

“Discernment as a Moral Act: Ethical Decision-Making in Formation and Discernment”

Opening Keynote Address

Conference on Human Formation 2026

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Good evening.

It is a privilege to be with all of you as we begin this important Conference on Human Formation. I would like to express my gratitude to our sponsored partners with this conference, Saint Meinrad - Right Reverend Kurt Stasiak, ArchAbbot and the Very Reverend Dennis Robinson, president-rector. I want to acknowledge our sponsors- National Religious Vocation Conference, Conference of Major Superiors of Men, Religious Formation Conference, and Leadership Conference of Women Religious. My deepest gratitude to the conference organizers - Beth Davis, Brother John Mark Falkenhain, Marc DelMonico, the presenters, and all those who work behind the scenes to make a conference like this successful. I am also appreciative of all of you - vocation directors, formation directors, seminary personnel, religious superiors, psychologists, spiritual directors, and all who are participating in this gathering dedicated to the future of priestly and religious formation in the Church.

I also bring greetings from Saint Luke Institute, where for nearly fifty years we have accompanied clergy and religious through integrated psychological, spiritual, and human formation treatment and care. Saint Luke Institute has had the profound privilege of walking with bishops, vocation directors, seminaries, religious communities, and candidates from around the world in the sacred and often complex work of discernment, assessment, healing, and continuing care. That experience continually reminds us that formation is never merely institutional work; it is deeply human and profoundly ecclesial.

As a Vincentian priest for 40 years, I have had the privilege of accompanying individuals and communities through some of the most hopeful and some of the most difficult moments in formation and ministry. Over the years, I have sat with leaders in the Church struggling over painful admissions decisions, navigating complex personnel realities, trying to balance compassion with accountability, and candidates sincerely desiring to serve Christ while also carrying significant human wounds, anxieties, and vulnerabilities. Those experiences have convinced me that discernment is never simply procedural. It is intensely spiritual and moral because real lives, communities, and the credibility of the Church are shaped by the decisions we make.

We gather at a pivotal moment in the life of the Church. Across dioceses, seminaries, houses of formation, and religious communities, we are increasingly aware that the work of discernment has become more complex, more demanding, and more consequential than perhaps at any other time in recent memory.

The candidates who come to us today arrive with tremendous generosity, sincerity, and zeal. Many possess remarkable gifts, deep spirituality, intellectual ability, pastoral desire, and authentic love for Christ and the Church. Yet they also come shaped by a world marked by fragmentation, anxiety, trauma, loneliness, isolation, rapid cultural and technological change, and shifting understandings of identity, intimacy, authority, and community.

At the same time, the Church herself carries the wounds of scandal, mistrust, polarization, and institutional fatigue. Formation communities are navigating unprecedented pastoral, psychological, spiritual, and cultural realities. The burden placed upon those entrusted with discernment and admissions has never been greater.

And therefore, tonight I would like to propose a central conviction that I hope can guide our entire conference:

Discernment is not merely an administrative process. It is a holy and ethical responsibility.

In his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV reminds the Church that “every act of formation is ultimately an act of reverence before the mystery of the human person.” The Pope insists that discernment within the Church must never become merely procedural or institutional because vocation concerns the sacred dignity of persons created in the image of God and entrusted to the care of the Church.

Formation and admissions are not exercises in institutional protection, risk mitigation, or policy compliance. Instead, they are sacred acts of stewardship carried out on behalf of the Gospel, the candidate, the community, and the People of God.

Every discernment decision carries ethical, spiritual, pastoral, psychological, and ecclesial consequences. We know this not simply from theory, but from experience. Many of the ministry-related crises facing the Church today can be traced, at least in part, to failures in formation. Collectively, the Church did not always prepare some priests and religious to resist clericalism, confront misogyny, or recognize the divesting reality of the sexual abuse crisis as it unfolded. Those painful chapters in our history remind us that formation is never a peripheral concern. If we desire a healthy Church tomorrow, we must be deeply committed to healthy formation today.

Therefore, who we admit matters.
Who we delay matters.
Who we decline matters.
How we make those decisions matters even more.

At its deepest level, discernment is participation in the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Church has always understood vocation not primarily as recruitment, but as listening – as discernment. We do not manufacture vocations. We accompany persons in discerning whether God is truly calling them to a particular form of life and whether they possess the freedom, maturity, and capacity to live that vocation faithfully and fruitfully.

This requires humility. The temptation in formation work is to reduce discernment to simplistic categories such as:

- “safe” or “unsafe,”
- “good fit” or “bad fit,”
- “successful” or “problematic.”

But authentic discernment is always more nuanced than that because human persons are mysteries. Every candidate carries grace and limitations, giftedness and vulnerability, aspiration and woundedness.

Pope Leo XIV in *Magnifica Humanitas* describes formation as “the patient art of accompanying grace.” He cautions the Church against reducing discernment to metrics of efficiency or institutional survival while neglecting the deeper reality of the human person.

At Saint Luke Institute, we encounter this reality every day. Psychological assessment alone cannot determine vocation. Spiritual desire alone cannot sustain vocation. Healthy discernment requires integration — the integration of the spiritual, emotional, relational, psychological, and pastoral dimensions of the person.

In my own experience, I have learned that some of the most sincere and prayerful candidates may still struggle profoundly with emotional regulation, intimacy, sexual identity, dependency, isolation, or relational maturity. Conversely, I have also witnessed remarkable human growth in individuals who through good and clear assessment, accompaniment, therapy, spiritual direction, community life, and grace, developed extraordinary self-awareness, freedom, and pastoral capacity over time.

These experiences continually remind me that discernment is not about identifying perfect people. It is about discerning whether a person possesses the capacity and willingness for ongoing conversion, integration, and healthy ministry.

The task of discernment is therefore not to identify perfect candidates. Perfect candidates do not exist. The task is to ask:

- Is this person capable of growing in freedom?
- Can this individual sustain healthy relationships?
- Is there sufficient psychological integration?
- Is there capacity for celibate chastity, obedience, accountability, responsibility, and communal life?
- Does the person demonstrate honesty, self-awareness, emotional regulation, and spiritual depth?
- Can this vocation be lived in a healthy, stable, and life-giving manner?

These are not merely clinical questions. They are moral, fiduciary, and pastoral questions.

One of the dangers facing formation today is that discernment can unintentionally become overly defensive. Because the Church has experienced profound failures—and rightly seeks to prevent future harm—we can sometimes reduce admissions and screening primarily to risk management. Risk management is necessary. Prudence matters.

Safeguarding matters. Policies matter. But if discernment becomes only risk management, we risk losing the theological and pastoral heart of formation. Pope Leo XIV acknowledges this tension directly in his encyclical when he writes that “a Church governed only by fear will struggle to form ministers capable of evangelical freedom.” The Holy Father reminds us that safeguarding and discernment must always remain rooted in truth, charity, and authentic accompaniment. The question cannot simply be: “How do we protect the institution?” The deeper question must also be: “How do we responsibly and ethically accompany the human person standing before us?”

At Saint Luke Institute, we have seen the consequences when discernment lacks courage, clarity, integration, or transparency. We have also seen the healing and flourishing that emerge when vocation discernment is approached with wisdom, honesty, interdisciplinary collaboration, and pastoral sensitivity.

I remember early in my priesthood working in a diocesan seminary assuming that generosity, orthodoxy, intelligence, and enthusiasm were sufficient indicators for long-term ministry. Experience has taught me otherwise. Over time, I came to recognize how unresolved trauma, emotional rigidity, lack of self-awareness, sexual identity confusion,

chronic loneliness, dysfunctional family of origins, and/or impaired relational patterns can deeply affect a person's ability to live healthy ministry and community life.

I have also seen how the failure to address these realities honestly can lead to suffering not only for the individual, but for entire communities and ministries. Those experiences have only deepened my conviction that discernment requires courage, humility, and moral clarity. There is a moral responsibility to the Church and to the People of God. But there is also a moral responsibility to the candidate. It is not compassionate to admit someone into a way of life they may not be capable of sustaining. It is not merciful to ignore serious indicators of instability, dependency, rigidity, unresolved trauma, narcissism, isolation, or impaired relational capacity. Nor is it ethical to admit someone merely because of institutional need, declining numbers, financial pressures, or fear of saying no. We have a fiduciary obligation not to "set candidates up for failure" in ministry. This is a grave disservice to the Church and to individual candidates.

When discernment lacks clarity or courage, everyone suffers:

- the candidate,
- the community,
- future parishioners,
- religious institutes,
- and ultimately the mission of the Church.

Poor discernment can wound lives for decades.

Good discernment, even when difficult, is an act of charity. Strong formation is essential not only for those preparing for ministry but for the entire Church. When priests and religious are formed with emotional maturity, spiritual depth, healthy relationships, and pastoral competence, they are better able to serve God's people with integrity and compassion. Conversely, poor formation harms both ministers and the communities they serve. Because the faithful deserve healthy, trustworthy, and well-prepared leaders, formation is ultimately a responsibility to the whole People of God, not just to individual candidates.

The *Program for Priestly Formation* reminds us that human formation is the foundation of all formation. Why? "Because grace builds upon nature." A man or woman cannot give what they do not possess internally. Ministry requires interior freedom, emotional maturity, relational stability, self-knowledge, and the capacity for healthy intimacy and communion. Human formation is not secondary to spiritual formation. It is inseparable from it. In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo XIV writes: "Grace does not erase the human

person; grace heals, elevates, and perfects human nature.” This insight lies at the heart of authentic human formation. Psychological maturity affects:

- well-being,
- spiritual life,
- pastoral ministry,
- leadership,
- authority,
- celibacy,
- boundaries,
- community life,
- and the ability to love authentically.

At Saint Luke Institute, our integrated model of care continually demonstrates that spiritual vitality and psychological health cannot be artificially separated. Healthy ministry requires both spiritual depth and human maturity. You cannot substitute one for the other.

One of the greatest lessons I have learned through my ministry is that discernment must always remain rooted in hope — not naïve optimism, but hope grounded in the possibility of healing, growth, and conversion. I have witnessed individuals who initially struggled significantly yet, through appropriate accompaniment and honest self-work, became healthy, compassionate, and effective ministers. I have also witnessed situations where avoidance of difficult truths ultimately caused far greater pain later.

Discernment requires honesty precisely because it requires love. And therefore, discernment requires an integrated vision of the person. No single evaluator can adequately discern a vocation alone. Discernment must involve:

- spiritual accompaniment,
- psychological assessment,
- community observation,
- formation evaluations,
- behavioral patterns,
- relational dynamics,
- and long-term evidence of growth.

Healthy formation requires interdisciplinary collaboration rooted in truth and charity. The goal is neither suspicion nor naïve optimism. The goal is integrated wisdom.

Therefore, a more synodal approach to formation is needed that emphasizes listening, collaboration, and shared responsibility among candidates, formators, clergy, religious, and laity. Rather than weakening discernment, it strengthens it by incorporating diverse

perspectives and fostering a formation process rooted in dialogue, accountability, and the wisdom of the broader faith community.

One of the most delicate aspects of formation work is that discernment decisions touch the deepest identity of a person. A vocation is not simply a career aspiration. For many, it is intertwined with meaning, sacrifice, belonging, spirituality, and the very understanding of self. Therefore, even difficult decisions must always preserve human dignity. Candidates should never feel reduced to a diagnosis, a psychological report, or a liability profile. Pope Leo XIV beautifully reminds the Church in *Magnifica Humanitas*: “No assessment or report can fully exhaust the mystery of a human soul loved by God.”

We must remember: People are always more than their struggles.

At Saint Luke Institute, we often remind ourselves that discernment is not simply about determining suitability for ministry; it is also about helping individuals move toward truth, freedom, healing, and authentic flourishing — even if the path ultimately leads elsewhere.

Some of the most difficult conversations I have had in priestly ministry and professional life involved helping individuals recognize that ordained or religious life may not be the vocation to which God was calling them. Those moments are never easy. They involve grief, disappointment, confusion, and vulnerability. Yet I have also witnessed how honest discernment, carried out with compassion and clarity, can ultimately become liberating and life-giving.

Discernment done well is never about closing down a person’s future. It is about helping individuals move more deeply into truth and authentic freedom. The Church must never communicate: “You are unwanted.” Rather, discernment should communicate: “We are seeking the truth together.”

I also want to acknowledge something that is often left unsaid: Those entrusted with formation and discernment carry a profound spiritual and emotional burden. As formators, you literally hold lives in your hands. You carry responsibility for the future health of communities, dioceses, ministries, and the faithful entrusted to the Church. Pope Leo XIV describes formators as “guardians of both hope and truth within the life of the Church.” That is an extraordinary responsibility.

At Saint Luke Institute, we increasingly recognize that those entrusted with discernment must themselves receive ongoing formation, consultation, support, and accompaniment. No discernment process can rise above the maturity, integrity, and self-awareness of those responsible for it. As someone who now works daily with bishops, religious superiors, clinicians, and formation personnel, I have become deeply aware that those entrusted with discernment often carry hidden fatigue, anxiety, isolation, and even fear regarding the

weight of these decisions. Formation and vocation personnel themselves need spaces for reflection, supervision, collaboration, and support. This is what these days are about - we are surrounded by supportive colleagues and beautiful sacred space.

Discernment is not simply something we do. It is a way of being accountable before God. Allow me to conclude with this thought.

As I reflect upon my own 40 years of priesthood, formation work, and leadership, I have become increasingly convinced that the future health of the Church will depend not simply upon how many vocations we invite forward, but upon how honestly, courageously, zealous, compassionately, and wisely we accompany those vocations.

Discernment is ultimately an act of love. It is love for the candidate. Love for the community. Love for Christ. Love for the Church. Love for the Gospel. And love for the truth. As Pope Leo XIV writes in *Magnifica Humanitas*: “The future credibility of the Church depends in no small measure upon her willingness to form ministers whose humanity has been shaped by truth, purified by grace, and strengthened through authentic accompaniment.”

If the crises of the past have taught us anything, it is that formation matters profoundly. Good formation strengthens the Church. Poor formation wounds individuals, communities, and ministries. The work entrusted to us is therefore not merely educational or administrative - it is an act of justice, stewardship, and hope. By forming healthy, integrated, accountable, and compassionate ministers, we serve not only those preparing for ministry but the entire People of God whom they are called to love and

My hope for this conference is that our conversations over these days will help us continue building vocation and formation cultures marked by wisdom, integrity, accountability, compassion, and courage. Cultures where discernment is carried out with rigor and mercy. Cultures where truth and charity are never separated. Cultures where the dignity of every person is protected. And cultures where the Church becomes ever more capable of forming healthy, holy, integrated leaders for the People of God.

Thank you and God bless you and the sacred ministry you serve.