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THE DIALECTICS OF “AUTO-GUIDED” FORMATION: THE SEMINARIAN AS AN AGENT OF FORMATION

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Abstract

Formation is an intricate phenomenon involving the interaction of the different agents of formation. At the centre of this interaction is the formandi/seminarian who is, himself, an agent of his own formation. The input of the formandi is fundamental to the overall output of the formative process since the output of the formative process is a synthesis of the inputs of all the different agents of formation. Understood in this sense, formation is a dialectics. The formandi, being the central focus of formation, and at the same time an agent of his own formation, his response and/or disposition to formation either compliments or negates the inputs of the other agents of formation. Therefore, the formandi can single-handedly make or mar the formative process. The dialectical dynamics of formation is not just between the other agents of formation and the formandi (external), it also internal, as the formandi struggles to resolve his personal ideas with the quadruple requirements of priestly formation. This paper adopts the method of critical analysis to evaluate the dialectics of auto-guided formation, it investigates how the formandi interacts with the agents of formation towards achieving the character of another Christ, and concludes that the extent to which the formandi is properly formed depends on the extent to which he positively disposes himself to formation. The aim of the paper is to encourage the formandi to dispose himself appropriately towards formation and get the maximum output from his programme of formation.

Keywords: Agent of formation, Auto-guided, Dialectics, Formandi, Formation.

Introduction

Priestly formation is meant to equip a candidate aspiring towards the Catholic priesthood through a continuing conversion of heart, mind and soul that would enable him carry on an effective ministry in serving God and the people. It is a demanding and intensive programme of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation that requires the interaction of different agents of formation, viz: the formators, the fomandi, the environment and the curriculum of formation. These agents interact continually to shape the fomandi into the character of a priest as an *Alter Christus*; one who acts *in persona Christi capitis* and *in nomine ecclesia*. The central focus in the formation process is the candidate who is undergoing formation – the seminarian or formandi. His disposition towards formation, which involves his docility or indocility, is key to how he is formed because formation is a “give and take” phenomenon. When the given is not taken, there would be no formation and the way and manner the given is taken determines the extent to which the formandi is formed. Herein lies the dialectics of auto-guided formation.

The present paper relies on existing literature on the subject and adopts the critical analytic, conceptual and hermeneutic approach to examine the dialectics of auto-guided formation. That is, how the formandi interacts with the agents and factors of formation, which includes himself, towards achieving the character of another Christ. The paper elucidates the idea of priestly formation as a basis to examine the concept of auto-guided formation. It carefully but critically interrogates the role of the formandi in his self-formation. Based on the analysis herein, it concludes that whether a formandi is appropriately formed or not depends on how his docility. The primary aim of the paper is to encourage the seminarian to positively dispose himself towards formation and get the optimal from his programme of formation.

Priestly Formation

Even though priestly formation is not the primary focus of this paper, it is nonetheless, important to expound the concept of priestly formation because the concept of auto-guided formation, which is the primary focus of this paper, takes its meaning and *modus operandi* within that of priestly formation. Priestly formation is a very important and demanding task aimed at developing the priestly character. It is a holistic, integral, and inclusive process that involves the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral development of the candidate in formation.¹ It requires the seminarian to open up for a personal encounter with the Lord and be

transformed by the Lord.² The new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis (RFIS)* n. 35 describes it as a process that implies the configuration of the seminarian to Christ, who is the head, the shepherd, the servant and the spouse; bringing the seminarian into a mystical identification with the person of Christ as described in the gospels. According to Carlos Wong, Archbishop Emeritus of Papantla and Secretary for Seminaries, Congregation for the Clergy, it is “the process of internalisation, in the proper sense, a priestly lifestyle, which aims to ingrain the values that are proper to life and to priestly ministry in the personality of the candidates for the priesthood.”³ Paraphrasing *Evangelica Testificatio* n. 32, Bishop Donatus Ogun of the Diocese of Uromi, describes formation as “the honest confrontation with the self of the way of life of Jesus Christ, His teaching and example. It is about building up of the inner man, it is the care you have for the inner man which will help you to recognise, in the midst of so many different and attractive possibilities, the most suitable way to live your vocation.”⁴

The Second Vatican Council’s (VC II) Decree on Priestly Formation: *Optatam Totius* (OT), clearly identified the basic principles of priestly formation, and the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV) by Pope St. John Paul II provides a blue print for priestly formation in the circumstances of a fast-paced digital world.⁵ A simple summary of PDV, in the words of John Anaigwu would be: priests need to be “balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities.”⁶ Specifically, PDV n. 43 states that,

They [seminarians] need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgement and behaviour.

PDV nos. 43 – 45 identify the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral aspects as the four basic components of priestly formation. And further emphasised that the human formation is the basis of all priestly formation because it is the human person that becomes the priest. The spiritual formation is the centre that holds and provides life to the being of the priest and his function as a priest. Intellectual formation, which is apparently the most visible, transcends the acquisition of degrees in Philosophy and Theology to include educating the priest to be “knowledgeable in all human sciences and even the history and culture of the nations within which they are expected to minister.”⁷ Such a holistic education recognises the positive development of the IQ and aptitude of the seminarian and equip him to respond appropriately to enquiries from the faithful who seek guidance and counsel to resolve their faith and moral crisis in the face of new scientific and technological

discoveries that tend always to remove God from the picture.⁸ According to OT n. 4, the trifold of human, spiritual, and intellectual formation aims at making the priest a pastor. One who is a true shepherd of souls after the example of Jesus Christ; trained in the ministries of the word, worship and sanctification, and shepherding just like Christ who did not come to be served but to serve (Mt. 10:45 and Jn. 13: 12-17) and win souls by becoming servants of all (1 Cor. 9:19). The pastoral formation has both the theoretical and practical aspects. The former is acquired in the classroom in the seminary, and the latter is acquired on the field (dioceses) during apostolic work and pastoral year. The apostolic work and pastoral year periods provide the opportunity for seminarians to learn the praxis of the ministry through exposure to parish life and setting. Needless to say, as Anaiwu impressively analysed, that the practical aspect of pastoral formation seems to be riddled with abuses these days judging from the way it is handled by priests in the dioceses. It has been misconstrued as a time for probing the seminarian, getting a wage-free houseboy, and at times, considered an unnecessary burden on the priest or parish.⁹

Priestly formation takes place essentially in a seminary, therefore, it can also be described as seminary formation. It differs from the regular secular education, schooling or job training, hence it is not called seminary education but seminary formation. “It is an activity of cooperation with the grace of God where by God Himself works in the man to form him into Christian man and sharer in the Priesthood of Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ In the seminary, the formation of the seminarian is integrated with the wider ecclesia understanding of the Church. Thus, Bishop Ogun says, “it is in the discovery of who the church says He [Christ] is you [the seminarian] are then able to meet him and say ‘here I am, send me.’ This is the purpose of Catholic formation in our seminaries.”¹¹ Based on the foregoing, it behoves on the seminarian to open-up and entrust himself to the Church in his formation while he recognises the fact that he is primarily responsible for his own formation.¹² This last point introduces the core of this paper; the seminarian as an agent of formation, which is to be properly understood within the notion of auto-guided formation.

Auto-Guided Formation

The concept of “auto-guided” is compounded from the dual concepts of “auto” with the prefix (auto-) and “guide.” The former (auto-), from its Greek root translates as “self” and often used in the formation of compound words like autograph, autobiography, automatic, etc. The latter (guide), as a verb means to indicate the way, and as a noun, it describes someone who shows the way to others. Literarily therefore,

“auto-guided” would be self-guidance or to guide oneself, which implies that the seminarian guides himself in his formation. The way it has been applied in seminary formation since its evolution a little over two decades ago, implies more than just self-guidance or to guide oneself. It means that the seminarian forms himself following the guidance of others. These others are his formators and the other agents of formation.

The Holy Spirit is principally the agent of formation and all other agents of formation are mediators through whom the Holy Spirit forms the seminarian. The other agents of formation include the following: (i) The Bishop, who is ultimately responsible for the entire formative process. (ii) The diocesan community and the presbyterate, which constitute the privileged environment for the transmission of priestly values. (iii) The educational community of the seminary, which consists of the formators, lecturers and employees. (iv) Diocesan priests who play a vital role in the interactions with the seminarians during the latter’s apostolic work and pastoral year experience. Even though it is not usually stressed, the laity and women play special roles in the seminarian’s discernment of his priestly vocation, so they are also agents of formation. These human agents of formation should help the seminarian to open himself up personally and profoundly to the sanctifying action of the Spirit by helping the seminarian to take his formation seriously and assist in sustaining him to make his ‘Yes’ response to the Lord every day.¹³

The role of the formators and lecturers in the seminary as agents of formation within the context of auto-guided formation is ineliminable. Therefore, it is important to emphasise it, even if just briefly. They constitute the “guidance” aspect in the process of formation, for by their way of life, instructions, and lectures, they guide the seminarian. In this wise, the seminary must be adequately staffed. To be adequately staffed does not just mean quantity in terms of the number of priests on the formation team or lecturers in the various departments. Neither does it just mean academically intelligent formators and lecturers. It means having qualitative formators and lecturers. Qualitative here describes priests who in the honest judgement of their Bishops are tested and trusted; “priests whom their Bishops can vouch for in terms of commitment to responsibilities, sound doctrine, spiritual, moral and social maturity, priestly decorum, intellectual soundness, economic and financial discipline, with ecclesiastical personality.”¹⁴ The same applies at its own degree to the lecturers employed to teach the seminarians. They must be of good moral standing and ideas, matured and disciplined in their choice of expressions, dress code, and should have respect for the Church’s teachings and hierarchy, as well as be able to keep their

personal opinions to themselves when they deliver their lectures. Inappropriate guidance would lead the seminarian to malformation.

All said, the seminarian is the first person responsible for his own formation. PDV n. 69 asserts that, “we must not forget that the candidate himself is a necessary and irreplaceable agent in his own formation: All formation, priestly formation included, is ultimately a self-formation. No one can replace us in the responsible freedom we have as individual persons.” In the same wise, the new RFIS n. 130 emphasises that:

Each seminarian is the protagonist of his own formation, ...and is called to a journey of ongoing growth in the human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral areas, taking into account his own personal and family background. Seminarians are likewise responsible for establishing and maintaining a climate of formation that is consistent with the values of the gospels.

In the above statement, the new RFIS directs attention to the formative attitude of the seminarian, which is the personal input or self-guidance inclusive in the notion of auto-guided formation. The personal input of the seminarian requires that he must be “available and docile to learn from the various circumstances of his life, in all the dimensions of his personality.”¹⁵ The concepts of “availability” and “docility” are imperative here. A seminarian who lacks availability just goes to the chapel, the class, the play field, the refectory and the library because he should be there according to the horarium but does not personally and actively participate in what goes on at these places. Consequently, he just goes through the activities without the activities going through him. In other words, even though the seminarian is guided, he refuses to apply himself to guidance – he has been given formation by the design of the horarium but he has not taken formation. It is one thing to be guided and another thing to apply oneself to guidance. A seminarian’s unavailability implies his lack of formation because he refuses, *ipso facto*, to be formed.

Availability and docility are complementary. To be docile is to open oneself to learn. A seminarian who goes to class with his mind already closed to whatever the lecturer would say cannot learn. Such a seminarian sits in positions where he cannot be noticed, stares at the lecturer all through the lecture with the grimace that may be translated into “finish and leave joor,” he takes no notes in class, asks no questions and avoids been noticed to be asked a question. Sometimes, he is reading through some other materials of interest to him that have no relevance to the lecture going on. Such a seminarian is not docile and he is lacking in the aspect of self-formation. Even when the aspect of the guidance is there, the seminarian would be malformed.

The availability and docility of the seminarian enables him to achieve the fundamental openness required to advance the necessary freedom to allow oneself to be accompanied and to receive positively the help of his formators. Seminarians that are selective of the formator they want to listen to are doing harm to their self-formation. In the same vein, formators that play to the gallery with seminarians; who would overlook formative issues because they do not want to disturb the seminarians or make them think they (formators) are “wicked” (to use the common term of seminarians), are not only obstructing the self-formation of the seminarians but also neglecting their role in the dialectics of auto-guided formation.

Dialectics of Auto-Guided Formation

Dialectics refers to “a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides.”¹⁶ It is a form of reasoning that involves a dialogue of arguments and counter-arguments that results in a synthesis of advocating propositions and counter-propositions. It is an inquiry into the truth of opinions with the aim of seeking a resolution or reconciliation. As a philosophical method, it is a discourse between two or more discussants who hold different opinions, but aim at establishing the truth of their positions through reasoned arguments. Within Hegelianism – Georg W. F. Hegel’s system of thought, with which dialectics is mostly associated – dialectics has a specialised connotation; it describes the contradiction between ideas that ultimately determines the relationship between the ideas. It consists of three stages of development. The first stage is the thesis or statement of an idea, it gives rise to the second stage, which is a reaction or antithesis. The antithesis negates the thesis. To resolve the negation of the thesis by the antithesis, the third stage, which is the synthesis is produced, thus, the synthesis resolves the differences between the thesis and the antitheses. It is in this sense that dialectics is understood as “the tendency of a notion to pass over into its own negation as the result of conflict between its inherent contradictory aspects.”¹⁷ This is exactly the sense in which Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels popularised it in their social and economic analysis referred to as dialectical materialism. It is characterised by the interaction between the thesis and antithesis in the production of the synthesis.

By the dialectics of auto-guided formation therefore, I mean the interaction between the formation-given, which constitute the thesis of the dialectics, and the formation-received, which is the antithesis, in the production of the formed – that is, the output of the resolution between the thesis and antithesis – is the synthesis. The formation-given is the input of all the agents of formation, moderated by the formators, in the

formation of the formandi. The formation-received is the way and manner the formandi receives the inputs of all the other agents of formation. In particular, it describes the formandi's positive or negative disposition (availability and docility) towards formation. The formed is what the formandi turns out to be at the end of his formation. The thesis alone (formation given) cannot constitute the synthesis; the way and manner it is received, which is either favourably or nonchalantly or rejected (antithesis) determines the end-product of the formed, which would be either properly formed, malformed or not formed at all (synthesis).

In the dialectics of auto-guided formation, the seminarian's role as an agent of his own formation is crucial to how he is formed. If the seminarian is positively disposed, he will be open to the inputs of the other agents of formation and he would allow himself be guided by such inputs. He would mould himself; intellectually, spiritually, pastorally and humanly, into the character and person of Christ, following the template of the formation-given. With determination and commitment to be properly formed, he would courageously confront the negativities that constitute antithesis to the formation-given. These negativities include: not wanting to be told what to do, wanting to be like other young men outside the seminary, wanting to sleep a little longer in the early hours of the morning rather than having to get up for morning prayers, questioning the rationale for manual work and the necessities for the mandatory lectures, dress code, etc. On the hand, the seminarian that is not positively disposed, would not only lack the determination and commitment required to confront these negativities, but would rationalise and justify them. Consequently, he would react, in one way or another, against the inputs of the other agents of formation. Even though formation is given, the seminarian would be malformed because of his negative disposition and lack of openness to accept the inputs of the other agents of formation. Because he disagrees within himself with the manner of formation, he would not be properly formed.

It is germane at this point to consider some of the possible attitudes towards formation by seminarians. There are, at least, four easily discernible possible attitudes that a seminarian can have towards formation.

- i. Lack of interest towards formation.
- ii. Pretentious interest towards formation.
- iii. Uncommitted interest towards formation.
- iv. Genuine interest towards formation.

For those in group one, there is nothing about the seminary that interests them; they grudgingly do everything, from going to the chapel for prayers to going out for games. They are interested in such things

that give them pleasure or make them free, for example, outing and lecture free days. Whatever the formators say does not make sense to them, they just stare at the formators and say “Thank you Fr” when the formator is done talking to them. Deep in their heart, they mean “Leave me alone.” Their minds are made on what they want to do and how they want to be priests, they are in the seminary to count the years as they roll by and get out there for ordination. From the day they finish their oral B.Th. exams, chapel is a no-no for them. They go around with an air of freedom thereafter. Seminarians like these cannot be properly formed because they lack the basic fundamental disposition of availability and docility.

For group two, they are of the same category in terms of disposition as those in group one but sneaky and more dangerous. They are very good seminarians in the presence of their formators and anyone who matters as far as their seminary formation is concerned. When no one is looking they do everything they should not do but which is actually what they desire to do. They can have a very strong negative influence on their fellow seminarians, which makes them dangerous. They are like the biblical wolves in sheep’s clothing.

The third group have the genuine interest in being formed, but on their own terms. They listen and participate in formation activities and programmes as it is convenient for them. When it is not convenient for them, they participate all the same but without any attention at all just to be counted as present. Seminarians in this category have a fair idea what the priesthood should be, but more often than not, their idea is orientated towards their “ideal priest” who is usually not Jesus Christ as it should be but one priest somewhere that they admire so much, for whatever reasons. If their ideal priest is one of those striving to do the right thing, those in this category have chances of being well formed, but if he is one of those doing his own thing in the priesthood, they are not likely to be well formed.

The fourth group involves seminarians who are wholeheartedly positively disposed towards formation. They actively participate in formation activities and programmes with the genuine intention of getting the maximum results in terms of acquiring knowledge and the priestly character after the mind of Christ and the Church. They are attentive in class and eager to learn. They do not hide in the crowd because they have no intention to break the rules and regulations of formation. They feel free with their formators and share their worries with the hope of being assisted to overcome their difficulties. Those in this category are, unfortunately not many.

Those in groups one to three would hardly ever see themselves to be wrong, they always consider themselves victimised and would

always justify themselves. If they are accused of any wrong doing, especially those in groups one and two, they are quick to tender and apology – “I am sorry Fr”, what they are sorry for, you do not even know because they have not accepted that they were wrong. It is usually an indication of seminarians who are not ready to learn or improve. If for any reason, they are expelled from the seminary, they consider themselves as victims of injustice. Those in group four are, at times unfortunate to be expelled but even then, they never hold grudges against the seminary or any of their formators.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to analyse the dialectics of auto-guided formation and emphasise the fundamental role of the formandi/seminarian as an agent in his own formation. No matter the formation given and the wholesome role of all other agents of formation, the seminarian is only formed to what extent he makes himself available for formation. Where he lacks the requisite docility towards learning and polishing his character to conform or configure himself to the person of Christ, the activities of the other agents of formation will have no positive impact in his formation. Aniagwu avers that we should always note the contradistinction between “formation given” and “formation received.” He asserts that it is not always the case that the formation received corresponds to the formation given and the reason for this lies in the quality of the response of the seminarian to formation.¹⁸ I am not unaware of the claim by some liberalists that we are in an age where youths have a high tendency towards unrestrained freedom and would want to do what they want, when they want and how they want. Based on the excessively permissive nature of today’s society, they argue that seminarians should be allowed some latitude. I am not taking a position on this in this paper, however, I insist that allowing seminarians latitude or not is not a primary issue, what is primary is the disposition of the seminarian towards formation. Irrespective of societal and environmental influences, a seminarian that does not make himself available with the required docility for formation would not be properly formed. Therefore, the seminarian should evaluate how he forms himself under the guidance of the other agents of formation. The measure a seminarian puts into his own formation determines the effectiveness of the measure his formators and other agents of formation put into his (seminarian) formation. *PDV* n. 69 affirms this with the words, “the actions of the different teachers become truly and fully effective only if the future priest offers his own convinced and heartfelt cooperation to this work of formation.”

Endnotes

¹ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), 43ff.

² T. H. Akaabiam, "Seminary Formation," *The Aquinas' Journal* 5 (June 2012), 1.

³ Jorge Carlos Patrón Wong, "Foundations of Priestly Formation," www.clerus.va>clerus>Dox, PDF, 1. (Accessed 2/9/2019).

⁴ Donatus Ogun, "Being True Disciples in a Changing World," Homily delivered at the SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Major Seminary, Bodija, Ibadan on the Occasion of the Celebration of the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul and Installation of the Ministries of Lector and Acolyte (June 28, 2019).

⁵ John K. Aniagwu, *Faith and Social Action: Perspectives on the Church and Society* (Iperu Remo: Ambassador Publications, 2011), 214.

⁶ Aniagwu, *Faith and Social Action*, 213.

⁷ Anselm Jimoh, "Priestly Formation in the Face of Contemporary Challenges in Nigeria: Lessons for Consideration in Auchi Diocese," in *Diocese of Auchi at 10: History, Growth and Perspectives* edited by J. A. Onimhawo and F. E. Ikhianosime, 31 - 53 (Ibadan: Safmos Publishers, 2013), 44.

⁸ Jimoh, "Priestly Formation," 44 - 45.

⁹ Aniagwu, *Faith and Social Action*, 222-223 and Jimoh, "Priestly Formation," 46.

¹⁰ "What is Seminary Formation?", <https://vocationsboston.org>, 2. (Accessed 2/9/2019).

¹¹ Ogun, "Being True Disciples in a Changing World."

¹² "What is Seminary Formation?", 3.

¹³ Wong, "Foundations of Priestly Formation," 3.

¹⁴ Jimoh, "Priestly Formation," 48-49.

¹⁵ Wong, "Foundations of Priestly Formation," 2.

¹⁶ Julie E. Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=hegel-dialectics>. (Accessed 29/2/2020)

¹⁷ "Dialectics" in <http://www.britannica.com/topic/dialectics>. (Accessed 3/9/2019).

¹⁸ Aniagwu, *Faith and Social Action*, 211.