
CHAPTER 14

**On-Going Formation of Priests:
New Approaches To Post-Seminary
Formation**

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Introduction

I recall an interesting conversation I once had with a very knowledgeable layperson towards the end of my seminary formation. This man was trying to make an argument for the similarity between the calling and work of a Catholic Priest and the work of a Medical Doctor. For him, when one considers the length of training and sophistication of the training received, alongside the ethical requirements, and the demands of the job, the Priesthood and the medical profession are very similar. He made bold to say that in the light of the regular updating and stress on specialization, the medical doctor eventually becomes more refined than the Priest. It was at this point that I mentioned the on-going formation of priests, to which he replied; “What is that? Am just hearing of that? What does it mean? But not all Priests have post-graduate studies, do they?”

The on-going formation¹ of priests is a reality that is often misunderstood, unknown and under-appreciated. And this cuts across the board, as not only are laypersons largely unaware of what it entails, even those that should know better, namely the Clerics themselves seem to underappreciate it. This is despite the fact that it is a concept that is crucial to successful priestly ministry, as we read in the words of Pope Benedict XVI’s *Motu Proprio Ministrorum Institutio*

The ongoing formation of priests... is the natural and absolutely necessary continuation of the process of building priestly personality which began and developed in the seminary... with the training programme which aimed at ordination. It is particularly important to be aware of and to respect the intrinsic link between formation before ordination to the priesthood and formation after ordination. Should there be a break in continuity, or worse, a complete difference between these two phases of formation, there would be serious and immediate repercussions on pastoral work and fraternal communion among priests, especially those in different age groups. Ongoing formation is not a repetition of the formation acquired in the seminary, simply reviewed or expanded with new and practical suggestions. Ongoing formation involves relatively new content and especially methods; it develops as a harmonious and vital process which — rooted in the formation received in the seminary — calls for adaptations, updating and modifications, but without sharp breaks in continuity.²

In this paper, we will consider Post-Seminary formation, from the point of view of new approaches to the on-going formation of priests. We will attempt to articulate the mind of the Church as regards on-going formation of priests, according to the four major levels of formation spelt out in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, namely Spiritual formation; Human formation; Intellectual formation and Pastoral formation, vis-à-vis an overview of what currently obtains in Dioceses in the Benin City Ecclesiastical Province (which we will use as a case study of sorts). From this standpoint, we will consider the possibilities for ‘new’ approaches to on-going formation, albeit it will be our argument that we can only consider ‘new’ approaches when we have better understood what should be obtainable.

Definition of On-Going Priestly Formation

When the Church talks about the on-going formation of Priests, she refers to a distinct phenomenon. “The term ‘ongoing formation’ is a reminder that one’s 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”.³

The Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests uses similar categorization for the concept. Here we read;

The activity of formation is based on a dynamic demand intrinsic to the ministerial charisma, which is permanent and irreversible in itself. Therefore this can **never be considered finished**, neither on the part of the Church which imparts it nor on the part of the minister who receives it. It is, therefore, necessary that this is thought of and developed in such a way that all priests may receive it *always*, keeping in mind the characteristics and possibilities that vary with age, condition of life, and assignments. Such a formation must cover and harmonise all the dimensions of the formation of priests. Thus, it must tend to help each priest achieve the development of a full human personality matured in the spirit of service to others, in whatever task he may receive; it will permit him to be intellectually prepared in the theological sciences as well as in the human sciences, insofar as they are linked with his ministry, in order to pursue his function as witness to the faith with a greater effectiveness; that he has a deep spiritual life, nourished by intimacy with Jesus Christ and by love for the Church; and so that he may pursue his pastoral ministry with zeal and dedication. In practice, such formation must be **complete**: spiritual, pastoral, human, intellectual, systematic and personalised.⁴

The watershed Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation that was the fruit of the Synod of Bishops that considered the formation of priests in present-day circumstances also treated the question of on-going formation. According to the Synod Fathers, “The ongoing formation of priests, whether diocesan or religious, is the natural and absolutely necessary continuation of the process of building priestly personality which began and developed in the seminary or the religious house with the training programme which aimed at ordination”⁵ Without prejudice to the best efforts of Bishops and Churches who are

working hard at it, it would appear that in Nigeria, the on-going formation of priests is yet to receive the kind of attention that would help to underline its importance. And can be attributed to two factors.

Culturally, there is the inability to adequately inculcate in both formators and formandees (sic), the fact that Seminary formation is preparation for Priestly life, and not just for Priestly ordination. If the emphasis during Seminary formation is for the Seminary Formators to weed out those who are not suitable for the priestly ministry, it stands to reason that the *modus operandi* would be fault-finding, in place of journeying along with the candidate, to help him answer his call. And when the Seminarians discern that his formators are very interested in seeking out his faults, he will continually seek out creative ways to make sure that these faults are not found out, following the principle of the proverbial *Eneke the bird*⁶. This would lead to pretence and other related vices, just to ensure that one crosses the line. In this manner, priestly ordination, the end-point of Seminary formation, is made to be a *terminus ad quem*, rather than the starting point of another life-long journey that is meant to build upon what was learnt in the Seminary.

On the other hand, and this applies to those situations where there are attempts to accentuate on-going formation, the stress seems to be on the intellectual formation, rather than a holistic approach. On-going formation in such instances, is reduced to further studies after ordination, and in certain cases, even this is not regarded as a right of the individual priest, but a privilege. What is clear is that in such situations, the academic degrees that a priest acquires after ordination, tend to overshadow the need to focus on other aspects of his priestly, resulting in arrested development of the other aspects.

When the Church talks about the on-going formation of her priests, we must be clear that “Programmes, resources, and practices do not constitute ongoing formation. They are necessary instruments but always in service to the larger purpose and direction of formation”⁷. On the contrary, “it is the continuing integration of priestly identity and functions or service for the sake of mission and communion with Christ and the Church”⁸.

A Brief Overview of On-going Formation as it Obtains in our Circumstances

We have seen from the foregoing, that on-going formation of priests is a multi-faceted reality. Before we can consider the possibility of new approaches to it, we have to attempt an x-ray of what currently obtains in our immediate environment⁹. We will do this using the following four questions;

- Who is responsible for the on-going formation of priests?
- When is the on-going formation of priests supposed to take place?
- What constitutes the content of the on-going formation of priests?
- How is the on-going formation of priests carried out?¹⁰

Who Is Responsible For The On-Going Formation Of Priests?

When we talk about the on-going formation of priests, and who should be responsible for it, the casual observer will immediately point to the Individual Priest and his Bishop. This will be a correct answer, although not an exhaustive one.

Pastores Dabo Vobis gives a deeper approach to the question of who is responsible for the on-going formation of priests, by specifying the following agents;

1. The Church itself as a Communion, under its head, the Bishop.
2. The Individual Priest.
3. The Bishop and the Presbyterate.
4. Experts involved in the formation of Priests.
5. The Family of the Priest.¹¹

As stated above, the Priest and his Bishop are two agents that quickly come to mind in this regard, and rightly so. In the words of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the priest's responsibility, "...is linked to their commitment at ordination to serve well the people of God through their ministry and through their own personal faith commitment. Priests in dialogue with their bishop, his representative, or other members of the presbyterate need to map out their plan of ongoing formation"¹².

As for the Bishop, it goes without saying that part of his function as a Shepherd, is to see to the welfare of his closest

collaborators, the Priests. And the ongoing formation of these his sons falls squarely under the title of welfare. By extension too, since the individual priest belongs to a fraternity of priests, it stands to reason that his brothers should be solicitous for the on-going formation of one another. The 'novelty' however, especially given our culture here, lies in the other two agents; the Church as a Communion and the Family of the priest.

We belong to a culture that still has great reverence for the 'man of God'. Catholics generally love and respect their priests, and they understand that they have an obligation to care for the priest since he is the one that represents them in their relations with God (cf James 5:1-4). Often, this care for the priest gets restricted to praying for them and providing for their material needs. It is noteworthy, therefore, for us to remind ourselves that there are other obligations beyond these two activities, one of which is to ensure their on-going formation.

Priests are not there to serve themselves but the People of God. So, ongoing formation, in ensuring the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral maturity of priests, is doing good to the People of God itself. Besides, the very exercise of the pastoral ministry leads to a constant and fruitful mutual exchange between the priest's life of faith and that of the laity. Indeed the very relationship and sharing of life between the priest and the community, if it is wisely conducted and made use of, will be a fundamental contribution to the permanent formation, which cannot be reduced to isolated episodes or initiatives, but covers the whole ministry and life of the priest. ...And so the entire People of God, in each and every one of its members, can and should offer precious assistance to the ongoing formation of its priests. In this sense, people should see that priests are allowed time for study and prayer. They should ask of them that for which Christ has sent them and not require anything else. They should offer to help in the various aspects of the pastoral mission, especially in those related to

human development and works of charity. They should establish cordial and brotherly relations with them, helping priests to remember that they are not "to lord it over" the faithful, but rather "work with them for their joy" (cf. 2 Cor. 1:24).¹³

The Socio-Economic realities in Nigeria have created an emerging attitude of distrust towards Clergymen in recent times. Social media is quick to make viral the mistakes, offences and crimes of self-acclaimed men of God, and in this manner, festering a wave of anti-clericalism that is alien to our cultural heritage. While it has always been a pastime of sorts for parishioners to discuss their priests, the present social conditions mean that such discussions are tending more towards looking for reasons to criticize and condemn them.

But a true Catholic that wants to condemn his/her priest, has to realize that to the extent that the failings being highlighted are rooted in an incomplete formation of the related aspect of the priest's life, then he/she has some responsibility for making sure that such errors are corrected and *lacunae* filled up. This is because we all have a role to play in the on-going formation of the priest.

The family of the priest has its own part to play in the matter. The joy and festivities that colour the priestly ordination of a person, is to some extent the family's way of showing gratitude to God for choosing one of them to serve Him in a particular manner. Beyond the ordination day, however, and without wanting to go into certain negative influences that the priest's family could have on him, the family is to help him fully realize his identity as a true disciple of Jesus, and a minister of God's mysteries in the Church.

By being one with their son in his aims, the family can offer him its own important contribution to his mission. The plan of providence chose the priest's family to be the place in which his vocation was planted and nourished, an indispensable help for the growth and development of his vocation. Now the family, with the greatest respect for their son who has chosen to give himself to God and neighbour, should always remain as a faithful and encouraging witness of his mission, supporting that mission and sharing in it with devotion and respect. In this way, the family

will help bring God's providential plan to completion.¹⁴

It is a truism that these two Agents of on-going formation, have generally not been factored into the efforts in our circumstances. It is one area where improvement can be made, and immediately too, to ensure that priests are given the best possible assistance to fully realize their identity and carry out their obligations.

When is the On-going Formation of Priests to take place? By its nature, the on-going formation of priests is a life-long matter. The ideal is to have a structure that caters for the different phases of life of a priest, and in this regard, there is still a lot yet undone in our circumstances.

The present-day emphasis leans towards the formation of newly-ordained priests or what is commonly referred to as 'junior clergy' (priests of 10 years of priestly ordination and below). It is commonplace in Dioceses in Nigeria, to have programmes and activities designed to help them live up to the responsibilities of the priestly state that they assume after ordination, and subsequently, to acquire skills that will help them to handle greater pastoral offices, as they grow in the priestly life.

Usually, after a priest crosses the threshold of 10 years of ordination, there is rarely any specific programmes aimed at addressing challenges that he might be experiencing, such as burn out, mid-life crises, health challenges that vitiate their ability to fulfil their responsibilities, thereby leading to feelings of inadequacy and frustration. In addition, there is an absence of a strategic plan at the level of the Dioceses to see to their intellectual renewal, and the acquisition of new skills and getting acquainted with contemporary Church modalities for resolving modern-day challenges. Yes, priests are sent to go for studies, and yes, there are workshops, seminars and other activities to impart skills to the priests. The problem is that there is often no strategic plan behind these efforts, hence we tend not to get the desired results.

What Constitutes On-going Formation? Here, we are talking about the content of on-going formation or better still, its aspects of Spiritual, Human, Intellectual and Pastoral formation.

This dimension of On-going Priestly formation is one of the strengths of the Dioceses that are in Edo State. The present-day practice stresses on Intellectual formation and Pastoral formation. Indeed, the intellectual formation is largely aimed at providing priests with the skills to better function pastorally. It is against this backdrop that Dioceses plan for further studies for priests, in order to meet three categories of need;

- a. Ensuring that the Diocese has relevant experts for its proper functioning;
- b. Satisfy the requests of Institutions like Seminaries and other Catholic Institutions of Higher Learning, for experts in ecclesiastical and other sciences;
- c. See to the personal development of priests who may not fall under categories a) & b) above.

These three criteria are usually what informs the choice of persons going for further studies, even though many would argue that what obtains could be better organized and made to operate under a defined system. In this way, the on-going pastoral formation of priests is guaranteed, as the intellectual formation is geared towards better pastoral practices.

As regards the Spiritual formation, this arguably is the strongest of the four aspects in terms of what Dioceses are doing for the priests. Practically all Dioceses in Nigeria have annual retreats for the priests and regular monthly recollections, either at Diocesan or Deanery levels, following the relevant canonical prescriptions¹⁵. However, there is a need for due diligence in this area, lest what has always been an area of strength becomes one of weakness. This is because of the twin evils of absenteeism (especially in the case of Recollections) and the inability of priests to stay *in situ* at the Retreat grounds for the entire period of the Annual Retreat for diverse reasons, disrupting the rhythm that the exercise needs, and losing focus therein.

On the whole, Dioceses have some arrangements for the different aspects of on-going Priestly Formation. While the Spiritual aspect seems to be the most stable in terms of the programmes, to some extent, the Intellectual and Pastoral formation also enjoy

reasonable consideration, while it would appear that Human formation does not enjoy the same level of planning and programming.

How is On-going Formation Carried out? Generally, on-going formation is carried out through courses, programmes and similar activities. This is why we often hear of priests attending seminars, participating in workshops and talks, as well as taking courses that equip them for the priestly ministry. Usually, these activities are carried out by groups of priests.

However, Human and Spiritual formation needs more than such activities, and our Dioceses need to explore other more personalized options, such as mentoring, so as to get the best out of her priests. This is because after all considered, it is the individual priest that needs this permanent formation, and he has to be open to the promptings of the Spirit through these programmes and activities. “For this reason, there should be awareness, especially on the part of those responsible, that all priests must be reached personally, taking care of each one, and not simply having all the diverse opportunities available to them”¹⁶.

New Approaches to On-going Formation

Having attempted an overview of On-going Formation, we recommend the following possibilities as new approaches to on-going formation for priests.

- Increased Episcopal Solitude.
- Systematization of Processes
- Accountability (through the involvement of other Agents of Formation)
- Flipping the pyramid of emphasis.

Increased Episcopal Solitude: The role of the Bishop in the on-going formation of priests is very important. According to *Apostolorum Successores*,

The Bishop is the father of the priestly family and through him, the Lord Jesus Christ is present among believers. For this reason, just as Jesus manifested his

love for the Apostles, so too the Bishop knows that it is his duty to show particular *love and solicitude* for priests and candidates for the sacred ministry. Guided by sincere and unwavering charity, the Bishop should take care **to assist his priests in every way, so that they come to appreciate the sublime priestly vocation, live it with serenity and defend it with vigour, radiant with joy as they faithfully carry out their duties.**¹⁷

All the documents that refer to the Agents of Formation underline the importance of the Bishop in this matter. If we wish to pay attention to the chronology, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* lists the Church and the Bishop as first among the agents of on-going formation¹⁸, and while *The Directory on the Life and Ministry of Priests* places the Priest himself and Brotherly Assistance as the first two Agents, in talking about the Bishop, it acknowledges that he has a very clear responsibility as per the permanent formation of his priests. Hence we read that the Bishop's responsibility;

is expressed both in that which concerns the individual priest, for whom the formation must be as personalized as possible and in that which concerns the formation of all the priests who make up the diocesan presbyterium. In this sense, the Bishop will never fail to foster communication and communion among priests, taking particular care, to guard and promote the true nature of their ongoing formation, to educate their consciences regarding its necessity and importance, and finally, to plan the necessary structure and appropriate persons to carry it out.¹⁹

Bishops have always given their best in the area of ensuring the utmost in terms of the permanent formation of the priests. Nevertheless, the need for increased episcopal solicitude cannot be over-emphasized. This solicitude will make the priest understand that the question of on-going formation is neither optional for them, whereby they may or may not apply themselves to it, nor an imposition from 'without'. The Bishop has to utilize a virile pastoral approach to make the priests better appreciate programmes of on-going formation that are available to them. To this end, we would

borrow from the document of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), which spells out the duty of the Bishop in this regard as including the following:

1. Bishop's Direct Responsibility:
 - The receipt of a regular report from those charged with the ongoing formation of priests on the "state of soul" of the presbyterate and any particular concerns
 - At least three contact points with the presbyterate at large, e.g., Chrism Mass, a study day, or a diocesan retreat (as well as the presbyteral convocation when it is held)
 - A periodic conversation held either directly or through the bishop's delegate with each priest concerning his ongoing formation to provide for accountability and encouragement
2. Bishop's Provision for Ongoing Formation:
 - Provides for the adequate staffing of an office for the ongoing formation of priests (bishop functions as the guarantor of encouragement, time, and resources)
 - Appoints a director to organize, ensure funding for, and communicate the resources of human, intellectual, pastoral, and spiritual formation (whether diocesan based or drawn from other institutions)
 - Appoints and oversees a committee of priests (perhaps drawn from the presbyteral council) and others to regularly examine the process of ongoing formation in its various dimensions
 - Supervises the director to establish linkage between the ongoing formation of priests and other diocesan efforts, e.g., evangelization, catechesis, worship, justice and peace, and lay formation
 - Through the mechanisms of diocesan communication, communicates the values, purposes, and activities of the ongoing formation of priests to the people of God²⁰

A cursory juxtaposition of the recommendations of the USCCB above and what obtains in dioceses around us would reveal that while there are some elements already present, there is still much room for

improvement. The Bishop may want to better utilize such offices as the Vicar for Priests, and such organs as the Priests' Welfare Committee/Commission, and expand their responsibilities to include the on-going formation of priests, such that they can better assist him to carry out his role in this regard.

Systematization Of Processes: Following from the above, it is necessary to ensure that the 'Director (Directorate) of On-going Priestly Formation' sees to the systematization of the processes and activities of on-going formation. As we have already seen, there already exists different initiatives as regards permanent formation, but they tend to be unco-ordinated and scattered. It will be the responsibility of the said Director, under the supervision of the Bishop, to see to the planning, execution and evaluation of the different formation programmes in the diocese.

This is particularly important when one considers that the mind of the Church is for such formation to span through the life of the priest. Consequently, it is expected that;

there is a formation that is specific to newly ordained priests, recently ordained priests, priests preparing for the first pastorate, middle-aged priests, priests preparing for retirement, and retired priests. Each group has its specific programme needs. Still, there are core pieces of identity and service that are constant across priests' lifetimes no matter their age or the particular circumstances of their ministry. A part of formation truly does remain ongoing, permanent, or constant.²¹

The volume of work that this will entail for the typical Catholic Diocese in Southern Nigeria, with its attendant high numbers of ordained priests for instance, already points to the need for an office and staff, with files and other hardware that will cater for the organization of information. And before we get fixated on the office space and the equipment needed, it is more important to ensure that the Director himself is trained before undertaking such office. Such training does not necessarily mean frequenting a course in a University. It would suffice to spend time in two or three Dioceses (preferably overseas) that have a defined and functioning programme

for on-going formation and to carefully study their *modus operandi*, with particular emphasis on the content and general orientation of their programmes.

It is this knowledge that will guide the Director in setting out the office and determining the responsibilities of the staff in the office. It is through this office also that the Bishop will be able to monitor the progress of his priests along with set parameters. For instance, the USCCB prescribes the following minimum for the priest as regards his on-going formation;

- Fifty-two contact hours of education per year (in other words, one hour per week)
- One week of retreat
- Daily prayer (especially the celebration of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours)
- Monthly celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, perhaps in conjunction with spiritual direction
- Monthly contact with a priest group or its equivalent.²²

In a diocese of about 50 priests for example, it will be very difficult to firstly organize, execute and then evaluate each priest from the point of view of the minimum for formation for the year, without such an office. Similarly, one can easily imagine the incremental improvements in the lives of priests if the office is well set up and running efficiently, hence its urgency.

Accountability (Through The Involvement Of Other Agents) The word ‘accountability’ suffers from a misunderstanding in Nigeria, and this misunderstanding sometimes means that when it is mentioned in certain circles, there is a semi-automatic negative reaction towards who uses it. However, in so far as accountability refers to “an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility or to account for one’s actions”²³ then its relevance vis-à-vis new approaches to the on-going formation of priests becomes clearer.

The most important factor in on-going formation is the priest himself. It is critical therefore that there be a system to hold him accountable for his actions in this regard. Without prejudice to the

sense of personal responsibility of the priest (which thanks to his initial formation tends to be very high), and to his free will, the Church has to have a way to get assurance that he is taking this seriously, as what negatively affects an individual priest reflects poorly on the corporate identity of the Church in a variety of ways. So, the other agents of on-going formation can assist the priest in this regard.

This is why the Bishop has to receive regular updates from the Directorate of On-going Formation and to pay close attention to those who may not be *pulling their weight*, as this could be an indicator of other deep-seated issues. The Bishop should not hesitate to raise this matter with his priests during pastoral visits and other encounters, as this will provide rich feedback from the priests' point of view, which can, in turn, facilitate the further improvement of the existing programmes.

The Presbyterium shares a special relationship with themselves. "In all the aspects of priestly existence, there appear particular bonds of apostolic charity, of ministry and of fraternity, which serve as the foundation of the reciprocal help that priests give each other. It is to be hoped that co-operation among all priests should grow and develop as regards their spiritual and human life, as well as their ministerial service. The help which must be given to priests in this field can find support in the different priestly associations which tend to form a truly diocesan spirituality".²⁴ Priests should encourage one another to apply themselves to the programmes that can help them make considerable progress in becoming other Christ, as it is often the case that they will be the first to discern when a brother priest is in difficulty.

In addition, the family of the priest should be made aware of their responsibility to journey along with their brother priest, with the same prayerfulness and joy that they demonstrated during his initial formation²⁵. We have already highlighted the novelty of the stress of the family of the priest as one of the Agents of his on-going formation. This has to be put in practical terms in the way they assist their son and brother in striving to become a good and holy priest. One clear way to assist him is not making undue financial demands on him that could distract him from his purpose.

Furthermore, experts in Seminary formation have to be incorporated into Diocesan Programmes of On-going Formation. This

can be advantageous in two ways; firstly, through their interface with priests in the field, they will be able to identify areas of initial formation that can be improved upon, from the standpoint of the lived experiences of priests. Additionally, they are in a good position to play a mentorship role to the priests, and to use the repertoire of their experiences to identify the connectedness between lapses in seminary formation and priestly life, and proffer solutions to the priests.

Flipping The Pyramid Of Emphasis: As we tried to establish much earlier in this work, On-going Formation tends to be identified with further studies. Also, extant programmes in Diocese stress more on the intellectual and pastoral aspects, while there are already regular activities that cater for the spiritual aspect of the priest's formation. The Human Formation does not have these sorts of programmes in the Dioceses, and should we continue like this without any intervention, then it would remain de-emphasized. Thus, there is an urgent need to flip the pyramid of emphasis as far as on-going formation is concerned, so that the human aspect gets the needed attention and pride of place.

In real sense, the Human aspect of on-going formation should come first in terms of emphasis. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* maintains that;

Fuller development is first required in the human aspect of priestly formation. Through his daily contact with people, his sharing in their daily lives, the priest needs to develop and sharpen his human sensitivity so as to understand more clearly their needs, respond to their demands, perceive their unvoiced questions and share the hopes and expectations, the joys and burdens which are part of life: Thus he will be able to meet and enter into dialogue with all people. In particular, through coming to know and share, through making his own the human experience or suffering in its many different manifestations, from poverty to illness, from rejection to ignorance, loneliness and material or moral poverty, the priest can cultivate his own humanity and make it all the more genuine and clearly

apparent by his increasingly ardent love for his fellow men and women.²⁶

It is when the priest is a better person that he can be a better Christian, and then more fully realize his identity as a close disciple of Jesus and a minister of the sacraments within the Body of Christ. This is why his Human formation, which is a life-long affair, cannot be over-emphasized. The goal, as the same document puts it, is that "...the People of God should be able to say about the priest, who has increasingly matured in human sensitivity, something similar to what we read about Jesus in the letter to the Hebrews: "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning" (Heb. 4:15).²⁷

In their *Basic Plan for the On-going Formation of Priests*, the USCCB states that a genuine Human Formation has to stress on the improvement of the Priest's capacity to communicate and his capacity for communion; care for the physical body to maintain a healthy and invested life, integration of human sexuality and contact with culture. As regards specific ways of realizing this, it provides that;

The specific means include events, resources, and programmes. For example, human formation, as we have described it, can sometimes occur through a one-to-one dialogue of friendship. At times, professional counselling can appropriately and effectively address human growth issues for priests. It need not be reserved, as unfortunately, it is in the perceptions of some, for the treating of illness. Professionally facilitated groups that focus on interpersonal dynamics can be effective instruments of human formation. Similarly, the human formation can happen in the context of feedback, when individuals are helped to see and appreciate their impact in various situations so that they can learn from that knowledge and confirm what is good and change what is less opportune. Programmes of periodic review and assessment are useful feedback mechanisms. As we have described it, the human formation has a direct, personal, and experiential dimension. Studies can also

foster human formation for priests. An intellectual component in human formation enables priests to understand themselves and others better. Certain courses, seminars, workshops, or directed readings could advance the human formation of priests.²⁸

In an ideal situation, even if there is no other programme of on-going formation in a Diocese, due to the importance of the human aspect, then the activities listed above have to be running in the typical Diocese. Bishops, given their position in the Church, have to make sure that Human formation comes first before the other aspects, to guarantee that the goals of on-going formation as a whole are realized. It is when the priest is truly human, that he can be more holy, an excellent pastor, and a scholar.

Conclusion:

It is often said that *there is no small vulture*. This is with reference to the fact that all vultures are bald, even the newborn among them. And this saying is often used in discussions involving newly ordained/young priests. I was a beneficiary of the saying too, and I choose the word 'beneficiary', because in the context of the discussion then, the saying was meant to boost my morale after some loving parishioners pointed out my error to me in a particular pastoral situation. Interestingly, they went on to say that they understood why I made the error, and they trust that a few years down the line, I will not be making such mistakes anymore.

It is true that there is no small vulture, but there certainly are inexperienced vultures, who despite their baldness, unless they continue their training under the more experienced ones, they would not get the tools needed to become the best possible vultures they could be. The on-going formation of priests is that indispensable mechanism that will help a priest to fully actualize the gamut of potentialities that are in him after he has assumed the priestly identity with sacred ordination. It is our opinion that this aspect of the life of the Church demands closer attention, and the new approaches we have suggested above will go a long way in ensuring that this is the case.

Endnotes

¹ In this paper, we will use the terms Post-Seminary Formation, On-going Formation and Permanent Formation of Priests synonymously.

² Benedict XVI, *Motu Proprio Ministrorum Institutio*, 16th January, 2013.

³ Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 8th December 2016, No 80

⁴ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, Vatican City, 1994, Nos 73 & 74.

⁵ John Paul II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 25th March, 1992, No, 71

⁶ *Eneke* the bird, as we read in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* said that 'since hunters have learnt to shoot without missing, I too have learnt to fly without perching'.

⁷ United States Catholic Bishops, *Basic Plan for the On-going Formation of Priests*, 2001, General Description.

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ What we will offer here is the fruit of participant observation of the Author, as a member of a Diocese, as well having carried out informal investigations into what also obtains in Benin City Archdiocese, and the Catholic Diocese of Auchi. These three Dioceses, which are in Edo State, Nigeria, constitute the 'immediate environment' referred to in the paper. While a more scientific study will offer deeper insights into the issues raised above, we do not reasonably expect it to have results that are completely different from the picture we will try to paint in this effort.

¹⁰ In drawing up these four categories, we are drawing largely from the USCCB's *Basic Plan for the On-going Formation of Priests*.

¹¹ See Nos 78 & 79

¹² USCCB, *Ibid*, No N.

¹³ John Paul II, *ibid*, No 78

¹⁴ *Ibid*, No 79

¹⁵ We read in Can. 276 §1. In leading their lives, clerics are bound in a special way to pursue holiness since, having been consecrated to God by a new title in the reception of orders, they are dispensers of the mysteries of God in the service of His people.

§2. In order to be able to pursue this perfection:

4/ they are equally bound to make time for spiritual retreats according to the prescripts of particular law;

¹⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, *Ibid*, No 80

¹⁷ Congregation for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops Apostolorum Successores*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Citta del Vaticano, No 75 (emphasis added)

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Ibid*, No 65

¹⁹ No 89

²⁰ USCCB, *Ibid*, No N

²¹ *Ibid*, No I

²² USCCB, *Ibid*, No N

²³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accountability> (Last visit 4th September, 2019)

²⁴ Congregation for the Clergy, *Ibid*, No 88

²⁵ The Bishop may choose to devote a part of the Homily during priestly ordinations and Chrism masses to encourage the families of priests in this regard.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Ibid*, No 72

²⁷ John Paul II, *Ibid*, No 72

²⁸ USCCB, *Ibid*, No J