

Dear Bishops,

The 2015 General Ordination Examination was evaluated February 2-6 by about 25 selected readers and members of the General Board of Examining Chaplains. The evaluation of each person taking the GOE has been sent to that person, with links provided for the bishops to see those individual evaluations of proficiency.

This was the first year for a major re-engineering of how the GOE was both developed and evaluated. Question-writing teams were responsible not only for writing the question in each canonical area, but also for preparing the rubrics by which each answer would be evaluated, and then doing the actual evaluation. This year each evaluation team focused on one canonical area only. Any answer that was judged not proficient then went to a bishop to review to see if the rubrics were being evenly applied to all students.

By now, you have likely seen the results of the students whom you sponsored to take the GOE. In total, 192 candidates took the GOE, the largest numbers of which were either M.Div. students or locally trained students. The review of the pertinent data from the evaluation reveals the following overall results.

	M. Div. Candidates (current and former students)		Locally Trained Candidates	
Number of exam takers	163		11	
	Proficient	Not proficient	Proficient	Not Proficient
Holy Scriptures	75%	25%	45%	55%
Christian Theology	55%	45%	64%	36%
Christian Ethics & Moral Theology	64%	36%	36%	64%
Liturgics & Church Music	87%	13%	36%	64%
Church History	52%	48%	27%	73%
Contemporary Society	81%	19%	73%	27%
Theory & Practice of Ministry	71%	29%	55%	45%

When, under the guidance of a professional testing consultant, we restructured the exam's formation and evaluation process, we hoped for a not proficient rate among seminary students of somewhere in the range of 15-20%. You can see that this is not what happened overall. There are several possible reasons.

Specific to this exam, there was a phrase used ("reasoned belief") in the question on Christian theology that may have been misinterpreted by some students. Similarly, a phrase used in the area of the theory and practice of ministry ("pastoral framework") in all likelihood had different meanings for the question writers and the candidates taking the exam.

In the area of church history, we wonder if students at most seminaries have had sufficient exposure to the period of church history focusing on the Enlightenment and the work of people such as John Wesley.

In many years, the ethics question has lower proficiency rates than other canonical areas. This discrepancy may be due the fact that there seems a wide variety in the way ethics is taught in our various seminaries.

We on the board also believe that we have more work to do to determine how we test for minimal competency for the typical priest going into a parish after completing a study program and ordination. The large discrepancy in the proficiency rates between M.Div. students and locally trained students should be the cause of significant discussion in the church about the state of theological education, particularly as the church begins to depend more heavily on alternatives to residential seminary education. The board for several years has asked for that sort of church-wide discussion, but so far it has not taken place.

We on the board commit to continuing to work toward an evaluation process of the academic proficiency of our future priests that effectively evaluates their academic preparation for ministry, and we invite your questions and comments.

Faithfully yours,

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Bishop of Arkansas

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