
CHAPTER 12

**Seminaries and Priestly Formation:
New Options in the Light of Modern
Challenges**

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Introduction

Every organization or community of human beings that have an objective or goal to achieve must as a matter of necessity eschew a programme of formation that will empower its protagonists in the task of attaining the overall goal. This plan must take cognizance of the peculiarities and intricacies that define the identities, collective and individuals, of all the human, material and procedural elements involved in the quest to attain the set goal.

It is within this general purview of orientation for goal achievement that we want to look into seminaries and priestly formation, examining their status vis-à-vis the goal and focus of the Church as regards the Catholic priesthood. How can we situate the Catholic priesthood within the mission of Christ and his Church? What is the relevance of the seminary to this mission and how does it help in ensuring adequate preparation for the challenges and demands of the priesthood.

In doing justice to the above puzzles, we shall be highlighting the various aspects of formation in the seminary, paying greater attention to the practical presentation of the contemporary situation in the seminary. Similarly, we shall be dwelling on the modern challenges facing priestly formation in the seminaries, with a view to proffering new opportunities for

enrichment to a system that is poised to maintain efficacy and relevance of its core values in every age and situation.

Seminaries: Relevance to Priestly Vocation

When Jesus called his apostles, he already had the plan to entrust his mission to them. At the moment of their call, the apostles were not ready for that mission, so, they spent time with Jesus, they listened to him; they were with him on his journeys and witnessed his miracles. All these prepared them for the mission that would be entrusted to them later. Similarly, “the priestly vocation is a continuation of the call to the disciples; the Lord continues to call out to young men to participate in his salvific mission as priests”¹.

The seminary becomes a place of encounter between Jesus and the disciple he calls. The relationship between them is expressed by the word: “vocation”, a word that is derived from the Latin verb *vocare*, which signifies: “to call”.² Within the context of priestly formation in the seminary, the word “vocation” can be considered from three different perspectives: the calling authority, the person called and the manifestation of that call.³ At the first instance, it is an invitation given by Jesus himself; the second instance shows it to be both a positive response and willingness to participate in the life of the one who calls; then the last connotes peculiar and active participation in the mission for which one is called.

Thus, as a nursery for vocation, the seminary prepares young people to become protagonists of the salvation that Christ makes available to the world. Achieving this goal will require a formative programme that is cognizant of the intricacies that surround the people, institutions and the peculiarities of the situations involved in the process of bringing the salvation of God to all nations.

In the realization that the priestly vocation is “a treasure that God always puts in the heart of some men, whom he has chosen and called to follow Him in this special state of life.”⁴ The seminary becomes not just a place, but also an opportunity, process and means of accompaniment that understands the various elements involved in the mission of the Church. It seeks to understand the peculiarities of each individual invited by God to work in his vineyard as priests, and subsequently through

appropriate means, assists the invited young people not only to realize the values inherent in the priestly vocation, but more importantly, help them to discover and develop the necessary attitude that facilitate the attainment of the goal for which Christ instituted the priesthood in the Church.

In the words of Pope Francis, seminary formation "is not a unilateral act by which one transmits theological or spiritual notions. Jesus did not say to those He called: 'Come, I will explain' or 'follow me, I will teach you'; Instead the formation Christ offered to his disciples was 'come and follow me', 'do as I do', and this is the method that even today the Church wants to adopt for her ministers. The formation of which we speak is a 'disciplining' experience, which draws men close to Christ and to conform more and more to Him"⁵

Seminaries And Contemporary Challenges

In meeting up with their responsibilities for the formation of priests, seminaries have structures and formative curriculum that facilitate the attainment of the priestly goal. While we shall be adducing more facts in the evaluative treatment of the present situation of seminary formation, it is pertinent to state that our seminaries have always been very loud in the profession of their faithfulness to the four cardinal dimensions of priestly formation – spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and human. The various stages of formation are aided by an array of effective agents, who ensure that candidates for the priesthood are aided in the acquisition of the values inherent in these four dimensions of formation as eschewed by *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and corroborated by other Church documents.

However, instead of giving a deeper treatment to these already known aspects of formation, this write-up shall be dwelling more on the evaluation of the present situation in our seminaries in order to accentuate necessary points that should be reviewed or reconsidered, abrogated or reinforced.

Without any particular order of importance, I want to start by examining the style of formation adopted in our seminaries.

Pedagogy

In adopting the classic freestanding model of formation where all aspects of formation are conducted in-house,⁶ our seminaries attempt to make the seminarians realize that even though they are in the world, they are not of this world. So, spending more time in 'isolation' from the world, seminarians are equipped with sufficient spiritual, intellectual and moral strength that will enable them to function well in their mission to bring God's salvation to all men.

While there is no denying the fact that seminarians have enough opportunities for theoretical knowledge of what to do and opportunities to learn on the field during pastoral works; it is pertinent to note that seminaries need to do more in the area of training and workshop that would equip the student with practical skills on how to effectively transform their theoretical knowledge into practical situations of life for pastoral efficacy. In order to avoid the identity crisis that may come from this, the seminary formators and the various agents of formation must ensure that the adopted model of formation does not shy away from the reality of the 'field' where the seminarians will later work as priests. It must start inculcating in them, right from the seminary, the reality of the people among whom they are called to minister, and the urgency of getting ready to so mix with the 'sheep' they will pastor, so that they themselves may have the odour of the sheep.⁷

Following this, there is a need for a review of the pedagogical approach in most of our seminaries. While there is actually no need to do away with or reduce the seminary's emphasis on order, structure and discipline, seminary formators must realize, not only that their task actually goes beyond ensuring that candidates are vast and well-grounded in theological truth and priestly spirituality, but also that doctrinal orthodoxy, liturgical celebration, pastoral ministry and priestly spirituality do not sufficiently define optimum formation.

Consequently, it becomes expedient that seminaries get their pedagogical approach right and realize that the project entrusted to them goes beyond 'training of priest', and that their real duty is actually the 'formation of the priest'. More than a mere exercise in semantics, understanding the task ahead of the seminaries as formation of priests, over and above mere training of

priests, will help seminary formators evaluate their pedagogical approach to see if their students eventually are transformed into ‘disciples’ and not just career pastors.

This is a major paradigm change that the new *Ratio* emphasizes and calls for. Notwithstanding the models of priestly formation that is chosen in a seminary, the focus must change from ‘training of seminarians’ to ‘formation of seminarians in discipleship’. This is well captured by Archbishop Eamon Martin when he adduces that “it has to be fundamental then, to every model of seminary, that we all – Seminarians, Rectors and Formators, theologians – on the lifelong journey of discipleship, called to follow Jesus Christ. Consequently, the distinctions between the steps (propaedeutic, initial, permanent), between the roles (of Bishop, Rector, Formator, Spiritual Director), between the dimensions (human, spiritual, pastoral and academic) and between the stages (discipleship, configuration, pastoral) are all somewhat secondary and instrumental to the overall integral formation of each of us as pilgrims along the *Sequela Christi* – under the action of the Holy Spirit and sustained by the grace of God”.⁸

This emphasis on pedagogical approach carries with it a reappraisal of our general understanding of the priestly vocation as a gift – a treasure – gifted by God. In the words of Pope Francis, “this treasure, which needs to be discovered and brought to light, is not meant to “enrich” just someone. The one called to the ministry is not the “master” of his vocation, but the administrator of a gift that God has entrusted to him for the good of all people, rather, of all men and women, including those who have distanced themselves from religious practice or do not profess faith in Christ. At the same time, the whole of the Christian community is the guardian of the treasure of these vocations, destined for his service, and it must be ever more conscious of the duty to promote them, welcome them and accompany them with affection”.⁹

Consequent upon the fact that the priestly vocation is a treasured gift to the entire human race, and that people gifted with such treasure must be assisted to appreciate, value and use it well through a whole process of discipleship, seminary Formators must keep in mind that formation does not end in the seminary. As the *Ratio* puts it, “the experience of discipleship of those called to the

priesthood is never interrupted... the priest not only learns to know Christ, but under the action of the Holy Spirit, he finds himself within a process of gradual and continuous configuration to Him, in his being, and his acting, which constantly challenges the person to inner growth”¹⁰

So, while the seminary formator has a lot of roles to play in the discernment of the vocation of others, he must himself realize that his own discipleship is not ended; he must remain open to further guidance from the Master; and his own attitude becomes an inspiration to the seminarian to allow themselves to be influenced and nourished by the Holy Spirit. Not only from books, but the seminarians will also learn from the humility of their formators that “the priest can never consider himself to be definitively formed... [he] is certainly not the man who arrives at a parish perfectly packaged, with all the answers. There will often be people who are more qualified than him in facing particular problems, and the new challenges that emerge may well be beyond his seminary formation”.¹¹ The priest, who is a formator, can also learn from the students he forms in various ways. In fact, instead of putting up a show of *pseudo* perfection because of its undermining effects on discipleship that characterizes seminary formation, formators must take to heart, the admonition of Pope Benedict XVI that “the faithful expect only one thing from priests: that they be specialists in promoting the encounter between man and God”¹²

The indispensable role of the formators in ‘mentoring’ seminarians is well stated by Pope Francis in an address to the Congregation for the Clergy: “Formation is... not a unilateral act by which someone transmits theological or spiritual notions. Jesus did not say to those he called: ‘Come, let me explain,’ ‘Follow me, I will teach you’; no! The formation offered by Christ to his disciples came rather as a ‘come, and follow me,’ ‘do as I do,’ and this is the method today too, the Church wants to adopt for her ministers.”¹³

Discipleship, both from the side of the seminarians and the formators means a proper understanding that formation is “not about mastering techniques or functional roles, but about following the path of discipleship: internalizing in co-operation with divine grace, the core virtues and ideals of disciples. Put simply, one

cannot be a credible witness, shepherd, healer or proclaimer of the Good News to contemporary culture unless one is rooted in a profound relationship with Jesus with the zeal and attitude of a disciple that will last a lifetime".¹⁴ So, the seminary, both as a school and process of formation in discipleship for both the formators and the seminarians must ensure a steady form of growth in church leadership; inculcating the leadership values that are Christian, opening up to the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit, and understanding the view expressed by St. John Chrysostom that "the most basic task of a church leader is to discern the spiritual gifts of all those under his authority, and to encourage those gifts to be used to the full benefit of all. Only a person who can discern the gifts of others and can humbly rejoice at the flourishing of these gifts is fit to lead the Church".¹⁵

The Challenge of Discernment and Personality Formation

While the spiritual, intellectual, pastoral and human dimensions of priestly formation are well spelt out; there is an aspect that the present reality of formation demands that we pay closer attention. This aspect has to do with discernment, but I will like to put it as emotional formation. It has to be given greater attention in seminary formation, either as a new dimension of formation on its own or as a well-accentuated and integral part of the human formation. This view is coming, not just because contemporary studies have revealed the importance and significance of Emotional Quotient and the influence of the management of emotion in personality formation and overall performance of man (which is not within the scope of this write-up), but more importantly because of its centrality in discernment and pastoral efficacy.

First and foremost, making choices is really not as easy as it looks, but at various stages of life, we have to make choices. What is the basis of the choices we make? Important choices, such as demanded by priestly vocation, are so often accompanied by risks or laden with fear, that one cannot really make them right without courage and sincerity (at the natural level), and without divine assistance (at the supernatural level). Thus, considering the whole complexity that revolves around senses, sensibility, emotion, action and sentiment in the whole process of personality

formation and decision-making, one cannot but ask the important question: how much of attention do we pay to all these in priestly formation?

Not to talk of the post-seminary experiences of priests and the frequent occurrence of depression (or desolation, to use a less stereotyped expression), the seminary formation needs to do more in assisting seminarians to really 'understand' themselves and the intricacies surrounding the decisions they make. Like any sound human being, it is necessary that seminarians and priests understand the art of managing emotions (and avoid being managed by emotions), so that when such emotions are seeking transformation into action through sentiments, they are not only in good stead to make right choices that are in accordance to their priestly aspiration and identity, but more importantly, the adequate formation of their emotion will grant them an openness to sincerely engage every element of formation with openness.

The seminary formation, even if it cannot pay great attention to it, must put seminarians through the basic steps of emotional formation, which include among other things: being sincere in giving a name to one's feeling (feel your feeling); discovering the source of one's feeling (be sincere and intelligent); discerning immediately whether the feeling is good or bad (be attentive and timely); comporting oneself in a coherent mode (be courageous in taking a good decision); paying constant attention to mastering one's feeling (be vigilant and responsible).¹⁶ When this is done, the requirement of the *Ratio* that accompaniment, engagement and discernment should be ensured to put the seminary formative programme into perspective that integrates well into the personality of the seminarian.¹⁷

Considering the place of fear and hazardous effects of being controlled by one's emotion and inordinate feelings, we shall appreciate the effect that emotional formation will have on overall priestly formation, especially in the areas of relationship, of trust between seminarians and the various agents of formation; honest assessment of strength and weakness, and disclosure of these to formators; willingness to receive and accept direction, guidance and correction; and building the capacity to live discipleship ad priesthood consistently.

Recommendations and Areas of Further Development

In addition to giving adequate considerations to issues already raised above, priestly formation in the contemporary Church will be enhanced for greater efficacy if the following points will be treated not only with great attention that they deserved but also given the urgency that will stem the rot that they are creating:

- i. **Call for a *Ratio Nationalis* for Nigeria:** as requested by the *Ratio Fundamentalis*, the Episcopal Conference should put up the necessary machinery that must include a deep and collegial co-operation of all our bishops with the lay faithful and experienced men and women in the area of formation, to formulate a *Ratio Nationalis*. The deep import of this lies in “not only implementing the new *Ratio* in a way that takes account of local traditions, customs and needs, but also courageously moving the whole formation experience beyond past and present methods, so that priests will be suitably prepared to engage and evangelize the secularized contemporary culture”.¹⁸
- ii. **Evaluation of current admission standard and procedures:** While the practice of lowering the standard of admission in areas of low vocation is not the best, we should also be wearied of raising the standard of those to be admitted so high that authentic vocations are destroyed. However, this is expressed without any prejudice to the fact that every aspirant should have the merit of his application considered by competent people, and the fact that greater attention should be paid to the prevalent falling standard of academic (and lack of interest in studies) into our various houses of formation.
- iii. **How to help seminarians acquire a balanced view of the Church:** It should never be taken for granted that aspirants to the priesthood have the right view and image of the Church. It is then pertinent that, even if it will be in a form of a workshop during their orientation programme, seminaries should ensure that seminarians have a good knowledge of basic ecclesiology – the mission of the Church, their place and role in the entire missionary enterprise of the Church. This will enable them to build

- their entire formation into the mission of the Church right from the beginning.
- iv. **How to discern and understand the impact of secular society, culture and values on seminarians:** Since the Church is called to show the Light of salvation to the world, seminaries must not just resign to fate in the acceptance of deficiencies evident in the formation of young people aspiring to the priesthood. The formation team in the seminary must stay ahead of their society to identify values that are inimical to the priestly formation and devise a way of helping seminarians shed the toga of evil or immoral values. However, while a compromise of value is no option, understanding is required to help aspirants understand the need to move beyond such ungodly values – even if the society sees nothing wrong in them.
- v. **An understanding of the characteristics of the age from which seminarians come:** every age has its peculiarities, which can be identified both in strength and weaknesses. It is pertinent that our agents of formation, especially, the formation team of the seminaries, develop a means of proper understanding the young seminarians with the intricacies that define their age and values. Our approach to priestly formation must devise a means of channelling the winning mentality and readiness for challenge of the present-day youth into primary evangelization, and correct their disinterestedness in anything institutional; we must annex their hyper-connectedness in the social media for religious orientation and evangelization, without failing in correcting their weak human relations; and while formation takes cognizance of their naïve view of faith and gifts as personal belongings. It must never fail to teach them in charity, the true meaning of ‘communion’ and help them to strip themselves of self-sufficiency mentality through proper discernment.
- vi. **The notion of human formation:** In addition to issues already raised under emotional formation, seminary formation must pay attention to, and consider formation as a progressive achievement, a lifelong journey of

integration and discipleship, which must take note of the specificity of the individual seminarian. Learning from the experience of the once buoyant and vibrant churches in the western world, the formation must pay attention to the rising tendencies of extreme clericalism and pride. The image of the priest as a servant leader must be underlined and defined to stem the cancerous tendency of viewing the priest as a 'deputy God' or a clerical chief.

- vii. **Integration of Formation:** Consequent upon the insistence of the *Ratio* on the centrality of integration and personality, "the process of formation must educate the person in the truth of his being, in freedom and in self-control."¹⁹ This must not just be assumed, but practical lessons in form of seminars and workshops must be organized to help the integration of the various elements of formation into the personality of the seminarian. It is not enough to evaluate the readiness or otherwise in this regard, seminaries must concretely prepare them for this integration and authenticity that the priesthood requires.²⁰
- viii. **Research and Teaching:** Considering the nature of many seminaries in Nigeria and opportunities of researches and discoveries inherent there, the seminary should form the bedrock of the Church's response to many challenges. As charity begins at home, our seminary communities should be able to and create time for concrete researches and teaching modules on how to address specific challenges like the transition from seminary to parish experience, dealing with extreme clericalism, careerism, commercialism, healing ministry etc.
- ix. **Seminary Formators:** The importance of the issues already raised will require that our seminaries are properly staffed and that the ratio of seminarians to formator is kept as low as possible. Most of our seminaries do not have enough formators to adequately guarantee the requirement of the *Ratio Fundamentalis*. It becomes expedient then, that more formators are sent to the seminaries; that more priests are sent for further studies to prepare them for seminaries; that the priests in the seminaries do not overstay their relevance to avoid burnout and redundancy;

and that where there are cases of lack of interest to go into formation by priests, their genuine reasons should be considered and addressed.

- x. **Special Needs in Formation:** Among the special needs of the seminaries that must be looked into, I will strongly recommend that each seminary should have a formator that is capable of addressing the issues that pertain to the emotional formation. While this is without prejudice to the presence and need of both Spiritual Directors and Psychologist, I will show a greater preference for a pastoral approach to it.

Conclusion

Over the centuries, the Church has been providing effective leadership to the world, this has been possible so far, because, in addition to the divine grace bestowed on the Church, she has been able to so positioned herself to see things before the world sees, to see farther than the world sees, and to see more things than the world sees. By so doing, she has been able to stay above the destructive and manipulative schemes of the world. This experience has been incorporated into the formation of priests and it has proven beyond doubt to be effective. With the issues already raised, it is my candid opinion that the Church in the contemporary world cannot afford to be disinterested or treat with levity, the formation of priests, and that all aspects and needs of formation must be prioritized not only because this will ensure the relevance of the Church in our time, but more importantly because effective formation remains the only sure path we have towards the achievement of the Church's missionary goal of making disciples of all nations.

Endnotes

¹ Franc Rode, *Il Cristo della Formazione: Manuale biblico e teologico di formazione alla vita religiosa*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010), 190.

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- ² Cf. Charton Lewis, *A Latin Dictionary: Founded on Andrews' Edition of Freund's Latin Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879).
- ³ Cf. William Addis – Thomas Arnold (eds.), *A Catholic Dictionary*, (London: Kessinger Pub. 2004), 840- 843.
- ⁴ Pope Francis, Address to the Plenary of the Congregation for the Clergy, 3 October 2014,
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141003_plenaria-congregazione-clero.html (Accessed 20/08/2019)
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Declan Marmion *et al.* (eds.), *Models of Priestly Formation*, p. xxx
- ⁷ Pope Francis, Homily at the Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday March 28, 2013,
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html (Accessed 20/08/2019)
- ⁸ Declan Marmion *et al.* (eds.), *Models of Priestly Formation: Assessing the Past, Reflecting on the Present and Imagining the Future*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2019, p. xix
- ⁹ http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141003_plenaria-congregazione-clero.html
- ¹⁰ *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* 80
- ¹¹ Declan Marmion *et al.* (eds.), *Models of Priestly Formation*, p. xviii
- ¹² Benedict XVI, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060525_poland-clergy.html (Accessed 20/08/2019)
- ¹³ Pope Francis,
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141003_plenaria-congregazione-clero.html (Accessed 20/08/2019)
- ¹⁴ Declan Marmion *et al.* (eds.), *Models of Priestly Formation*, p. 20
- ¹⁵ John Chrysostom, *Six Books on the Priesthood*, trans. G.W. Butterworth, Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press, 1964, p. 44.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Amedeo Cencini, *Dall'Aurora io ti Cerco: Evangelizzare la sensibilita per imparare a discernere*, Milano: San Paolo, 2018.
- ¹⁷ Cf. *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* 43-53
- ¹⁸ Declan Marmion *et al.* (eds.), *Models of Priestly Formation*, p. xvi
- ¹⁹ *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* 63
- ²⁰ *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* 131