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THE RELEVANCE OF EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE OF JESUS IN SEMINARY FORMATION IN THE LIGHT OF JOHN 14:1-14

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Abstract

The formation of the human person has always been a herculean labour as a result of the complex nature of human beings. The human specie has similarities with other animal species but some other features radically distinguish human beings from other living beings. Outstanding of these features is the power of reasoning and freewill. The human person can make decisions based on the level of reasoning and disposition. The formation of the human person can never be imposed as a result of the freewill. This means the human person can be impervious to formation passing through the person. John 14:1-14 presents a conversation between Jesus and his disciples about his imminent return to his father. In this pericope, Jesus takes up both Thomas and Philip over their shallow knowledge of him in spite of their closeness to him. Thomas did not know that Jesus is the way and Philip failed to see God in Jesus. Their familiarity with Jesus did not simply afford them this experiential knowledge. This paper opines that it is a possibility for seminarians to spend years in the seminary learning about Jesus without actually knowing him. Experiential knowledge of Jesus is different from academic knowledge. Academic knowledge is necessary in as much as it leads to the experiential knowledge. The danger, however, comes when the knowledge the seminarian has of Jesus during his seminary formation is limited to the academic knowledge. This can hamper his effectiveness as a priest in the 21st century.

Keywords: Experiential knowledge, Jesus, Seminary Formation, John

Introduction

Seminary formation is the process young men aspiring to become Catholic priests pass through in order to become priests in the Catholic Church. Seminary formation affords the candidates for the priesthood to acquaint themselves with the essential doctrines of the Church which have their basis in the scriptures. Seminarians, in the course of their seminary training, are given formation in four crucial areas namely human, pastoral, spiritual and academic. They are to be well-grounded in these four areas so as to be effective ministers of both the word and sacraments after their ordination. These areas are integral to the wholistic formation of candidates for the priesthood. They are thus to immerse themselves in formation and not lag behind in any of these four areas. However, experiences have shown that it is possible to go through the entire seminary formation without necessarily allowing the formation to permeate one's life. In other words, one may pass through the seminary without the seminary passing through the person. We may, therefore, have intelligent and hard-working priests who act only like functionaries. They know a lot about Jesus and can talk so much about him too. However, in all their dealings as priests, something still seems to be missing. They lack that inner touch that only someone with a personal knowledge of Jesus and an intimate relationship with him can have. This is what this write-up is all about- experiential knowledge of Jesus. The bone of contention is: how can the academic knowledge of Jesus be transformed into experiential knowledge? It is the stance of this writer that if the candidates for the priesthood are able to have the experiential knowledge of Jesus before leaving the seminary, they would be in a better position to "bring all to Christ and Christ to all".

Definition of Terms

For an easy understanding of this work, some terms that are operational are clarified and their use explained. The words are experiential knowledge and seminary formation.

Experiential Knowledge

According to The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language, experience is "knowledge derived from one's own action, practice, perception, enjoyment, or suffering"¹. This means that experience is something personal to the individual and must come from one's perception of reality. Experiential too has been defined as "pertaining to or acquired by experience; empirical"². This also suggests that experiential emanates from experience. It is empirical

and not abstract. Knowledge on the other hand is defined as “a result or product of knowing; information or understanding acquired through experience”.³ There is another aspect of knowledge which the Dictionary points out namely that it is “information; learning; specifically, the cumulative culture of the human race”.⁴ Knowledge, therefore, is the accumulation of all that is learnt either through learning or experience. Bearing the foregoing in mind, experiential knowledge as used in this work refers to that knowledge that is gotten from experience rather than one that is gotten from mere learning through academics.

Seminary Formation

Seminary formation refers to that process whereby young and interested men are trained towards becoming priests in the Catholic Church. They undergo some rigorous training in both philosophy and theology and thus become mature intellectually and otherwise to be able to proceed to the priesthood. Seminary formation spans some few years of aspirancy, spiritual year, philosophical studies, pastoral year and theological studies. It also involves the work of discernment on the part of the formators who together with the rector have the responsibility to recommend candidates to the bishops for ordination at the end of their training. Seminary formation, therefore, as used in this paper refers to the training of young men for the Catholic celibate priesthood.

John 14:1-14: The conversation between Jesus and his disciples

In this passage, Jesus engages his disciples in a conversation during which he tells them that he is about to leave them and return to his father. He assures them that he would not abandon them but would go and prepare a place for them so that where he is going, they too would follow later. This is because they know the way to the place. It was at this point that the first scandal occurred. Thomas, one of the disciples listening to Jesus betrayed his ignorance about the way. He says: “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (v.5). At this culpable ignorance of Thomas, Jesus does not hide his disappointment. However, he seizes the opportunity to teach them that he is the way (*ego eimi he hodos*), the truth (*kai he aletheia*) and the life (*kai he zoe*) (v.6). He continues by saying “no one comes to the Father except through me”. This means that the knowledge of the Father is in the Son and that of the Son is in the Father. So, if the disciples truly know Jesus, they have known his Father as well (v.7). In the words of Teresa Okure, “A most consoling message for the disciples is that they know the way to where Jesus is going (v. 6). Jesus is the way to God: they need to walk along it and have no fear of stumbling. He is the truth: they need to hold on to him and rely on him without fear of being failed by him. He is the life:

they need to live it, live in him, and have no fear of death.”⁵ This knowledge is necessary for a continued relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus reveals the identity of the Father to the disciples and through this revelation, they are able to sustain a relationship with Jesus. “The link between Jesus’ words and those of the Father who sent him”, says PHEME PERKINS, “is grounded in the picture of Jesus as the agent of the Father (e.g. 3:34; 7:17-18; 8:28,47; 12:47-49)”⁶

Jesus makes the knowledge of him and his father a joint one so that anyone who has the knowledge of one also has the knowledge of the other. There are two key words used in this passage to express this namely οἶδα and γινώσκειν. These two verbs denote knowing with εἶδω and γινώσκω meaning “I know”. γινώσκω means to perceive, gain knowledge of, know, learn, understand, judge, determine, decide, think and to resolve.⁷ It follows from this that γινώσκω has a wider meaning than οἶδα. These two words are key in this passage. The use of γινώσκω in the perfect here means knowledge already attained.⁸ However, this knowledge is not perfect yet as it becomes obvious from the question Philip asked afterwards.

In v. 8, Philip cuts in to the discourse of Jesus by asking Jesus to show them the Father so as to quench their doubt, ignorance and curiosity. Jesus is once again taken aback by this display of ignorance by Philip. What Philip is actually asking for here is not that clear. Is it like one of the great theophanies that Moses and Elijah enjoyed or the visions of the heavenly court enjoyed by the prophets? Hence, BROWN concludes thus: “In the context of the evangelist’s own time, perhaps Philip is made the innocent spokesman of those heretical Christians who seek after or claim a mystical vision of God.”⁹ Jesus reprimands him and continues his teaching regarding the unity that exists between the Father and himself. This knowledge is open to only those who are close to Jesus. They are the ones expected to have a first-hand knowledge of who Jesus is and what he stands for. However, in spite of their close affinity to Jesus, the disciples, Thomas and Philip, could not fathom the real personality of their master. Thus, “the disciples are ignorant of truths that are fundamental for an understanding of who Jesus is, what he is doing, and where he is going.”¹⁰ It must be noted that this reprimand was not meant for only Thomas and Philip but for all the disciples as it is evident in the use of the plurals in v. 7 *ἐγνώκατε, γνώσεσθε γινώσκετε* and *εωρακατε* and in v. 11 with the use of *πιστευετε* and *αιτεσετε*. These plural verbs suggest that even though Thomas and Philip were the disciples who displayed publicly this ignorance about Jesus, the teaching that followed was not meant just for the two of them but for all the disciples.¹¹

This discourse regarding the relationship between Jesus and his Father continues till v. 14. Here, Jesus makes it abundantly clear to his disciples that he is God's representation on earth. To have seen him is to have seen his Father too. Seeing and knowing Jesus is tantamount to seeing and knowing the Father. The fact that the disciples have not yet arrived at this level in their knowledge does not make them a failure but in the words of Moloney, "The disciples have not failed completely to know Jesus (as "the Jews" had done: viii 19); yet their questions indicate that they do not know him perfectly."¹² Jesus seizes this opportunity to enlighten and educate them on his real identity, where he comes from and where he is returning to. He also tells them that even if they do not believe on account of his words to them, his works are there as outward manifestations of his personality and his relationship with God the Father. "Real belief in the works", according to Moloney, "involves the ability to understand their role as signs- the ability to see through them to what they reveal, namely, that they are the work both of the Father and of the Son who are one, and thus that the Father is in Jesus and Jesus is in the Father."¹³ The discourse ends with the invitation to the disciples to ask for anything in the name of Jesus which he would grant (v. 14).

The point at issue in this pericope is not so much the discourse of Jesus with his disciples as the interventions of the disciples to Jesus' words. The betrayal of their shallow knowledge of him and his Father points to the fact that it is possible to know many things about someone without really knowing the person. This fact is made clearer by the immediate response of Jesus to the request of Philip ("Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied." v. 8) namely, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? (v. 9). This response must have been worsened because of the ignorance displayed earlier on by Thomas who did not know that Jesus was the way to the Father. It was as if the disciples of Jesus did not actually know the true identity of their master even though they were very close to him listening to his words and seeing his marvelous deeds. The truth of the matter is that if his disciples did not know him well enough, how would they be able to make him known to the people around them who were not close to him, that is, the pagan world? Nevertheless, the point must be made that this is not an indictment on the part of the two disciples, Thomas and Philip, as their requests were not ridiculous or outrageous. It only shows how imperfect they were in their understanding of the person and mission of Jesus on earth.

Seminary Formation in perspective

The task of the seminary is to train and form men who would be ordained as priests to minister to the needs of the church. To facilitate

this task, priests are chosen and sent as formators to the seminary to accompany the candidates on their journey to the priesthood. Seminary formation is thus divided into different stages with studies in philosophy and theology. There are four major areas of seminary formation which are spiritual, pastoral, intellectual and human. These run through the different stages of seminary formation. The seminarians are expected to develop in the four areas of formation without leaving any one behind. To achieve this end, auto formation is highly encouraged but with the formators accompanying the seminarians to be able to reach the requisite maturity for ordination. The formators by their words and examples accompany them to respond positively to God's call.

Philosophical Studies

As part of the prerequisites for ordination, seminarians are to undergo studies in philosophy to sharpen their power of reasoning and enable them to make mature decisions resulting from critical analysis. Through the study of ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary philosophical thoughts of philosophers, they arrive at a moment when they are disposed to receiving different thoughts and opinions with the aim of sifting out the truth. Philosophy enables the candidates to have an open mind towards the opinions of others and to approach issues with equanimity. With the aid of studies in logic, metaphysics and epistemology and other related disciplines, they learn to articulate their thoughts in a convincing way to win people over and are also circumspect regarding what they hear. The knowledge acquired in philosophy serves as a preparatory ground for theology which is "faith seeking understanding". Also within the years in philosophy some theological courses are taken by the candidates to balance up their study in philosophy before they proceed on the pastoral year.

Theological Studies

On the return of the seminarians from their one year pastoral year, they begin their theological studies in earnest. In the course of the years in theology, they undergo studies in scriptures, dogma, canon law, liturgy and morality. It must be noted that the essence of these courses is to acquaint the candidates with the knowledge of Jesus Christ as revealed to us in the Old and New Testaments, in the Fathers of the Church and in the Teaching Office of the Church. With this requisite knowledge it is believed that the seminarians have reached an appreciable level of maturity to advance to ordination. The rector and the entire formation team do not come to this conclusion without first examining and assessing the candidates. This process is called evaluation. First, they are assessed on the basis of their academic performance which the various

examinations they do reveal. Before the reception of any ministry, the candidates are also tested and evaluated to ascertain their readiness to advance towards the priesthood. In the final year of their priestly formation, candidates who have been judged worthy and suitable are recommended to their bishops for diaconate ordination. Those who are ordained serve as deacons for six months till the close of the session. They are then further recommended for priestly ordination after a thorough evaluation has been done by the rector and the formators.

Lack of in-depth knowledge of Christ by the seminarian

It has been observed by many people that there seems to be a great dichotomy between the seminary and the parish. The seminary is the house of formation for future priests while the parish is where the ordained minister functions. Due to the nature and function of the seminary, seminarians do all in their power to abide by the rules and regulations of the seminary. This, more often than not, is as a result of the saying that “if you keep the seminary rules, the seminary would keep you”. Therefore, seminarians often put on their best behaviour while in the seminary so as not to be expelled but to be recommended for ordination in due course. Sometimes, this attitude leads to a lot of pretence such that the true colour of seminarians does not come out until after ordination. The seminarians in this category pass through the seminary formation and even excel in the various aspects. To the formators these seminarians have met the requirements to be admitted to ordination into the Catholic priesthood. However and quite unfortunately, immediately after ordination, the newly ordained priest begins to act in a way that is incongruous with the training he has just received. He begins to behave in a way that is at variance with the examples of Jesus Christ whose herald he has now become according to the words of ordination. He feels and acts as being on top of the world with the whole world answerable to him forgetting Christ who says: “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:33).

One finds some situations in the parishes that make people to ask if a particular priest ever passed through a seminary. They do things in ways that show that they only passed through a seminary without the seminary passing through them. There seems to be a general belief that there is a contradiction between seminary life and parish life. This perhaps accounts for words like “Do you think I’m still a seminarian? Do you think we are still in the seminary? I am no longer a seminarian etc. Some believe that there is no consensus between the theory in the seminary and the practical in the parish. Therefore, for such priests, once the seminary formation is ended, so also is anything that has to do with

it. As such, some practices in the seminary are the immediate victims of this kind of attitude like praying the Office of the Hours, doing adoration and benediction, praying the Rosary and so on. The pertinent question is this: why is there such a dichotomy between the life of the seminarian while in the seminary and the life of the priest after ordination? It is the opinion of this writer that the lack of an in-depth knowledge of Jesus is responsible for this dichotomy.

The Relevance of Experiential Knowledge of Jesus for the seminarian in the 21st century

Experience, they say, is the best teacher. The Dictionary defines experience as “Knowledge derived from one’s one action, practice, perception, enjoyment or suffering.”¹⁴ Experiential I also defined as “Pertaining to or acquired by experience.”¹⁵ Experiential knowledge, therefore, refers to the knowledge acquired through experience. It is quite different from mere theoretical knowledge which is a knowledge acquired through learning alone. With theoretical knowledge one learns with the head alone without necessarily involving the heart. This is why one can learn something and forget it thereafter. It is not the case with experiential knowledge. More often than not, whatever one learns through experience does not depart from the person. It rather becomes part and parcel of that person.

In the episode of John 14:1-14 discussed earlier in this piece, Thomas and Philip were among the disciples of Jesus who have been with him for some time listening to him and learning from him. They seem to know so much about their master except his real identity as the visible image of God on earth. This accounts for their questions to Jesus while he was discussing with them. Thomas asked for the way Jesus was going while Philip asked to see the Father so as to be satisfied. The amazement of Jesus at these questions reflected in his response tells the whole story. As his close friends and companions, they were expected to have known him through and through having listened to him and seen all his marvelous deeds. However, their lack of this in-depth knowledge of him surprised him and he seized the opportunity to educate all the disciples on his real nature and personality. This does not in any way put these disciples in a bad light but only exposes their imperfection. They still had so much to learn from Jesus who even after his death and resurrection promised to send them the Holy Spirit who would lead them to the complete truth (John 16:13).

The seminarian in the 21st century, in order to be true to his calling to be a priest after the heart of Jesus, must not only have the theoretical knowledge of Jesus but also the experiential knowledge. This will enable him to live out more concretely the values of the priesthood

in a world that is hostile to the gospel. This experiential knowledge is relevant today because it helps the seminarian to see continuity between life in the seminary and life in the parish. The seminary training is to enable the seminarian when ordained to become a good and holy priest. He must not see the discipline he received in the seminary only as a means to become a priest but as a discipline for life. This is one of the benefits of experiential knowledge that the seminarian is able to see the seminary formation not just as a means to an end but a way of life that must be lived out in the priesthood.

Another way that experiential knowledge can impart positively the life of the 21st century seminarian is that having embraced the life of Christ as his own, the things of this world are not his immediate priority after ordination but to do the will of God just as Jesus said in John 4:34, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work”. This is quite different from what we observe today among newly ordained priests. Even before ordination, the preoccupation of the deacon preparing for ordination is on the material acquisition like the kind of car(s), latest gadgets in town, large sum of money in his bank account and a host of others. This is not to suggest by any means that these things are not necessary for the ministry. It is rather the inordinate desire for them at any cost that calls our preparedness for service to question. After all, the master, Jesus, when he was sending out his disciples on their mission said: “As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’ Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. You received without payment; give without payment. Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, or two tunics, or sandals, or staff; for laborers deserve their food” (Matt. 10:7-10). Hardly can we find today disciples who are ready to plunge themselves into the ministry without first looking for comfort and conveniences. I once heard of a deacon preparing for his priestly ordination who came up with a list of things needed for the ordination and commencement of priestly service. The total cost of all the items on the list runs into several millions of naira. It is not a bad thing for the disciples to be comfortable in the course of their work but the truth of the matter is that comfort and conveniences should not be the *conditio sine qua non* for service or what the disciples would be pursuing. Otherwise, these things could act as encumbrances to the carrying out of our duties as priests. An experiential knowledge of Jesus who had nowhere to lay his head would help achieve this (Matt. 8:20).

The Difference between mere Functionaries and real Pastors of souls

There is a vast difference between functionaries and ministers of the gospel. Functionaries can be likened to hirelings who feel nothing for the sheep but only carrying out the task they are being paid for. These are the people Jesus refers to in John 10:11-13 when he says “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away- and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep”. It can be said then that any minister of the word and sacraments who pursues only his own interest and not that of the sheep entrusted to him is only a hireling. Such a person does not possess the experiential knowledge of Jesus. We find so many of such hirelings in the ministry today. They are not ready to dive into the deep for a catch of fish but are busy pursuing their own selfish interests and ambitions and whenever and wherever these are not satisfied, there is trouble and discontentment. Thus, they could be referred to as mere functionaries, performers and artistes.

Real pastors, on the other hand, having experienced Jesus as one who has come to serve and not to be served, are always ready to go in search of souls to be won for Christ. They are prepared to be sent anywhere to minister to people as long as human beings are there. They do not pick and choose where they are going to work. Wherever their bishop or superior sends them, they are happy to go there. On resuming there, they do not put their own needs first. Rather, their preoccupation is to elevate the life of the people and make them better than they met them. They try to imitate the Good Shepherd himself who knows his sheep just as his sheep know him too (John 10:14). They identify with the people not only when things are going on well for them but also and more importantly in their moments of crisis and suffering.

The Role of the Seminary and Diocese in imparting experiential knowledge to the Seminarians

There is no gainsaying the fact that both the seminary and the diocese play important roles in the formation of seminarians. Theirs, therefore, is a collaborative ministry and to succeed in this, all hands must be on deck. The seminary, among all the other functions that it performs, must ensure that seminarians are given sufficient time and space to really discover themselves. While in the seminary, everything must not be subjected to a matter of horarium. If everything is about horarium the seminarians would always abide by it and participate in all the programs of the seminary even when they are not convinced or disposed towards

it. However, if some of the programs in the seminary are presented as private which by no means indicates optional, they are better able to make up their minds on what to attend and for how long. Though this idea may seem to subject seminary formation to the whims and caprices of the seminarians, the intention behind it is to prevent the mechanical obedience to seminary programs. In this way seminarians would be better known and those having challenges can be better helped.

The diocese of the seminarians has a role to play too in giving to them the experiential knowledge of Jesus. Seminarians go on pastoral work every year and they are sent to work in parishes. It must be ensured that they are well guided to carry out real pastoral works and not just some menial or domestic assignments in the parish or rectory. Besides, since examples are better than precepts, priests must always show them good examples for them to emulate. It is often counter-productive when they hear one thing from priests and yet observe another. Also, more often than not, people learn bad things faster than good ones. Seminarians must see priests do the right things so that they can learn them and be able to put them into practice when they eventually become priests themselves.

Conclusion

The encounter of Jesus with his disciples, Thomas and Philip, as enunciated in this work has opened up the discussion on the meaning of experiential knowledge as distinct from mere theoretical knowledge. These disciples as well as others have been with Jesus for a while and yet their knowledge of him has been somewhat shallow. They know him well in the flesh but their knowledge of him as a divine being is inadequate. They still had doubts regarding his divinity. That accounts for why these disciples questioned Jesus the way they did. F. Moloney's words are apt here when he says "To know Jesus is to know the Father, and Philip is exasperatingly ignorant in asking Jesus to show the Father (v.9). The problem lies in the disciples' lack of faith."¹⁶ It is the opinion of this piece that the same thing happens to seminarians who only have theoretical knowledge of Jesus without advancing to the experiential knowledge. They know so much about Jesus but Jesus himself they do not know. This is a clarion call on all those responsible for the formation of future priests and the seminarians themselves to interiorize whatever theoretical knowledge they have about Jesus so as to make Jesus more real to the 21st century world.

Endnote

¹ The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language. Typhoon Media Corporation, 2010. P.447.

² Ibid

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⁴ Ibid

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⁹ Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John X111-XX1. New York: Doubleday, 1970. P. 632

¹⁰ Francis Moloney Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998. Pp 395-396

¹¹ Raymond E. Brown, The Gospel According to John X111-XX1. New York: Doubleday, 1970. PP. 621-622

¹² Ibid p. 631

¹³ Ibid 633

¹⁴ The New International Webster's Comprehensive Dictionary of the English Language. P. 447

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 447

¹⁶ Francis Moloney, Sacra Pagina: The Gospel of John. P. 396