

To the Archbishop and all members of Provincial Synod,

When the pandemic made its appearance at our doors in March 2020, the plans for our ACPO Conference faced a shaky future. Less than a month later, it became apparent the 2020 Conference was in jeopardy due to health and safety concerns brought on by COVID-19. In discussion with our ACPO Bishop, we felt it would be best to cancel the scheduled conference in the hope things might improve later in the year. Other ecclesiastical provinces came to the same conclusion.

As isolation and restrictions continued, the ACPO team realized it would be a while before things returned to normal, so after many discussions with different parties, the four provincial secretaries were tasked with coming up with a conference template all provinces could work with. The Province of Canada was the first province to put it into effect on the weekend of April 9-10, 2021. After we reviewed it and tweaked it a bit, a second conference was held in this ecclesiastical province on the weekend of April 30-May 1. The two conferences were necessary because we felt 9 candidates per ACPO would be a workable number as we navigated through this uncharted online process.

Statistically, looking at both conferences, we received 15 candidates from 4 dioceses in this province. The gender ratio was 9 women and 6 men. The assessment team was made up of people from 6 of our dioceses and included equal numbers of lay and clergy, men and women. I should add that since we were trying a new format, I only invited experienced assessors. All 15 candidates were recommended as postulants in their respective dioceses with comments, concerns and/or specific recommendations to assist in the process of final discernment.

The weekends went fairly well and I am thankful for the assistance of a technician in the boardroom with me at all times. He was able to deal with any ZOOM issues as they happened and also direct candidates and assessors into the appropriate 'rooms' online in order to maintain privacy during the breakout sessions and interviews. I must say we did encounter some internet connectivity problems with a few candidates whose internet connection was weak and lost from time to time.

Upon reflecting, I can say that at its basic level, an online ACPO can work. By this, I mean it fulfills the need of conducting interviews and getting answers to the questions posed by the assessors. However, much is lost in this electronic format – through the fault of no one. Let me explain as concisely as possible.

An ACPO interview, as I assume most interviews, depends a lot on the verbal communication skills of both people involved. In addition, it also depends greatly on the non verbal cues received by the assessors. These are practically impossible to read when interviewing online. For example, one candidate was subjected to the stress of a

4<sup>th</sup> interview for something that could have been clarified in a “post-interview chat” in the hallway.

An ACPO conference – a residential one – also depends heavily on the social, or we might call it pastoral side of the weekend. Again, for anyone not familiar with the process, the whole weekend is set up as a discernment process. Meal time conversations and break time discussions are ways for the assessors to get a rounder picture of the candidate. And yes, candidates are made aware of this in their opening time with the Secretary. These times are also opportunities for candidates and assessors from different teams to get to know each other. This is a very important component of the weekend when the assessors meet as a final caucus to write the recommendations.

Other components missed by the assessors was bonding/team building time which they usually get before the candidates arrive; and, the loss of the worship component where we usually get a chance to see the candidates shine in their creativity.

I am pleased we were able to serve the needs of the Church in this way through the challenges and changes imposed on us by this pandemic. However, when the world and the Church returns to a sense of normalcy, I would strongly suggest that ACPO returns to its residential format.

In closing, I wish to offer my personal thanks to all Bishops and their Dioceses for their patience while we built an online format of this very important step in the discernment process; and to all the assessors for their hard work and dedication. I especially want to offer my thanks to the Right Reverend John Watton who was there during the birth pangs of this new format, and the Right Reverend John Organ for his assistance and support in both conferences.

Respectfully Submitted,

The Reverend Canon Leo Martin  
ACPO Secretary  
Ecclesiastical Province of Canada