



Code of Ethics for Vocation Ministry

Introduction and Purpose

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. God is a covenantal God who invites followers of Jesus Christ to a new covenant in his Blood. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we, too, are called to be covenantal ministers, seeking to offer the highest quality of service possible. Vocation Ministers, therefore, must function from a covenantal ethic, which requires them to offer the highest standards of service to all to whom they minister.

Vocation Ministers are entrusted with the privileged and sacred responsibility of assisting others in the discernment of their baptismal call. An effective exercise of this ministry requires a faithful witness of one's own vocation, an understanding of the various lifestyles within the Church, and a faith rooted in Jesus Christ, who in his teaching, witness and invitation zealously called men and women 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, training and a commitment to ethical and professional standards.

The purpose of this *Code of Ethics for Vocation Ministry* is threefold:

1. To provide ethical and professional standards with best practices for Vocation Ministry;
2. To set forth values and ethical guidelines for Religious Institutes to conduct their new Membership discernment and assessment programs with respect for the rights and privileges of the Candidate and the Religious Institute, and;
3. To reinforce the value that Vocation Ministry is a shared responsibility of Religious Leadership, Vocation Ministers, Members of the Religious Institute and the prospective Candidate.

Preferred Attributes of the Vocation Minister

Those considered for the position of Vocation Ministry should:

- Demonstrate a spirituality consistent with the charism and rule of the Religious Institute by fidelity to prayer and to the sacramental life of the Church;
- Have a passion for vowed Religious Life and believe in its future;
- Show an integration of his or her identity as a Religious and minister in the Church over a proven period of time. When the Vocation Minister is a non-vowed person, he or she should have a strong ministerial identity as a layperson in the Church;
- Be able to articulate clearly his or her prayer life;
- Be able to articulate clearly his or her Religious identity (when the Vocation Minister is a vowed Religious);

- Be able to articulate the life and charism of the Religious Institute (when the Vocation Minister is a layperson);
- Demonstrate psychological, emotional, spiritual, and psychosexual maturity as evidenced in the establishment of healthy boundaries in both personal and professional relationships;
- Be able to work independently and with accountability to policies, procedures and guidelines;
- Give evidence of age appropriate, healthy relational skills in his or her interpersonal relationships, both in and outside of the Religious Institute;
- Be able to assess people fairly and astutely;
- Show initiative, adaptability and creativity in ministry and community life;
- Relate well with people of diverse cultures, ages, ethnic backgrounds, ideologies, and ecclesiologies;
- Demonstrate a capacity to accept and resolve conflict and supportively address problems with others.

Professional Competence of the Vocation Minister

- The Vocation Minister should have clear lines of accountability to Religious Leadership for his or her time, activities and resources.
- In-service training in pertinent areas of Vocation Ministry—including but not limited to interviewing and assessment skills, cultural diversity, ecclesiology, sexuality, theology, ethics, and canon law—should be attained and seen as a priority.
- The process of supervision and mentoring should be utilized when it is available.
- The Vocation Minister should be provided with a system or network of spiritual, emotional and professional support in ministry.

Responsibilities of Religious Leadership

To the Vocation Minister

- To provide a job description listing responsibilities and channels of accountability;
- To provide adequate resources in ministry (time, budget, training, emotional support);
- To meet with the Vocation Minister on a consistent basis;
- To articulate clearly the expectations and behavioral objectives of the Vocation Minister;
- To evaluate the ministry of the Vocation Minister and the effectiveness of the Vocation Program;
- In the event that the Vocation Minister is a layperson, to orient him or her in Religious Life and the culture and charism of the Religious Institute.

To the Membership of the Religious Institute

- To believe in the future of Religious Life and in the charism of the Religious Institute;
- To appoint quality people to Vocation Ministry;
- To make known the admission processes and policies regarding new members to the entire Membership;
- To challenge the Membership to greater authenticity and integrity in their Religious Lives;
- To ensure that confidentiality is appropriately respected on all levels.

To the Prospective Candidate

- To ensure that those assigned to Vocation Ministry are emotionally, spiritually and professionally prepared to serve in this capacity;

- To ensure that proper admission policies are clearly articulated and are consistently followed;
- To ensure that Formation Programs are equipped to address and handle the wide range of diversity (cultural, ethnic, age, etc.) reflected in today's Candidates.

To Self

- To be open to accountability and dialogue from Membership and the Vocation Minister about the ongoing role of Religious Leadership and Vocation Ministry.

Responsibilities of the Vocation Minister

To the Religious Leadership

- To communicate information on a regular basis and in a timely manner;
- To be open and honest about his or her discernment with prospective Candidates at all times;
- To educate and to keep Religious Leadership abreast of contemporary vocation trends;
- To exhibit a responsible work ethic and to be accountable for the resources provided for Vocation Ministry;
- To demonstrate cooperation and loyalty to those entrusted with the moral and spiritual leadership of the Religious Institute;
- To be aware that he or she is always and everywhere to function as the exclusive representative of his or her Major Superior in the exercise of Vocation Ministry.

To the Prospective Candidate

- To explain the role of the Vocation Minister in the discernment process;
- To explain that the Vocation Minister is the representative of his or her Major Superior and is not free, therefore, like a spiritual director, counselor or confessor, to act as the representative of the Candidate.
- To explain clearly any expectations of the Religious Institute related to the Candidate's discernment process;
- To ask in a professional manner the appropriate questions for proper assessment, which should be proportional to the person's level of discernment;
- To give a fair and honest representation of the Religious Institute in a manner appropriate to the level of discernment;
- To respect the common norms of confidentiality;
- To respect professional boundaries at all times;
- To ensure that the Candidate fully understands the requirements of the admissions process prior to making application to the Religious Institute;
- To inform the Candidate early in the discernment process of any exclusion criteria as determined by the Religious Institute;
- To follow carefully all of the procedures and policies for application and admission as outlined by the proper authority of the Religious Institute and any prescriptive required by the Canon Law of the Church;
- To communicate in a timely manner any decision that may impact the Candidate's status in the admissions process, which includes providing clear and unequivocal rejection of candidacy when it is apparent to the Vocation Minister that the Candidate has no reasonable future with the Religious Institute.
- To respect and to accommodate the Candidate's cultural and ethnic background when it may affect the assessment process (e.g. psychological testing);

- To recommend counseling or therapy when indicated for a Candidate accepted into initial formation; when a Candidate is rejected, it is inappropriate to suggest counseling or therapy.

To the Membership of the Religious Institute

- To educate the Membership on contemporary vocation trends;
- To provide resources and opportunities for Membership to assume their rightful role and responsibility in promoting, encouraging and inviting vocations;
- To ensure the Membership that the Religious Institute is being well represented to prospective Candidates and the public;
- To ensure that the people entering the Institute's formation program have the skills and potential to live with integrity the Religious Life consistent with the Institute's charism and tradition;
- To fulfill faithfully the expectations of the Vocation Minister as outlined by the Religious Leadership.

To Self

- To maintain proper self-care by a balance of prayer, work, leisure, personal relationships, community, etc.;
- To receive proper training and mentoring for Vocation Ministry;
- To seek the consultation of other qualified professionals when necessary;
- To maintain professional boundaries at all times with prospective Candidates and to review periodically how well this is being done.

Responsibilities of the Membership of the Religious Institute

To the Vocation Minister

- To provide the Vocation Minister with the proper emotional and spiritual support in his or her ministry;
- To show an openness and willingness to witness this support by assuming a role in the corporate responsibility of the entire Religious Institute to promote vocations;
- To respect the issues of confidentiality related to the discernment and assessment of a potential Candidate;
- To recommend names of potential Candidates to the Vocation Minister;
- To be willing to share on occasion the common life with those who are in discernment.

To the Religious Leadership

- To be open and willing to consider serving the Religious Institute as Vocation Minister;
- To trust that Religious Leadership appoints the most competent people to serve in Vocation Ministry;
- To cooperate with Religious Leadership in the responsibility to build a future for the Institute.

To the Prospective Candidate

- To be willing to share the resources of time and wisdom in mentoring a Candidate;
- To welcome a Candidate into a local community;
- To witness honesty, joy, authenticity, and fidelity in Religious Life so that a newer vocation will be nurtured and supported in the Religious Institute;
- To respect the common norms of confidentiality and professional boundaries at all times.

To Self

- To assume responsibility for personal and spiritual renewal;
- To be educated about the profile of the contemporary Candidate and other vocational trends.

Responsibilities of the Vocation Minister to Other Vocation Ministers

Vocation Ministers should maintain a mutually respectful relationship with others who share in their ministry.

- They should take adequate measures to discourage, prevent, expose, and correct the unethical conduct of Vocation Ministers.
- If they believe that another Vocation Minister has acted unethically, they should seek resolution by discussing their concerns with the respective person and/or that person's Major Superior.
- Vocation Ministers should defend and assist other Vocation Ministers who are unjustly accused of unethical conduct.

Although the Vocation Minister must protect the rights of privacy and confidentiality regarding prospective Candidates, his or her primary responsibilities are to the Religious Institute he or she is representing, to other Religious Institutes, and to the Church. Given these responsibilities, there are occasions when it is appropriate, necessary and just for Vocation Ministers to communicate with each other about a particular Candidate.

- If a Candidate applied and/or was accepted to another Religious Institute or Diocese, the Vocation Minister of the new receiving Institute is obligated to obtain a reference from the former Religious Institute or Diocese.
- The Leadership of the former Institute should decide who will provide references to the new Institute and what information shall be shared regarding each Candidate.
- Such communication should always protect the integrity of the Institute while maintaining the care and confidentiality of the prospective Candidate.
- Vocation Ministers should provide honest responses if requested by another Vocation Minister without divulging specific confidential information.
- If a Candidate was accepted and/or entered another Religious Institute or Diocese and left because of reasons related to safety of children, youths or vulnerable adults, the Religious Institute or Diocese has an ethical and possibly legal obligation to disclose the information to the new Religious Institute or Diocese to which the Candidate is applying.
- If a Candidate was asked to leave a Religious Institute or Diocese, pertinent information regarding the circumstances of his or her departure should be shared with other Religious Institutes or Dioceses that may inquire.

Diversity

All women and men are made in the image and likeness of God. Candidates who come to Religious Life and priesthood today come from diverse backgrounds (age, marital status, orientation, education, etc.) and cultures, with an inherent dignity that is revered and respected.

- Throughout the discernment and application process every effort should be made to

safeguard the culture of the Candidate, especially when he or she is from a non-dominant culture.

- When Candidates are foreign born, Institutes should make efforts to learn and to understand the culture of the Candidate's country of origin.
- Every attempt should be made to the best ability of the Institute to investigate the background of Candidates from countries outside of the United States, recognizing that some countries may not record or provide such information to the Institute.
- With a sense of humility and with acknowledgement of the human limitation present in Religious Life, Institutes should assess what types of diversity in Candidates they are willing and able to deal with in their formation programs.
- Although good will is necessary, it is not sufficient in dealing with the multi-faceted issues of diversity in community and formation. Members of the Religious Institute should be educated about diversity and multiculturalism. Resources and opportunities are made available for this purpose.
- Accommodation in bridging cultural differences is not the sole responsibility of the Institute or the Candidate. It is a mutual process that requires open discussion and understanding on the part of both the Institute and Candidate.

Record Keeping

All policies pertaining to record keeping maintain a value and respect for the individual Member, the Religious Institute and society at large.

- The Vocation office should have a written policy regarding the maintenance and destruction of records and correspondence of those who have expressed interest in the Institute, those who have applied, and those who have been accepted.
- Release forms should be part of the application process, allowing for private and confidential information about the Candidate to be shared with the necessary authorities. Release forms should be specific about timeline of their validity and who has access to what information.
- Candidates should be informed of the record keeping policies of the Institute, including where the information is stored, the length of time it is stored, and who has access to the records.
- Religious Leadership, Vocation and Formation personnel should have a common understanding of what and how much information about the Candidate needs to be shared for acceptance into a formation program. The Major Superior is the one who determines what information is relevant.
- All policies should be developed in accordance with state laws.

Confidentiality

Maintaining confidentiality in the discernment process is a means of respecting the rights and dignity of individuals in their search for God's presence in their lives.

- Sensitive information about a Candidate should not be shared by the Vocation Minister or other pertinent parties in the open forum. To do so is a violation of trust.
- The Vocation Minister should request information from a Candidate only when it is pertinent to his or her discernment process and eventual application process.
- Limitations of confidentiality should be articulated to the Candidate early in the discernment process.

- Permission should be requested from the Candidate prior to any audio or video recording of sessions.
- Information is shared with the Major Superior only when it is relevant to the making of a well informed decision.
- The Vocation Minister should take special care to follow all policies regarding record keeping for the Vocation office.
- When potential Candidates have a prior history of membership in a formation program or vows in another Religious Institute or Diocese, the Vocation Minister ensures that the information exchanged serves the good of the Church and respects confidentiality.
- While Vocation Ministers cannot provide to other Vocation Ministers documents that a potential or rejected Candidate produced (e.g. academic transcripts, autobiography, recommendations, psychological reports, etc.), they are free to share their own experience of a Candidate, both positive and negative.

Dual Relationships

The Vocation Minister should avoid dual relationships and the appearance of mixed roles with Candidates. Vocation Ministers should be prudent and mindful of potential overlapping in their relationship with a Candidate. The relationship between Vocation Minister and Candidate is professional, and not based on personal friendship. The Vocation Minister is aware that he or she is an advocate for the Religious Institute and not for the Candidate. All communication and interaction with the Candidate should be guided by this principle.

During their time of discernment and formation, Candidates are vulnerable and impressionable. All professed members of the Religious Institute, but most especially the Vocation Minister and the Major Superior, are in a position of trust and power. The power differential between the Candidate and Major Superior, Vocation Minister and all professed Members is real. The symbolic role of the professed for the Candidate must be honored by all Members of the Religious Institute. To compromise this principle is a violation of ethical conduct. To ensure that these values are maintained, the following guiding principles are recommended:

- The Vocation Minister, or any other professed Member involved in the discernment or formation process, does not serve as confessor or spiritual director for the Candidate.
- 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.
- Unhealthy emotional relationships or sexual intimacy between a professed Member and a Candidate is not only a violation of vowed chastity, it is also a grave breach of ethical conduct. There is no place for such relationships in Religious Life.

Combined Roles of Vocation Minister and Formation Director

Because of their unique roles and relationships with the Candidate, it is highly recommended that Vocation Ministers do not simultaneously serve as Formation Directors. To combine the two roles poses a risk of bias on the part of the one who serves in this dual capacity in the following areas:

- The person who assesses whether or not the Candidate has the ability and skills to enter a formation program now has the responsibility to teach them how life and ministry is lived with the Religious Institute.

- What a Vocation Minister needs to know about a Candidate for proper assessment is different from what a Formation Director needs to know about a Candidate in advance of his or her entrance into a formation program.
- The role of Vocation Minister is usually one of pastor, facilitator and vocation counselor. Because of the evaluation process, the role of Formation Director has a greater role of authority over the Candidate, much like a teacher has over a student. Shifting roles from Vocation to Formation Director can often be confusing and difficult to navigate for both the Candidate and the Vocation/Formation Director.

Recognizing the challenges of inadequate personnel, especially in smaller Institutes, Religious Leadership may be left with little choice but to combine the roles of Vocation and Formation Director. In this exceptional case, some suggested safeguards are important.

- The major interview, or behavioral assessment, should be completed by someone other than the Vocation/Formation director.
- The Vocation/Formation Director should never also serve as spiritual director.
- A periodic review of an ethical “checks and balances” should be instituted. It is recommended that a committee be established for this purpose.
- A clear channel of appeal should be made available to the Candidate in the event that a personal conflict arises between the Vocation/Formation director and the Candidate.
- The goals of the formation program should be clear, positive and specific in their articulation of target behaviors, strategies, timelines, etc.

Expectations of the Candidate in the Discernment Process

While the rights of Candidates during the discernment process should be respected, Candidates do not have reciprocal obligations particular to a professional and ethical code of conduct in Vocation Ministry. There are, however, some expectations of the Candidate that the Vocation Minister may assume regarding the Candidate’s own participation in the discernment process.

The Vocation Minister should expect that the Candidate will:

- Be honest and truthful in his or her discernment and application process;
- Follow through in a timely manner with whatever is reasonably suggested or required by the Vocation Minister to assist him or her in discernment;
- Follow carefully all of the requirements of the application process;
- Discontinue the discernment process with the Vocation Minister once the Candidate knows that he or she does not want to pursue a vocation with the given Religious Institute;
- Recognize that discerning one’s vocation is a sacred process that requires time, prayer and commitment;
- Assume responsibility and ownership for his or her own decisions and life direction;
- Make use of the resources available to assist in discernment (i.e. literature, spiritual direction, etc.);
- Choose and act responsibly when becoming more aware of both self and God’s will throughout the discernment process.

Concluding Statement and Reflection

Vocation Ministry continues to evolve in a rapidly changing world and Church. The commitment, however, to professional and ethical standards in Vocation Ministry must remain constant on

the part of all concerned parties: Religious Leadership, Vocation Ministers, Members of the Religious Institute and the prospective Candidate. This shared responsibility for new Membership is an essential value for contemporary Vocation Ministry.

The National Religious Vocation Conference recognizes that this document may not be inclusive of all the varied aspects of Vocation Ministry. At the same time, it also acknowledges that cultural and environmental factors may need to be considered in applying these guidelines to the various types of circumstances and ways in which Vocation Ministry is carried out in Religious Institutes.

To assist Religious Institutes in the processing of this document, the National Religious Vocation Conference proposes the following questions for group or personal reflection:

- How does your Religious Institute define the terms and understand the roles of Religious Leadership, Vocation Minister, Membership, and Candidate?
- How has your Religious Institute experienced “diversity” and “dual relationships” in Vocation Ministry? What policies and procedures are in effect in your Religious Institute regarding “confidentiality” and “record keeping”?
- How might this *Code of Ethics* be helpful in the exercise of Vocation Ministry in your Religious Institute?
- How may these guidelines be adapted to your own particular situation?

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