

In Fulfillment of Their Mission: The Duties and Tasks of a Roman Catholic Priest An Assessment Project

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The title of this article is from the Fifth Edition of the USCCB Program of Priestly Formation, 2005, section 23: “For priests, the specific arena in which their spiritual life unfolds is in their exercise of ministry in fulfillment of their mission.” The project was funded by a two-year grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion.

Devising a strategy and creating tools to assess the development of seminarians for the Master of Divinity degree poses a daunting task for seminary faculties. On the one hand, the aim of theological education offers resistance to the application of formulaic assessment models that ignore “the nuanced and complex goals of theological education.”¹ On the other hand, existing standardized guidelines lack sufficient detail to allow for objective appraisals of student performance. Compounding these difficulties, few faculties share best practices in assessment and have not had the opportunity to wrestle with these issues with colleagues from other theological institutions. Also, few seminaries have considered adapting assessment strategies that have proven effective in other professions as a tool to strengthen their mission of theological education.

For the better part of two decades, the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) has been at the forefront of efforts to examine and introduce current theory and best practices to the community of theological educators. Their work highlights the hesitancy on the part of faculty to embrace objective measurement because of the belief that the “outcomes of a seminary education” are best assessed through a process of “professional judgment.” This judgment is often subjective and based upon experience in the field. However, there is always a need for a more precise articulation and objective measurement, especially within the areas of professional development and skill acquisition in the learning taxonomies associated with ministerial training.

John Harris and Dennis Sansom suggest that professional judgment by experts can be strengthened by a greater degree of objectivity when a common language is developed for student assessment.² This can be achieved through ongoing dialogue among educators who share the same content knowledge and inhabit a common “language community” with their students. That shared language reveals to students what they are expected to know and be able to do. It provides for educators what they are expected to teach and how they might assess student performance.

In Fulfillment of Their Mission: The Duties and Tasks of a Roman Catholic Priest and the scoring rubrics that accompany it are products of an ongoing dialogue of such a language community. That dialogue has brought together academic faculty

representing eight seminaries affiliated with the Midwest Association of Theological Schools (MATS) and senior staff representing Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC). MATS is a 40-year-old association of 24 Roman Catholic seminaries from the midwest, southwest, and west coast that holds an annual meeting in Chicago to discuss issues surrounding seminary formation, administration, and best practices regarding seminary programmatic development. EDC is an international, nonprofit organization that conducts and applies research to advance learning, and provides technical assistance and support to translate new knowledge into policy and sustainable practice. EDC currently manages 325 projects in 35 countries. Its Center for Education, Employment, and Community Programs has more than 15 years experience developing standards-based assessment in fields ranging from manufacturing to information technology.

Through a two-year grant from the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion, MATS and EDC have fashioned a new way for educators and students to view the full range of responsibilities of ordained priests in the church today. *In Fulfillment of Their Mission* offers a profile of what a successful priest needs to know and be able to do. It draws upon the expertise of active priests and seminary faculty members. It illustrates how widely recognized methods of occupational analysis can be adapted to address the distinctive nature of the priestly vocation. It provides a foundation upon which seminary faculties can begin to build assessment strategies and portfolios that offer objective measurement of the activities that describe ministerial performance.

There is of course a limit to how extensively a standard occupational analysis can be applied effectively to the priesthood. In the spirit of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*³ and as the *Program of Priestly Formation* (PPF) asserts, “Formation, as the Church understands it, is not equivalent to a secular sense of schooling or, even less, job training.”⁴ Application of the occupational analysis model has been enhanced to reflect the human, spiritual, pastoral, and intellectual domains of formation. This modification has not eliminated the inherent tensions between an occupational and a vocational view of the priesthood. Nevertheless, we believe that *In Fulfillment of Their Mission* represents a fresh vantage point from which Roman Catholic seminary faculties and their students can view their formational goals.

Background

Since 1971, Roman Catholic seminaries have organized themselves following the guidance of the PPF. Through the PPF, now in its fifth edition, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops establishes norms that specify the curricular content of seminary education and priestly formation. Based on these norms, seminaries help each candidate engage in vocational discernment to embrace the identity, skills, and mission of a Roman Catholic priest. What the norms do not prescribe are methods by which

seminary faculties should gauge the progress that seminarians achieve along their journey to ordination. As a result, seminaries typically approach the subject of seminarian assessment in isolation. Frequently, seminary formation faculty establish their own criteria for judging student performance. This allows a seminary to shape its evaluation processes to reflect its unique institutional culture. Yet it does not provide a common basis for assessment across seminaries because of the uneven development of criteria. Moreover, this type of evaluation lends itself to a more subjective judgment of candidates.

MATS and EDC have engaged in a process that seeks to explore the possibilities of creating more objective methods of evaluating student performance. The project brings together seminary leaders in an effort to generate consensus about how best to create an infrastructure upon which authentic, objective assessment measures can be developed. It is a project driven by four interrelated questions:

- To what extent can the priestly vocation be described in language that lends itself to objective assessment?
- To what extent can a framework for assessing the ministry of a priest take into account the behavioral attributes that constitute the core of the formation process?
- To what extent can methods used to develop assessments in other professions be applied to the Roman Catholic priesthood?
- To what extent can this strategy lead to the creation of tools that are useful to seminary faculty and those responsible for the ongoing formation of priests?

Using a Performance-Based Approach

The MATS/ EDC team centered its discussions on the development of a performance-based assessment framework. This approach replicates best practices used to create training programs and authentic assessments in other professional schools. At the same time, it parallels the scope and nature of ministerial formation that often requires, as ATS notes, the dimension of time.

The attainment of learning goals in a professional degree program like the MDiv cannot be fully determined while students are in the degree program, or even at the time of graduation. MDiv students are being educated for performance ministry, and some learning goals cannot be assessed until graduates are in ministerial settings...and the graduate is in practice in the field.⁵

Like ATS, MATS and EDC understand that it is from the vantage point of ministerial performance that seminarian learning can fully be gauged. It is the integration and application of learned skills and behaviors that constitute the portrait of

successful formation. Consequently, by examining the responsibilities of a priest in the field, outcomes can be defined that optimize the quality of education in the seminary.⁶

Developing the Profile of a Priest in Ministry

Effective assessment begins at the end. Clearly defined goals enable educators to provide substantive feedback to their students. For the purposes of developing an assessment framework for seminarians, this meant creating a statement that appropriately defines the end point for further deliberations, i.e., the goal of seminary formation. To do this, the work team adapted EDC's concept of a "Learning Occupation."⁷ A Learning Occupation is an invented construct that does not exist in the workplace, nor does it correspond to a specific occupational title or description. Rather, it represents the combination of all tasks, knowledge, skills, and attributes required to perform a range of job functions conducted in a group of related real life occupations. The Learning Occupation construct draws on best practices in worker training in Japan and Germany, where cross training of technical workers is considered critical to ensure high-quality work. It has been used by EDC in Industry Skill Standards projects to articulate an outcome goal for the education and training of workers whose responsibilities cut across different, related occupations.

EDC's methodology was used to create a starting point for reflection about a contemporary portrait of a Roman Catholic priest in the field. While the main mission of seminaries is to prepare men to become priests, recent studies have suggested that seminary graduates become pastors within three to five years.⁸ As a result, the "Learning Occupation" that emerged was that of a Roman Catholic priest with pastoral experience rather than a recent seminary graduate. Thus, the panel's proposed Learning Occupation reads:

A Catholic Priest serving the people primarily in parishes, and also in schools, hospitals, prisons, and other settings, through acts of Christian Ministry including celebrating liturgy and sacraments, education, administration and pastoral care.

This definition of the Learning Occupation paints a limited landscape of the priesthood in so far as it takes into account only the types of ministry a priest may have and the main duties of performance by a priest. It is understood that the nature of priestly service is linked with its identity (in particular, the spiritual, and theological aspects of the vocation). That is to say, priesthood is more than an occupation. Nevertheless, as a point of reference, the generic nature of this definition promotes easier articulation of the primary and secondary responsibilities of a diocesan priest, and provides clear and useful limits within which the daily work of parish priests can be described.

The definition of the Learning Occupation became the subject of a modified DACUM analysis facilitated by EDC. DACUM (Developing A Curriculum)⁹ is a method for practitioners in an occupational field to identify the major areas of work and the constituent tasks that define successful job performance. Methods like DACUM rest on three basic principles:

- Expert workers can describe and define their job more accurately than anyone else.
- An effective way to define a job is to precisely describe the tasks that expert workers perform.
- All tasks, in order to be performed correctly, demand certain knowledge, skills, resources, and behaviors.

For the purposes of this project, a panel representing eight seminaries was assembled that includes seven ordained priests: all have served as parish priests, six have seminary teaching experience, four currently serve or have served as academic deans of theological schools, one is a member of a religious community, and one is an ATS administrator. The panel also includes: two women religious with teaching and administrative experience, and four laymen with various levels of expertise in administration, teaching, and assessment.¹⁰

The focus of the ensuing guided dialogue hinged upon descriptions of concrete, observable activity performed by priests. Participants were encouraged to envision a successful priest¹¹ as defined by the Learning Occupation. They described a parish priest ordained between three to five years serving as a pastor. Participants were challenged to identify *all* ministerial activities undertaken by such a priest and express them by using a single verb and object. The final wording of each activity statement was achieved through group consensus. The purpose of this exercise was to achieve a high degree of specificity and clarity in the description of activities performed by the priest. This activity facilitated the eventual development of objective assessment measures.

Once all activities had been identified by the panel, they were organized around major areas of ministerial responsibilities (i.e., duties) and their constituent tasks. This organization of responsibilities is depicted as a matrix listing the duties and tasks of a Catholic priest. To complete this profile, the panel identified those elements that enable a priest to perform these activities. In short, these include:

- The skills and knowledge necessary for a priest to perform his responsibilities
- The behaviors, or attributes, demonstrated by a successful priest
- The resources necessary for a priest to perform his responsibilities successfully

This listing does not claim to be exhaustive, but as a whole it provides a fairly complete picture of what skills, knowledge and behaviors a priest in today's church is likely to exercise in ministry. Lastly, the panel identified major trends and concerns that define the current context in ministry and the resources necessary for its performance.

Reading the Priest Profile

In Fulfillment of Their Mission captures and organizes the information solicited from the MATS panel through a rigorous guided dialogue process. The matrix developed displays nine ministerial *duties* (major areas of responsibility) and their constituent *tasks*. The nine duties are listed numerically (not by priority) for ease of reference to include:

1. Celebrates Liturgy and Sacraments
2. Provides Pastoral Care and Spiritual Guidance
3. Teaches the Faith
4. Leads Parish Administration
5. Practices a Ministry of Presence with Parish Groups
6. Participates in the Life of the Diocesan Church
7. Engages with Diverse Publics
8. Engages in Professional Development
9. Engages in Personal Development

The tasks run horizontal to the duties in adjacent columns. Each task is referenced with the duty number and a letter. For example, the task "Celebrates Eucharist" is referenced as (1A) indicating that it is the first task for Duty One. Similarly, the task "Visits the sick and others in need" is referenced as (2A) to indicate that it is the first task of Duty Two, etc. The tasks have been sequenced to approximate an order of priority. The collection of duties and tasks in this Learning Occupation intends to describe as completely as possible the activities of a successful priest in ministry.

The profile serves two immediate purposes. First, it communicates to prospective seminarians precisely what will be expected of them as future priests. Second, it summarizes for educators what it is they need to prepare these students to know and be able to do. Faculties at several MATS seminaries have begun to review and discuss utilizing this profile in the following ways:

- A faculty retreat day to review formation priorities
- A guide for the recruitment of prospective candidates
- A framework for curriculum review
- The infrastructure for an M.Div. portfolio that may evolve into a capstone project

- A foundation for developing a post-ordination growth plan for newly ordained priests

Validating the Profile

The panel that contributed to the development of *In Fulfillment of Their Mission* brings a high degree of expertise and experience about priestly ministry and preparing men for the priesthood. The consensus of the panel is that the profile provides a dependable description of the duties and tasks of priests today. Further verification of the profile's accuracy was sought from active priests in the field. EDC customized its previously developed online occupational survey it had previously developed to accommodate the specific content of the panel's work.¹²

The aim of this validation process was to produce a document that authentically represents the work of a priest and that has broad applicability. The survey asked respondents to do four things:

1. Provide basic demographic data about themselves and their parish
2. Determine the importance of each identified task in the performance of their ministry
3. Identify the frequency by which each task is performed
4. Review the additional lists developed for the profile (skills and knowledge, behaviors, resources, and current context)

The combination of importance and frequency scores were used to understand the "view from the field" of the priorities of ministerial work.

During the fall of 2006, the survey was piloted by making it available to a sample of active priests provided by the MATS panel. This trial run resulted in 76 completed surveys. The demographic profile of the respondents is summarized as follows:

- Average age: 51.9 years
- 80.7% Caucasian, 7.7% Hispanic/Latino
- 62% have 20 or more years experience in the ministry
- 25.7% held a career in another field prior to becoming a priest, with the majority of these having been involved in either business/industry or education
- 47% serve in a suburban setting, 43% urban, and 11% rural

Respondents were asked to review all duties and to rate the relative importance of each task by a five-point Likert scale ranging from "essential, very important, important, somewhat important and not applicable." Following each task, a frequency measure was used with response categories of "daily, weekly, monthly, rarely and not applicable" to determine how often each task was performed. In addition, each

respondent had an opportunity to provide individual comments. Results from the survey show that the respondents agree that *In Fulfillment of Their Mission* provides an accurate picture of a priest's responsibilities. They also concurred that the panel's ordering of the tasks for each duty approximates the degree of importance those tasks have in the field.

Assessing the Performance of a Priest's Duties and Tasks

EDC has used occupational analyses as the basis for creating assessment tools in a variety of career fields. In the case of the helping professions, EDC has learned that effective interaction with clients typically demands that workers possess special attributes like compassion, active listening and the ability to empower individuals to make their own decisions. The degree to which these attributes exist proves to be difficult to evaluate. For example, in New Hampshire, EDC worked with human service professionals to contextualize such qualities in order to facilitate their assessment. Descriptive statements were created that provided examples of what the job tasks of human service workers "look like" when they integrate specific attributes. These descriptions of observable job tasks and attributes were then sequenced to illustrate levels of performance mastery. These levels became the basis for assessment.¹³

The project panel replicated this strategy using the four domains from the PPF, and developed examples of what these domains looked like when performed in various tasks. These examples of performance were organized into sequences illustrating levels of proficiency.

Reading the Rubrics

A rubric is a scoring tool that specifies the level of performance expected for several levels of quality. It is a set of criteria used by instructors to assess student performance. Rubrics clearly communicate degrees of proficient performance to instructors and students alike because they offer instances of achievement that are observable and specific. Building off of EDC's experience in creating rubrics for other career skills programs,¹⁴ the project panel created rubrics for each of the nine duties described in the profile.

The rubric for each duty is organized around four *performance levels* that show incremental levels of achievement. These levels are novice, approaching proficiency, proficiency, and above proficiency. By definition, the novice level represents the performance of what would generally be expected of a recent graduate from seminary. One would see the potential presence of pastoral skills that still require further development. The level designated "approaching proficiency" indicates a more highly developed skill level and a more mature integration of the four domains of formation. The level of "proficiency" lists sample performance statements that describe a stage of skill development expected of a pastoral leader. Finally, the performance level "above

proficiency” includes statements that indicate exemplary service and ministry. In many ways the minister becomes a role model and minister to his peers.

The left column on the rubric charts lists the "performance area" for the duty being analyzed. Performance areas generally coincide with the tasks.¹⁵ Each performance area is broken into "performance statements." The performance statements are used to describe levels of mastery within the performance area. Each performance statement illustrates an activity that integrates a task performed by a priest that incorporates one or more of the dimensions of formation (guided by the PPF and PDV). The numbers and letters following each performance statement signify tasks that may be assessed using that same statement. The dimensions of formation integrated into the performance statement are indicated by the *italic* letters—*I* (intellectual), *H* (human), *S* (spiritual), and *P* (pastoral). For example, under Duty One and adjacent to the performance area “Celebrates the Eucharist,” the first performance statement indicating achievement at the novice level reads “Celebrates the rite accurately in its various options and rubrics.” The numeric and lettered references following the statement denote alignment to tasks 1A, 1C, 1E, and 1G, indicating that each of these tasks can be measured by the same performance statement. In addition, this performance statement integrates the intellectual (I) and pastoral (P) domains required here. The collection of rubrics charts includes similar cross-referencing between performance statements, tasks, and dimensions of formation.

Using *In Fulfillment of Their Mission* and the Rubrics

As noted, MATS seminaries and diocesan offices are beginning to reflect on various ways of applying *In Fulfillment of Their Mission* as an assessment tool. In several focus groups of seminary personnel, it was felt that the instrument can serve to benchmark faculty reflection on the various levels and components of formation. At most seminary faculty discussions intellectual formation is the focus. The profile and rubrics have provided a new approach to discuss and integrate the human, spiritual, and pastoral domains into an assessment of the curriculum. Several seminaries are beginning to incorporate these tools as part of a portfolio that students and their formation and spiritual directors may use for personal goal setting and periodic review.

A few priest focus groups have felt that the profile and rubrics could become a template for individual priests to evaluate and set goals for their own growth as a minister. One director of continuing education suggested that the project can become a guide for individual priests, as they set personal goals and strategize how they might improve their ministry. Many valued the examples of performance statements found in the rubrics as they exemplify various levels of proficiency providing a way to help priests to assess themselves in a current ministerial context.

A focus group of priests from the Archdiocese of St. Andrews and Edinburgh (Scotland) have reviewed these documents and noted the universal applicability they have to their own context.

A national validation of the priest profile is currently underway. EDC has revised and posted the validation survey online. Roman Catholic priests serving in the United States are invited to take the survey by logging on to <http://surveys.edc.org/cleveland/dacum3.htm>. Directions for completing the survey can be found at this site. EDC also hosted an online dialogue to discuss the priest profile and rubric charts from April 1 to April 15, 2008.

Those seeking more information about these materials or technical assistance in their use can contact the authors.

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Endnotes

¹ Daniel Aleshire, *Theological Education*, Autumn 1998.

² John Harris and Dennis Sansom, "Discerning is More Than Counting," *American Academy for Liberal Education*, March, 2000.

³ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis (I Will Give You Shepherds: On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day)* (Vatican City: 1992). *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is a seminal document on the identity and role of the Catholic Priest in the advent of the New Millennium.

⁴ *Program of Priestly Formation, Fifth Edition*, section 68.

⁵ *ATS Handbook of Accreditation, Section Eight, "A Guide for Evaluating Theological Learning,"* p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁷ Judith Leff and Monika Aring, *Gateway to the Future: Skill Standards for the Bioscience Industry*, (Newton, MA: Education Development Center, Inc., 1995), 27.

⁸ Dean Hoge, *Experiences of Priests Ordained Five to Nine Years*, National Catholic Education Association, Washington, DC, 2006.

⁹ Robert E. Norton, *DACUM Handbook*, (Columbus, OH: 1997). The DACUM process has been widely promoted by Robert E. Norton and the Center on Education and Training for Employment at Ohio State University.

¹⁰ The panel members include: Rev. Mark A. Latcovich, Ph.D., Saint Mary Seminary and Theological School, Wickliffe, Ohio; Sr. Elaine Brothers, OSF, Ph.D., and Rev. Kenneth Hannon, OMI, Ph.D., Oblate School of Theology, San Antonio, Texas; Terrence Callan, Ph.D., The Athenaeum of Ohio, Cincinnati, Ohio; Rev. Damian J. Ference, Saint Mary Church, Hudson, Ohio; John Gallam, Ph.D., Sacred Heart School of Theology, Hales Corners, Wisconsin; Rev. Rodney Kreidler, Saint Angela Merici Church, Fairview Park, Ohio; Rev. Todd Lajiness, Ph.D., Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, Michigan; Rev. John Lodge, S.T.D., Christopher McAtee, D.Min., and Rev. Martin Zielinski, Ph.D., University of the Lake/Mundelein Seminary, Mundelein, Illinois; Mgr. Jeremiah McCarthy, Ph.D., Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Sr. Karen Shirilla, SJ, Ph.D., Saints Cyril and Methodius Seminary, Detroit, Michigan, and Thomas Walters, Ph.D., Saint Meinrad School of Theology, Saint Meinrad, Indiana. EDC senior staff Joseph Ippolito, M.A., and Joyce Malyn-Smith, Ed.D., designed the conceptual approach and facilitated the development process.

¹¹ The qualitative variable successful priest is understood to mean one who has “achieved levels of ministerial performance” that meet the prescriptions of church teaching, canon law, and skills that reflect pastoral sensitivity with ministry (see the appendix of prescribed rubrics).

¹² The survey was developed as part of EDC’s Information Technology Across Careers (ITAC) project that was funded by the National Science Foundation.

¹³ This example is drawn from EDC’s New Hampshire Skill Standards Implementation and ITAC projects.

¹⁴ EDC’s ITAC project is one of several recent initiatives that have developed scoring rubrics.

¹⁵ In some instances tasks in the profile have been combined or slightly reworded to facilitate assessment. For example, in Duty One, “Celebrates Liturgy and Sacraments,” tasks (1D) “Celebrates Reconciliation” and (1F) “Anoints the sick” have been merged as one performance area under a new heading called “Celebrates the sacraments of healing.” The panel felt that the performance statements listed were equally applicable for each of these two tasks. Similarly, the panel felt that tasks (3I) “Communicates message of faith through various media” and (3J) “Represents the Church’s point of view in the public arena” could best be assessed by combining them under the performance area “Uses the media to communicate the message of faith.”