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CHAPTER 11

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## **The Challenges of Priestly Formation in the Contemporary Changing Society**

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### **Introduction**

To respond to the expectations of modern society and co-operate in the vast evangelizing action that involves all Christians, we need well-trained and courageous priests who are free from ambition and fear but convinced of the Gospel Truth, whose chief concern is to proclaim Christ and who are prepared to stoop down to suffering humanity in his Name, enabling everyone, particularly the poor and all who are in difficulty, to experience the comfort of God's love and warmth of the *ecclesial* family<sup>1</sup>

This thought of Benedict XVI is adequate to describe the thrust of my reflection which could be understood in line with the formation of candidates for the priesthood in the contemporary world, particularly, in Nigeria. The words, 'proper' and 'adequate' training of the catholic priest are key concerns that are dear to the Fathers of the Church '*ab initio*' till today. This concern is premised on the understanding that the world is a changing place and each era and time has its challenges, and so, formation at any point in time must be 'proper' and 'adequate'. Against this backdrop, diverse formative processes are being employed in the training of priests. The formation, therefore, must be dynamic and never static or stereotype. Priests, therefore, must adapt themselves in a positive way to the society and preserve an integrity corresponding to their call and vocation. Thus, the priest of our contemporary society has a lot of

moral demands, granted the fast-changing society that we live in. The stakes of formation invariably, therefore, can only become higher.

The thrust of this essay is to reflect on the challenges of the formation of priests in order to contribute to the sustainability of priest in addressing issues of this changing society. This is relevant because of the adage that says, (*nemo dat quod non habet*) "you cannot give what you do not possess". Invariably, the question is how would priests be adequately relevant in a world of constant change? It is crystal clear that society is undergoing changes through science and technological developments. This development has continued to revolutionize life in its entirety including pastoral and spiritual life of the faithful. The socio-cultural and ethical issues are taking a new trend, more and more, traditional values are being contested in the light of new developments and some long-established pastoral principles are gradually being seen as out-modelled. The priest in the face of this is meant to evolve new pathways to resolving the challenges to the signs of modern times. The inability for priests to live above the moral bar and demands of society poses some questions on the quality of formation he has received.

### **The Priest, Dilemma of a Contemporary Age and Change**

The priest of today is a product of his age. The contemporary world has become more critical of religious values and principles. There is a rise in secularism and relativism. These twin ideologies have posed more threats to the continued relevance of priest in society. Hitherto, the priest enjoyed high-level clericalism and elitism in society. This can be argued to be the spin-off of the ecclesiastical hegemony and religious dominance from the middle ages. While its effects had whittled down in some parts of the world particularly in Europe and America, in Africa and in Nigeria, the Priest still enjoys a pride of place. Nevertheless, the whirlwind of secularism and relativism is fast thickening that, the priest's moral authority no longer rests on the institution of the Church alone, but, that he needs to justify the institution and call he professes by his way of life and pastoral roles. The society is fast changing with the signs of modern times, the priest also is expected to advance new, positive and viable methods in dealing with issues within his ambience. The basic concern is how the priest can know, evaluate understand and manage pastoral challenges evolving as a result of the change in the society. In fact, the long-

standing docile and loyal attitudes of the faithful are increasingly dissolving by the day. It is a truism that the priestly life demands honesty, integrity and heroic self-sacrifice but without proper discernment in the world of change, this might turn out to be a platonic adventure. Friedrich Nietzsche's popular phrase that 'religion makes people docile and timid in the face of suffering and oppression' is no fast becoming untenable.

It is amazing that these challenges extend to the places where vocations to the priesthood are nurtured; the seminary and our parishes. Based on this reality, the Church is struggling to deal with the increasing rate of change and expectation of the priestly ministry. In the words of Benedict XVI, "how much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him!"<sup>2</sup> The situation of paradox raises the question of the authenticity of priestly formation in the light of today's changing society. This becomes paramount because a most important and increasingly difficult role is being assigned to priests in the renewal of Christ's church in this temporary changing society.<sup>3</sup> This concern for renewal is an age-long desire clearly enounced by the Second Vatican Council Fathers. It states:

The holy council is fully aware that the desired renewal of the whole church depends to a great extent on a priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ. It proclaims the supreme importance of priestly formation and affirms some of its primary principles whereby laws tested by the experience of centuries are confirmed and new elements are introduced to correspond with the constitutions and decrees of this council and with the changed conditions of our time.<sup>4</sup>

We shall try to expound what constitutes the Catholic priestly formation as a background to know whether it is proper, adequate and sustainable for the priests to face the challenges of this modern society. The ideological thought of, Joseph Komonchak, come into a play in this context.

The Church is a social and historical reality, so it is essential to a systematic understanding of the Church to employ tools developed for a systematic understanding of social and historical realities. How

can one work out a systematic ecclesiology without working out first such terms as 'individual' 'community' 'society,' 'meaning,' 'change,' 'structure,' 'institution,' 'relationship,' and so on, and the various relationships, that can obtain among these terms?<sup>5</sup>

To further understand the concerns of this paper, it suffices to examine the concept of change in contemporary society in relation to the Catholic Church.

Change as a concept is discussed at different levels in various fields of study due to the fact that nearly everything in existence passes through a process of change. It is on this note that this concept of change is interpreted in different ways but we shall limit the usage in this essay to its description as per its verb which is understood as, 'to make' or 'become different' or 'alter'. This change might affect either external features or internal features of a being, or it could affect both the internal and the external of a being concurrently. Heraclitus<sup>6</sup> describes the cosmos as being in a state of constant flux (state of becoming).<sup>7</sup> Everything is constantly changing and becoming other things to what it was prior to that state. This is objective philosophical knowledge of the world, which is in consonance with the scientific description of the physical and human realities. The priest being part of nature, reacts and responds to its natural changing environment.

Mirroring this from the context of incredibly challenging issues in the Church, there is a need for skilled and well-formed and informed priests to carry out the mission of the Church. Perhaps, this was the vision of the Fathers of the Church who searched for an ecclesiology that would explain issues affecting human existence. So, the impulse to work out a systematic ecclesiology demands an understanding of the social and historical realities within and around the Church. This is where the formation of priests must involve a curriculum in ecclesiology that takes to mind these demands and contexts. Therefore, if priests must be people who are properly and adequately equipped and formed to minister in a changing society, his formative discipline must be accommodating of these demands. The Fathers of the Church aver in this light, that formative discipline should include psychology, sociology and pedagogy.<sup>8</sup> This understanding opens us to look at priestly formation succinctly.

### **Priestly Formation and Ecclesiastical Studies**

The Second Vatican Council decree on the training of priests gives insight into the nature of formation put in place for every Catholic priest to function adequately in every given circumstance. He is prepared by the seminary to act and take proper steps and decision in whatever contexts he finds himself.<sup>9</sup> The document, *Optatam Totius* explains that a comprehensive priestly formation concerns human, intellectual, spiritual, pastoral formations which revolve around the character, moral, physical and psychological formations.<sup>10</sup> This formation begins in an embryonic state in the minor seminary with the focus on educational, religious and spiritual formations which should methodically and consistently co-ordinate all pastoral action for fostering vocations, and promote it with both discretion and zeal, not neglecting whatever suitable help may be found in the insights of modern psychology and sociology.<sup>11</sup> Inculcating inter-disciplinary values are taken seriously in the formation of priests because he lives and functions in human society. “Priestly formation, by reason of the very unity of the Catholic priesthood, is necessary for all priests, diocesan and religious of whatever rite.”<sup>12</sup> It is instructive to know that programme of priestly formation shall be established by the Episcopal Conference, to be reviewed at suitable intervals and approved by the Holy See, so that the general rules may be adapted to the special circumstances of time and place, and the formation of priests will always be in keeping with the pastoral needs of the areas in which they minister.<sup>13</sup>

The fundamental formation begins in the major seminary after completion of the studies in courses in science and humanities which prepare every student of each country for a higher study. In the ecclesiastical studies, philosophy and theology are primary because they open and mould the minds of the students more and more to the mystery of Christ, which touches the whole of human history and continuously influences the Church, and is at work particularly in priestly ministry.<sup>14</sup> The courses of formation make life in the parish in conjunction with evolving challenges less cumbersome in the light of the formation given to priests through these courses. Philosophy transforms the whole process of intellectual discernment of every priest as he embarks on his daily activities.

Philosophy leads students to a solid and coherent knowledge of human nature, the world and God.<sup>15</sup> Modern philosophical

developments and sciences help them to dialogue with people of their time and to equip them to grasp the basic principles of the various systems, hold fast to elements proved to be true and recognize and refute the roots of error.<sup>16</sup> The decree continues that the actual teaching should arouse in the students a love of rigorous investigation, observation and demonstration of truth, together with an honest awareness of the limits of human knowledge. Careful attention should be paid to the close connection between philosophy and the real problems of life as well as to the questions which engage the minds of the students/priests.<sup>17</sup>

In the same context, theology helps students to draw Catholic teaching from divine revelation, enter deeply into its meaning, use it to nourish their spiritual lives and be able to proclaim, explain and defend it in their priestly ministry.<sup>18</sup> Basically, philosophical and theological formations provide candidates for the priesthood with the nourishments to translate challenges of life to progress. Aside, prolific scientific training in sacred sciences and other appropriate subjects are necessary to enhance their apostolate in the changing and current society are recommended in the formative years and even after ordination. The exercise of this formation becomes mandatorily as each priest is required to go through practical experiences in the parishes and ecclesiastical institutes under thorough supervision without neglecting the use of their personal initiative in carrying out their assigned tasks. Thus, they should be initiated into pastoral practice by appropriate experiences.<sup>19</sup> Finally, ongoing formation is emphasized because of the daily demands of priestly life that continue to evolve in the trends in society.

It is evidently clear that sustainable formation, personal self-organizing and learning systems are provided for candidates for the priesthood. However, certain elements come into play in this provision in order to bring about positive management of parish daily changing realities. The consideration of nature and nurture is of utmost relevance because personal organization and development play prominence in the handling of the realities of pastoral life. The degree of an interactive dialogue between a person and its environment determines the richness of the responses given to the challenges of life in the priestly ministry. The predisposition of the brain to his environment determines the level of development of human society. Be it as it may, environmental influences are keys to

human living and development but human development and maturity over-rides all factors.

### **Challenges of Authenticity for Priestly Formation**

The 21st century can be regarded as the dawn of the new age which has witnessed new descriptions and definitions of life in many ways different from traditional and orthodoxy understandings. These are expressed in the forms of new doctrines, morality, ethics and values. Precisely, we are experiencing new psychology, sociology and pedagogy and these are rooted in the new visions of secularity, an intricate ideology of human origin, existence and meaning, new crusades on freedom from religion, not freedom of religion.<sup>20</sup> As it were, these new convoluted ways of seeing the world anew are being propagated by influential and wealthy personalities and institutions that allow a warm appeal to these doctrines and understandings. With such high-profile accent on these new doctrines, there is a towering attack on orthodoxy and traditional teachings of the Church. Such challenges have had a penetrating influence on priestly ministry. This leaves a major challenge to the vocation. Arguably, there is the conflict of seeing the priestly ministry as a profession or occupation rather than a vocation. In the exercise of the priestly ministry today, some trends leave a lot of people to question the authenticity of their vocation, or at least, the authenticity of their priestly formation. Some of these trends are highly opposed to what constitute the tenets, the doctrines and the teachings of the Church, especially, in the areas of worship, ethics and morality concerning life, marriage, sex and gender. The new trends which raise the questions of authenticity of priestly vocation and formation are enormous that we cannot touch on all of them. Nevertheless, major concerns of these oscillate around the celebration of the Church's liturgy, preaching the word of God, living priestly life and the practice of true charity and love.

The Church in Africa, particularly, in Nigeria as a growing Church, is witnessing an increase in the number of vocations to the priesthood. This trend is termed 'vocation boom'.<sup>21</sup> Vocation boom poses a serious challenge to the formation of priests in many ways. This includes a shortage of infrastructure, personnel and pedagogical materials. The fear of this challenge was expressed in the year 1995 by the then Archbishop of Ibadan Metropolis, Archbishop Felix A. Job, as *Ubi multitudo, ibi peccati* (there is danger in number). There

would indeed be a danger if, for instance, there are well over five hundred seminarians with only 15 formators. Apart from other infrastructural and provisional constraints, there would be a lack of a personal touch in formation with the seminarians. There is a likely risk of having some people moving through the system anonymously.

This problem can be compounded by a situation of godfatherism. This expresses a situation where a seminarian is not fully disposed to the authentic, proper and adequate formation, knowing fully well that a priest/Bishop will advertently or inadvertently support him, no matter the case.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the student's formation becomes distorted because he lives in deception both to the formation and his supporter. The students who suffer from such pitiable indisposition to formation and growth in their training, more often than not, end up becoming problems in the priesthood and the Church later.

We cannot but briefly express some worries on the seeds of relativism and materialism that are well seeded in our society. Relativism is a subjective way of approaching, viewing, analyzing, expressing, evaluating and judging things, including the human person. Socio-cultural relativism promotes evil personalizing or subjectivizing diverse cases of life because it proposes that each has its unique morality. Thus, each culture and person have texts which determine codes of moral behaviour for them. The case of objectivity or general acceptability of moral responsibility is squashed. This deceptive trend tends to promote materialism as the doctrine because of its subjective tendencies. These phenomena again raise questions and query the authenticity of priestly formation in contemporary society.

### **Management of Challenges of Authenticity**

It is not possible to live without challenges affecting human existence and essence, but the mode of handling and managing them are prominently significant in life. The American Philosopher, Thomas Kuhn expresses similar thoughts, that, "Though history is unlikely to record their names, some men have undoubtedly been driven to desert science because of their inability to tolerate crisis. Like artists, creative scientists must occasionally be able to live in a world out of joint".<sup>23</sup> In this context, priests must learn to be positively creative in the face of a crisis in order to remain faithful to their life and ministry.



Crises should not destroy them, rather should strengthen them. It is on this basis that adequate formation is expedient to prepare them for situations of such. To achieve this objective, the wisdom of the Fathers of the Church should unreservedly be implemented.

Taking into account the candidate's age and development, each candidate's motivation should be tested, as should his freedom to choose. His spiritual, moral and intellectual stability should be examined, as should his physical and psychological health and any possible hereditary traits. The same goes for his ability to carry the burden of the priesthood and perform his pastoral duties.<sup>24</sup>

It is in the light of this strict measure and precaution that the challenges in the priestly formation could be addressed in a positive line. Since formation becomes indispensable in the life of a priest, I would suggest what psychologists refer to as self-organization and learning, which is an early learning process in animals is to be imbibed. Whatever is learnt at this point becomes a reference point for the animal. Thus, a priest should continuously refer to what was learnt at the formative stage of his priestly formation. The best-explored examples of this type of learning have been studied in birds. "Young birds learn the songs of their parents, memorize the patterns of their plumage, and later select their mating partner accordingly."<sup>25</sup> This is experience-dependent learning which could be of assistance in the formation of candidates for the priesthood. It is at this juncture, we would delve briefly into the subject of auto-formation.

Auto-formation speaks volume on the personal responses of the candidate to the formation recommended and given by the ecclesiastical authority. The basic concerns would be: how is the candidate responding to formation? What is the level of the candidate's response? These responses would determine the degree of development and maturity of each priest to be. Taking a leap from the learning-pattern of birds referred to in our earlier discussion, a candidate should be matured enough to learn and navigate his priestly life and ministry from the formation tools provided by the seminary.

A constant review of learning could serve as a leverage for ameliorating the challenges to the authenticity of priestly formation.

This becomes essential because of the wind of change and development in the world.

### **Conclusion**

It is not an exaggerated claim that the Church provides ample and adequate materials for priestly formation but then, the situation in the Church in Nigeria leaves a lot for concern. It is on this note that those concerned with formation should pay adequate attention to those areas of challenges. Perhaps, a quota system should be applied to address the issue of over-population in seminary or for the recruitment of formators to enrich the system. In like manner, adequate material provisions should be provided for the training of seminarians. Furthermore, care must be taken in the selection of candidates to be sent to the seminaries as Formators. It should not just be on the basis of intellectual capability but also of personal disposition, having the grace to mentor, teach and being exemplary should be considered. It is essential to mention that instructive and deliberative statues must be created to review some of the present conditions of formation in the country today to meet with current challenges in society. This can only be a sustainable mechanism to address the challenges to the authenticity of priestly formation today. The positive resultant consequence is that it will create an avenue to preserve and sustain *sensus ecclesiae* in the area of priestly formation. Finally, a proper discernment is required for these steps to be accomplished in the Church.

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Priests of Jesus Christ*, (Oxford: Family Publication, 2009)

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Light of the World, the Pope, the Church, and signs of the Times (A Conversation with Peter Seewald)*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010, 34.

<sup>3</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, (Decree on the ministry and life of priests), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Flannery, A. *the Basic Documents, Vatican Council II, Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, Optatam Totius (Decree on the Training of Priests),

<sup>5</sup> Ormerod, N. J., (Schultenover, G. D.) *Vatican 11, Did Anything Happen?* (New-York: Continuum, 2008), 155.

<sup>6</sup> Heraclitus is of the Pythagorean or Italian School of Philosophy, 546.

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<sup>7</sup> Composta, D. *History of Ancient Philosophy*. Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1990., 33-44

<sup>8</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 1

<sup>10</sup> The details of these formation are found in the booklet entitled, *the Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)* published by the Congregation for the Clergy, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 2.

<sup>12</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 2

<sup>13</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 1

<sup>14</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 13.

<sup>15</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 13.

<sup>17</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 13.

<sup>19</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 21.

<sup>20</sup> Kresta, A. *Dangers to the Faith, Recognizing Catholicism's 21<sup>st</sup>-Century opponents*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2013, 13.

<sup>21</sup> Vocation boom is an unprecedented increase in the incoming number of applicant/candidates to the priesthood. It is opined by some individual that this stream of candidate is anchored on economic and developmental woes of the nations in Africa, which suggests a future slim in the flow of number.

<sup>22</sup> This becomes a major challenge as some candidates hid under the guidance of individual person to disguise as good candidates to the priesthood. Occasionally, things turn around to expose the deceptive traits of such characters.

<sup>23</sup> Kuhn, T. S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996, 78-79.

<sup>24</sup> *Optatam Totius*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> Klivington, K. *The Science of Mind*. London: The MIT Press, 1989, 177.