



Episcopal Brief:

WHY CLERGY CARE IS A MATTER OF JUSTICE & MISSION

By Deacon Ernest T. Martinez, Director of Deacons, Archdiocese of Denver

Purpose:

This brief provides bishops and senior diocesan leadership a concise rationale for investing in clergy care initiatives that integrate pastoral theology, Canon Law, and evidence-based resilience training.

1. A convergence of responsibilities: Scripture, Canon Law, and the Magisterium converge on the duty to care for clergy. Care is not optional; it is integral to the Church's mission. Canon 281 highlights just support and welfare; Canon 384 articulates the bishop's special concern, protection of rights, and provision for spiritual and intellectual growth.
2. A mission safeguard: Clergy routinely serve at the intersection of death, grief, trauma, conflict, and crisis. Unaddressed stress impairs judgment and narrows perception, increasing pastoral risk. Proactive training strengthens prudence, presence, and decision-making.
3. A duty of justice, not merely charity: Ecclesial care ensures clergy can serve without being forced into secular employment for basic survival or without carrying burdens alone. For married deacons, just support includes the realities of family obligations.
4. A culture of fraternity: Peer support operationalizes sacramental fraternity, providing early identification of distress and pathways to appropriate resources. This supports vocational sustainability and reduces isolation.
5. A replicable model: Training that integrates clinical competence with Catholic theology can be adapted across dioceses nationwide, strengthening clergy wellness while remaining faithful to the Church's anthropology and mission.

National Applicability and Replication Potential

While rooted in the local context of Denver and Colorado Springs, this model is readily transferable to dioceses nationwide. The challenges addressed-clergy stress, trauma exposure, suicide risk, and burnout-are universal. The integration of peer support, psychological literacy, and theological grounding offers a replicable template for diocesan clergy care.

This training, when paired with a clear episcopal mandate and ongoing support, can serve as a national model for clergy wellness that is faithful, professional, and humane.

*Please see 'Guidance for National Use and Adaptation'



CRISIS, TRAUMA, & RESILIENT MINISTRY

A Catholic Clergy Review of the Nicoletti–Flater Certification Training By Deacon Ernest Martinez,
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This document presents a finalized, episcopal-ready review of the four-day Nicoletti–Flater Certification Training, undertaken with the support of Archbishop Emeritus Samuel Aquila and Archbishop James Golka. It integrates clinical best practices in crisis response, trauma awareness, and resilience with Catholic pastoral theology, Sacred Scripture (RSV-2CE), and the juridical wisdom of the Church.

In addition to biblical and pastoral foundations, this review is grounded in the Church’s own law, which recognizes that care for clergy is not merely an act of charity but a duty of justice. Canon Law affirms that bishops have a serious obligation to ensure the holistic well-being of clergy-priests and deacons alike-so that they may serve freely, faithfully, and without undue burden.

ECCLESIAL FOUNDATION IN CANON LAW

While Canon Law often speaks explicitly of priests, its principles extend to all clerics, including deacons, insofar as they share in ordained ministry and ecclesial service. Two canons are particularly relevant to the themes of this training:

Canon 281 articulates the Church’s responsibility to ensure that clerics are supported in a manner appropriate to their vocation and state of life. While this canon is often associated with priests who are salaried by the diocese, its principles fully apply to deacons, albeit expressed differently in practice.

Unlike priests, the vast majority of deacons are not financially compensated by the diocese and ordinarily provide their ministry as a voluntary offering while maintaining secular employment. Canon Law explicitly recognizes this distinction. For married deacons in particular, Canon 281 acknowledges that financial family and employment responsibilities are primary, and that adequate provision must exist either through just remuneration or through continued secular work that sustains the household.

For deacons, therefore, the Church’s obligation under Canon 281 is not primarily fulfilled through salary, but through structural, pastoral, and formational support that safeguards their long-term well-being and vocational sustainability.

In practical terms, bishops exercise this responsibility by ensuring:

Ongoing formation and continuing education, so that deacons and priests are spiritually nourished, intellectually prepared, and pastorally supported throughout their years of service.

Retreats, convocations, and fraternal gatherings, which provide rest, renewal, and communion with brother deacons and priests (clergy).



Accessible pastoral care and accompaniment, ordinarily through the Directors of Deacons, the Vicars for Clergy, and other delegated offices, recognizing that deacons experience unique pressures at the intersection of family life, secular work, and ordained ministry.

Institutional and charitable supports, including deacon assistance funds or foundations, to respond to legitimate financial hardship, medical crises, disability, or advanced age when secular resources prove insufficient.

Seen in this light, Canon 281 affirms an important ecclesial truth: the Church does not receive the deacon's service without responsibility for the deacon's care. Even when ministry is unpaid, the bishop remains morally and canonically bound to foster conditions that allow the deacon, and his family, when married, to live with dignity, stability, and hope.

This canon thus undergirds a culture of fraternity and shared responsibility within the diocese, ensuring that deacons are not treated as "volunteers," but as ordained ministers whose generous service merits intentional, ongoing support from the Church they faithfully serve.¹

Canon 384 establishes the diocesan bishop's duty of care, requiring him to show special concern for his priests (and Deacons by extension), by listening to them, defending their rights, and ensuring access to spiritual and intellectual formation.

This responsibility endures even when a cleric faces serious difficulty, reflecting the Church's commitment to accompaniment rather than abandonment.

Together, these canons articulate an ecclesial vision in which the psychological, spiritual, and material well-being of clergy is integral to the Church's mission. The Nicoletti–Flater (or comparably competent psychology professionals), training supports bishops in fulfilling this canonical responsibility by providing tools that safeguard the health, judgment, and sustainability of those entrusted with pastoral care.

Read in harmony with Sacred Scripture and pastoral theology, Canon Law reinforces the conviction that resilient ministry is not optional but essential. By attending to stress, trauma, and crisis in an informed and compassionate manner, the Church acts in fidelity to both her spiritual mission and her juridical responsibilities.

PAPAL TEACHING ON CLERGY CARE, FRATERNITY, AND PASTORAL RESILIENCE

The Church's commitment to the care of clergy is not merely practical; it is doctrinal, pastoral, and consistently affirmed in the modern Magisterium. The following papal teaching provides an ecclesial foundation that complements the biblical and canonical rationale presented above, and it illumines why structured peer support, resilience formation, and early intervention are acts of fidelity to the Gospel

¹ <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/audiences/2025/documents/20251112-udienza-generale.html>



and to ordained ministry.

Pope St. John Paul II: Human Formation and Sacramental Brotherhood

Pope St. John Paul II repeatedly emphasized that clergy are first men before they are ministers, and that the integrity of ministry depends upon the integrity of the person. In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, he teaches that human formation is foundational, because the ordained minister must be a credible, stable, and compassionate presence in a suffering world.

“The priest is called to be a living image of Jesus Christ... This requires a well-formed human personality.”
(*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, §43)

He also underscored the reality of sacramental fraternity among clergy: priests and deacons are not meant to carry burdens in isolation. Authentic brotherhood-expressed through honest conversation, shared support, and mutual responsibility-strengthens vocational perseverance and protects pastoral charity.

Pope Benedict XVI: Friendship with Christ and the Humility to Receive Help

Pope Benedict XVI warned against a functionalist view of ministry in which clergy become mere providers of religious services. He insisted that the ordained minister is a man in relationship: first with Christ, and then with the People of God. When interior life is neglected, ministry becomes unsustainable and vulnerable to discouragement, cynicism, and collapse.

“The priest is not a functionary. He is a friend of Jesus Christ.” (Chrism Mass Homily, 2006)

Benedict’s realism about human limitation reinforces the virtue of humility: accepting support-fraternal, pastoral, and professional when needed-is not weakness but truth lived honestly. This converges naturally with evidence-based approaches to stress, trauma mitigation, and resilience.



CRISIS, TRAUMA, AND RESILIENT MINISTRY – A CATHOLIC CLERGY REVIEW OF THE NICOLETTI-FLATER CERTIFICATION TRAINING

Introduction:

Over the course of four intensive days, Catholic clergy from the Archdiocese of Denver and the Diocese of Colorado Springs participated in a certification training led by Dr. John Nicoletti and the Nicoletti–Flater Associates team. This formation was undertaken with the explicit support and encouragement of now, Archbishop Emeritus Samuel Aquila and now Archbishop James Golka, recognizing a real and pressing pastoral need: clergy are increasingly called to minister in contexts marked by crisis, trauma, suicide, grief, and chronic stress—both in the lives of those they serve and within their own vocational experience.

This training provided a rigorous, evidence-based framework for understanding stress, trauma, crisis communication, de-escalation, suicide intervention, and resilience. When received through a Catholic worldview, the material resonates deeply with Sacred Scripture, the Church’s understanding of the human person, and the pastoral mission of clergy configured to Christ the Good Shepherd. What follows is a condensed but comprehensive review of the full four-day training, integrating Dr. Nicoletti’s core content with biblical reflection (RSV-2CE), Catholic anthropology, and concrete application to priestly and diaconal ministry.

The Human Person in Crisis: A Catholic Anthropological Lens

Dr. Nicoletti defines crisis as any situation in which a person’s perceived ability to cope is exceeded. From a Catholic perspective, this aligns with the Church’s understanding of the human person as a unity of body, mind, and soul, wounded by sin yet ordered toward communion and healing. Scripture repeatedly acknowledges this fragile condition:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9, RSV-2CE)

Crisis reveals both human limitation and the profound need for accompaniment. The training emphasized that individuals in crisis are not operating from their highest rational capacities; stress hormones impair reasoning, memory, and judgment. This neuroscientific reality mirrors biblical wisdom:

“Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.” (Proverbs 12:25)

For clergy, this reinforces the pastoral priority of presence, calm, and compassionate speech before instruction or correction.



Stress: Identification, Impact, and Moral Significance

A major portion of the training focused on stress-general, chronic, and traumatic. Stress was defined as the body's response to any unusual demand, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Clergy are particularly vulnerable due to cumulative exposure to suffering, high responsibility, and limited recovery time.

The B-FIIT metric (Baseline, Frequency, Intensity, Interference, Time) offers a practical discernment tool. From a spiritual standpoint, it functions as an examination of conscience applied to the whole person. Psalm 139 echoes this reflective posture:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!” (Psalm 139:23)

Unchecked stress distorts perception, narrows moral vision, and weakens prudence. The training rightly emphasized that stress is not a moral failure, but failing to attend to it can lead to pastoral harm, impaired judgment, and vocational burnout.

The Brain in Crisis and the Ministry of Presence

Dr. Nicoletti's explanation of the brain in crisis-moving from the “animal brain” to the rational “Spock brain”- has direct pastoral implications. Clergy often encounter people whose emotional brain is dominant. Attempting logic too soon is ineffective.

Jesus Himself models this. On the road to Emmaus, He first walks with the disciples, listens to their grief, and names their sorrow before interpreting the Scriptures:

“And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.” (Luke 24:27)

The training's emphasis on emotional labeling, mirroring, and active listening reflects Christ's own method of accompaniment-calming before teaching, presence before proclamation.

Crisis Communication and De-escalation: Influence Over Control

A central theme of the training was the distinction between control and influence. Authoritarian approaches escalate crisis; respectful influence restores dignity and cooperation. This principle resonates with Catholic moral theology, which upholds freedom as essential to authentic human response.

“For freedom Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5:1)

Techniques such as small requests, calibrated questions, calm tone, and non-threatening body language are not manipulative when ordered toward safety and care. They reflect pastoral prudence and charity in action. Clergy, like first responders, must first govern themselves:



“He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty.” (Proverbs 16:32)

Active Listening, Empathy, and the Heart of Pastoral Ministry

Active listening was presented as a learnable skill requiring discipline and humility. The M.O.R.E.P.I.E.S. framework provides a practical structure for pastoral encounters, especially in emotionally charged situations.

Empathy-distinct from sympathy-was described as accurately understanding and reflecting another’s experience. This aligns directly with the Incarnation:

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” (Hebrews 4:15)

Clergy are sacramentally configured to Christ, who enters human suffering without minimizing it. Empathy builds trust, opens hearts, and prepares the ground for grace.

Trauma: Memory, Meaning, and the ‘Book of the Dead’

The trauma model presented-especially the concept of the “Book of the Dead”-was one of the most striking elements of the training. Trauma is not forgotten; it is either integrated into memory or continues to intrude through flashbacks and triggers.

Scripture acknowledges this enduring imprint:

“Deep calls to deep at the roar of thy waterfalls; all thy waves and thy billows have gone over me.” (Psalm 42:7)

Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) was emphasized as a real possibility when trauma is processed with honesty, support, and meaning. For Christians, this growth finds its ultimate context in the Paschal Mystery:

“If we have died with him, we shall also live with him.” (2 Timothy 2:11)

Shattered Assumptions and the Cross of Faith

Trauma often shatters basic world assumptions: safety, predictability, and meaning. Dr. Nicoletti identified denial, avoidance, meltdown, and the development of a “new normal” as common responses.

Clergy encounter this frequently in parishioners-and within themselves. Even faith can be shaken:

“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Psalm 22:1)



The training affirmed that crisis of faith is not faithlessness but part of human response to overwhelming events. Pastoral care must allow lament while gently rebuilding hope.

Suicide, Ambivalence, and the Ministry of Hope

The suicide intervention material underscored a crucial truth: suicidal persons are ambivalent. A part of them wants to live. This insight carries immense pastoral weight.

“I have set before you life and death... therefore choose life.” (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Clergy are not called to solve the problem but to slow the moment, reduce urgency, and help the person find other “doors.” The training’s emphasis on small requests, calm presence, and resource connection aligns with the Church’s unwavering commitment to the dignity of life.

Grief: Uncomplicated, Complicated, and Accompanied

Grief was presented as a normal human process that becomes complicated when stalled or distorted. Clergy frequently walk with those experiencing profound loss.

Jesus Himself wept:

“Jesus wept.” (John 11:35)

The training reinforced that presence, patience, and non-judgmental accompaniment are often more healing than words. Grief must be honored, not rushed.

Resilience, New Normal, and Clergy Sustainability

The ultimate goal of the training was resilience—not toughness or stoicism, but adaptive, integrated strength. Dr. Nicoletti consistently emphasized that resilience is not about returning to a previous state, but about learning to live faithfully within a “new normal.” This insight resonates deeply with Catholic theology, which understands Christian life as a continual dying and rising in Christ.

“Those who hope in the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles.” (Isaiah 40:31, RSV-2CE)

For clergy, resilience must be intentionally cultivated. The training outlined concrete practices: self-monitoring, stress management, sleep hygiene, exercise, healthy routines, peer support, and timely professional care. From a Catholic perspective, these practices are not merely self-care but stewardship of vocation. The priest or deacon who tends to his own health is better able to remain available to the People of God.



PowerPoint Analysis: Original Contributions and Clergy-specific Translation

A careful review of the Nicoletti–Flater PowerPoint materials reveals several original and distinctive contributions that are especially relevant for Catholic clergy:

1. The B-FIIT Metric

Originally developed for first responders, this evaluative tool translates seamlessly into clergy life. It provides a structured means for ongoing self-examination and peer accompaniment, helping clergy notice deviations from baseline before crises escalate.

2. The Brain-in-Crisis Framework

The layered brain model (survival, emotional, rational) offers clergy a scientifically grounded explanation for pastoral encounters that feel irrational or emotionally volatile. This framework helps clergy avoid moralizing behavior that is neurologically driven.

3. The ‘Book of the Dead’ Trauma Model

This metaphor is a uniquely powerful contribution. While not theological in origin, it harmonizes with biblical understandings of memory, lament, and remembrance. For clergy, it offers language to normalize trauma without spiritualizing it prematurely.

4. Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)

The emphasis on PTG aligns strongly with the Paschal Mystery and offers clergy a hopeful, realistic alternative to burnout or resignation.

In translation to clergy ministry, these models must be integrated with sacramental theology, moral theology, and pastoral charity. The training wisely avoided replacing spiritual care with psychology; instead, it offered tools that strengthen pastoral presence.

Integration with Clergy Peer Support & Resiliency C.O.R. Apostolate

The Nicoletti–Flater training provides the clinical and operational backbone for the now designated ‘Clergy Outreach & Resiliency’ (C.O.R.) Apostolate. Its emphasis on peer-based support, early intervention, and normalization of stress directly supports a sustainable clergy care model.

From a Catholic worldview, peer support reflects ecclesial fraternity:

“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.” (Galatians 6:2, RSV-2CE)

C.O.R. operationalizes this command by creating structured spaces where clergy can speak honestly, be heard without judgment, and be accompanied by brothers who understand the unique pressures of ordained ministry. The Nicoletti framework ensures that such accompaniment is safe, informed, and effective.



APPENDICES OVERVIEW

The following appendices are provided to strengthen the usability, episcopal review, and national applicability of this document. They may be read independently or in conjunction with the full narrative review.

Appendix A: Scripture Index (RSV-2CE)

The following Sacred Scripture passages are cited or alluded to throughout this review and are foundational to the Catholic understanding of crisis, trauma, accompaniment, and hope:

Genesis 1:27 - The dignity of the human person
Psalm 22:1 - Lament and the experience of abandonment
Psalm 42:7 - Overwhelming distress and deep calling to deep
Psalm 139:23–24 - Self-examination before God
Proverbs 12:25 - Anxiety and the healing power of a good word
Proverbs 16:32 - Self-mastery over force
Isaiah 40:31 - Renewal of strength through hope in the Lord
Deuteronomy 30:19 - Choosing life
Matthew 11:28 - Christ's invitation to the weary
Luke 24:13–35 - The Road to Emmaus and pastoral accompaniment
John 11:35 - Jesus weeps with the grieving
John 13:1 - Christ's love to the end
Galatians 5:1 - Freedom ordered toward life
Galatians 6:2 - Bearing one another's burdens
Hebrews 4:15 - Christ's empathetic priesthood
2 Corinthians 1:3–4 - Comfort received and given
2 Corinthians 12:9 - Grace perfected in weakness
2 Timothy 2:11 - Dying and rising with Christ

These passages provide the biblical framework through which the Nicoletti–Flater material is interpreted and applied within Catholic clergy ministry.



Appendix B: Key Nicoletti Concepts for Clergy (Summary Reference)

B-FIIT Metric

A structured method for evaluating stress and trauma through Baseline, Frequency, Intensity, Interference, and Time. For clergy, this functions as an ongoing pastoral and vocational discernment tool.

Brain in Crisis

A neurobiological model explaining diminished reasoning during acute stress. Reinforces the pastoral priority of calming presence before instruction.

Control vs. Influence

Effective crisis intervention relies on influence rather than force. This aligns with Catholic respect for human freedom and dignity.

Active Listening & M.O.R.E.P.I.E.S.

A practical framework for empathetic, non-judgmental communication essential to pastoral encounters.

Trauma and the ‘Book of the Dead’

A metaphor describing how traumatic memories persist unless integrated. Provides clergy with language to normalize trauma without spiritual bypassing.

Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)

A resilience model emphasizing growth through adversity, resonant with the Paschal Mystery.

Suicide as Ambivalent Communication

Understanding suicidality as a crisis of meaning and communication reinforces the pastoral focus on slowing urgency and restoring hope.