



Convocation of American Churches in Europe

A COMMENTARY ON THE VOCATIONAL DISCERNMENT PROCESS

The 2003 and 2006 General Conventions completely re-wrote the Title III canons pertaining to Holy Orders. The revision had several goals in mind:

1. To highlight the ministry of all the Baptized (III.1).
2. To validate the Diaconate as a fully valid Order.
3. To give far more flexibility to Bishops and Commissions on Ministry, especially to recruit young persons for ordained ministry (see new canon III.3) and to eliminate the “local priest” (a.k.a “Canon 9 priests”) anomaly of having people ordained for particular communities being unable to move.
4. To refine the process in light of the experience of women in the clergy.
5. To give greater support to newly ordained persons.

The Convocation has had an unprecedented number of applicants for ordination in the past ten years. As a result, the Commission on Ministry of the Baptized (COMB) has worked to develop reasonable and effective guidelines for the process of vocational discernment. There have certainly been learnings along the way! The new canons align with a major concern of the previous and present Bishops-in-charge that all baptized members of Convocation congregations be encouraged and enabled to discern their particular vocations, and be empowered to go into the world and do them.

One major issue is formation. In the Convocation, for several reasons, we have favored a customized design of theological education and formation for ordained ministry. This has required the establishing of a body that can assist the Bishop, COMB, and ordinands—the European Institute of Christian Studies (EICS). The ability to direct and evaluate training for ordination is presently vested in the Bishop, assisted by various tutors and programs under the aegis of the Board of EICS.

The big changes are the creation of separate tracks for Deacons and Priests, while still acknowledging that Priests are to be ordained Deacons as well. There is now a clear difference between postulancy for the Diaconate and the Priesthood. In essence, the previous understandings of postulancy and candidacy for Deacons are conflated into “candidacy,” while the Priesthood track retains the older understanding.

The Dossier Checklist reflects the new tracks and the steps in each. All should follow it with a close eye to the canons. Some terminology changes have been made:

1. “Aspirant” applies only to people asking what God is calling them to do. If they sense that they may have a call to ordained ministry, they should ask the Priest or Pastoral Leader to conduct a careful inquiry with them personally. Should this inquiry result in the need to pursue further a discernment of a possible call to ordained ministry, then a discernment group should come next.

2. "Nominee" is a person who, after the careful inquiry and discernment group process, is being nominated for consideration to ordination to the Diaconate or Priesthood.
3. In the Deacon track, the Bishop makes a nominee into a Postulant, who then proceeds to ask for candidacy.
4. In the Priesthood track, the Nominee becomes a Postulant only after background checks and examinations are completed and COMB has interviewed the Nominee and given the Bishop its recommendation.

Some particular points, by number:

(3, 4, 5, 6) The Bishop and COMB have guidelines for the formation of discernment groups, and can give assistance to our congregations. Specifically, the Priest or Pastoral Leader in charge of the congregation or faith community, after personally conducting a careful inquiry with the Aspirant, shall contact the Bishop to say that s/he is forming a group of people to meet for a specific period of time to assist the aspirant in discerning God's call. The group shall be selected with the specific person in mind, and shall meet together only for that particular Aspirant. The group shall make a report to the Priest or Pastoral Leader. If the recommendation is to proceed into the ordination process, then the Priest or Leader may decide to present the Aspirant to the Vestry or Bishop's Committee. If that committee agrees, the Aspirant becomes a Nominee either for the Diaconate or the Priesthood upon the Bishop's receipt of the Nomination (III.1(a) or III.8.2(d)(2)). In all cases, Nomination by a congregation is an expression of support, (including financial!) for their Nominee throughout the ordination process, no matter what the outcome.

(8, 25) The Bishop should interview the Nominee early in the process, rather than later.

(10, 26) The new canons do not require these at this point, but because we have had to chase people for them after COMB interviews, this is prudent. Background checks in Europe are more difficult to do, because of privacy issues.

(17, 33) The revisers sought to eliminate the Standing Committee/Council of Advice role completely, reasoning from numerous cases where a Standing Committee would block someone for ordination based on one cursory interview, while the candidate, seminary, parish, COM and bishop had worked with the person for years. The House of Bishops overruled them and put back in the SC's role in "backstopping" the process – backstopping because their official role is to certify that all the appropriate canons have been applied correctly.

I have re-inserted the Council of Advice in a more active role in the process, expecting that we will continue the Council's role of active interviewing and knowledge of the candidate. Reasons: our process is peculiar enough that we must have more than the usual checks in place; our geographical dispersion means we need as much "face-time" with each other as possible; as we continue to form non-Americans for ministry beyond the Convocation as well as in it, we must take a heightened role of responsibility for whom we allow to minister anywhere in the world.

Incidentally, the Convocation is specifically mentioned in III.5.1(b).

(13, 29, 40) EICS' role in the process: Each Ordinand will have a customized formation plan, overseen by the Bishop and worked out between the ordinands and a "shepherd" from EICS. The principles of these plans and how they are elaborated are found on the website, "Deacon Formation Guidelines," and "Ordinand Training Guidelines."