate.
- C. Specifying information that is needed and pertinent for vocation discernment and the admissions decision.
- D. Obtaining release forms from the candidate for applications records:
  1. Limiting their validity to a required period of time.
  2. Limiting the release of mental health records and other particularly sensitive information to the vocation minister or designated admissions personnel responsible for screening and the major superior.
- E. Outlining information about the candidate that may be shared with vocation and leadership teams. The major superior determines what information is relevant.
- F. Informing candidates regarding the vocation record-keeping policies of the religious institute and the scope of confidentiality surrounding their personal information.
- G. Addressing ownership of records. The candidate's file belongs to the religious institute except for candidate records (documents produced by the candidate, e.g., autobiography, birth certificate, sacrament documentation). These candidate records are returned to the candidate or destroyed on their departure or ceasing the application or formation process.
- H. Obtaining clear prior written release from candidates regarding photographs and other digital recordings to be used in communications of the religious institute.
- I. Determining how long vocation records are maintained and who has access to these records.
- J. All policies should be developed in accordance with Canon Law, civil laws, and any other data protection laws that apply. (See NRVC's Privacy Policy).



## **VI. DUAL ROLES OF VOCATION MINISTER AND FORMATION DIRECTOR**

A. Normally vocation ministers do not simultaneously serve as formation directors. In cases where it occurs, the following concerns arise:

1. Vocation and formation ministry require differing skill sets.
2. Vocation ministry focuses primarily on assessment, while formation ministry focuses on formation itself, though both skill sets are operative throughout.
3. Vocation and formation ministry have differing requirements for information about the candidate.
4. Vocation and formation ministry have differing roles regarding candidates. The vocation minister promotes, accompanies, and assesses capacity for formation. The formation director continues discernment and formation and assesses the capability for novitiate and/or for vows.

B. When the roles of vocation and formation ministers are combined, some safeguards are suggested:

1. Another person, e.g., leadership or an external vocational consultant, should assist with the assessment of the candidate for admission.
2. The vocation/formation director never serves as spiritual director, counselor, or confessor for the candidate.
3. The vocation/formation minister and leadership should periodically review these ethical guidelines with respect to their vocation/formation processes.
4. A clear channel of appeal should be available to a candidate should a conflict arise.
5. The written goals of the formation program should be developed and discussed with leadership, vocation/formation personnel, and the candidate with specific strategies and timelines.
6. Formation programs should explicitly plan for and include resources/education at every stage of formation to help develop an integrated sexuality, celibacy, interpersonal relationships, affectivity, etc.
7. Each religious institute needs clear policies on document disposition as stated in the previous section on Vocation Records Management Policy.

## **VII. CONCLUSION**

Vocation ministry continues to evolve in a rapidly changing world and Church. At the same time, the commitment to professional and ethical standards in vocation ministry must remain constant on the part of all: religious leadership, vocation ministers, members of the religious institute, and the prospective candidate. This shared responsibility for new membership is an essential value for vocation ministry.

The National Religious Vocation Conference presents this document as a guide to religious institutes and societies of apostolic life in meeting these responsibilities, recognizing that no document will include all the varied aspects of vocation ministry or be universally applicable across all congregations, cultures, and situations.

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