

PROMOTING A SEMINARY FORMATION THAT IS CONTINUOUS WITH THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY

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Abstract

Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, is most renowned for the four areas of priestly formation it proposes. But one who picks up this document and intends to immediately read about these areas might be disappointed. The document first examines the current situation of the priest today and the nature of the priesthood. Only in the fifth of the six chapter work did the work discuss the areas of formation of candidates for the priesthood. The loud message of the structure of this document is that formation of future priests must be attentive to the nature of the priestly ministry and the context where it is to be exercised. Considering the challenges facing the priestly ministry in Nigeria today, especially a religious context characterised by an aggressive pentecostalism and a militant Islam, this paper wishes to show that a sound theological formation, a spirituality that is informed by the great masters of the Catholic tradition motivated by a strong pastoral zeal, marked by sincerity and openness and imbibed in a way that is continuous and not discontinuous with Seminary formation is indispensable for a sound priestly formation today.

Keywords: Seminary, Formation, Ministry, Priesthood, Pentecostalism

Introduction

Pope John Paul II's *Pastores dabo vobis* is well known for the four areas of priestly formation it outlines. With this vision, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation wishes to state that the seminary formation of the future priest should be anchored on human formation, spiritual formation,

intellectual formation, and pastoral formation. But one who picks up the document and hopes to immediately read these four areas of formation might be disappointed. It is only in the fifth of the six-chapter work that these areas of priestly formation are enumerated and discussed. The earlier chapters of the text are focused on the contemporary context where the priest would work today, and on the nature and mission of the priestly vocation. The clear message of the structure of the document is that the meaning of the priesthood and the contemporary context of the priestly ministry must inform the formation of candidates for the priesthood.¹

This message also implies that the candidate for the priesthood should be trained in a way that seminary formation flows into priestly ministry. But the pontiff writes with an awareness of certain hindrances that might militate against this continuity when he states about the ongoing formation of priests: "With priests who have just come out of the seminary, a certain sense of "having had enough is quite understandable when faced with new times of study and meeting. But the idea that priestly formation ends on the day one leaves the seminary is false and dangerous and needs to be totally rejected."² What the pope identifies here is not a passing problem confronting the priestly ministry. In our own Nigerian context, this problem resonates in the mentality of 'I have arrived' that often characterises how some view their priestly ordination. This mentality frequently promotes a certain rupture with seminary formation. We therefore often have the exhibition of certain characters in the priesthood whose modes of priestly ministry and service are alien to the formative program of the seminary. An example of this is the mad rush of many newly ordained priests to take up healing and deliverance ministries and to exhibit styles and patterns of preaching and the celebration of the liturgy that are inconsistent with their seminary formation. Religious figures far from the practice and tradition of the Catholic Church are easily taken up by these priests as models. It is not books on the lives of saints and their teachings, Church documents, classical Catholic books, sound theological texts that dot their shelves; rather, the books and religious materials they consume are works of popular pentecostal pastors.

While stating that the discontinuity between the way some priests exercise their ministry and their seminary formation expresses the heart of our problem, it however does not tell it all. It should be asked: what is responsible for this discontinuity between the way some exercise their priestly ministry and their seminary formation? If the seminary formation ought to have had the necessary formative ingredients that should help the priest exercise his ministry with integrity, then why has it failed to follow the priest into his ministry? Or more concretely, one

may ask, is there something lacking in the seminary formation that facilitates its easy discontinuity with the priestly ministry? Might we also ask if there are other causes beyond the seminary formation that contribute to this discontinuity?

This paper wishes to respond to these problems by first examining the current style of priestly formation with special attention to the Nigerian context. After a discussion of the problems inherent in the formation of priests, we shall proceed to propose a way forward on how this discontinuity can be overcome in order to have a credible seminary formation that is continuous with the priestly ministry.

Seminary Formation of Future Priests

The institutionalisation of priestly formation began in the Middle Ages, specifically, with the Council of Trent. It was precipitated by the problems that plagued the priesthood at that time, especially as it concerned the moral life of the clergy. There was, therefore, a certain vision of forming the future priest in a way that protects him from the dangers of the world. The idea of the seminary was thus envisaged with the model of a monastery. But with the pastoral renewal that Vatican II called for, while retaining the classical model of formation, there was a shift to a more pastoral style of formation. What this means is that while the enclosed system of seminary formation remains, there is also the need to form the candidate in a way that would make him equipped for the challenges of the priestly ministry in today's world.³

Pastores dabo vobis' (PVD) outline of the four areas of priestly formation shows this post-conciliar emphasis that significantly builds upon the conciliar document on the training of priests, *Optatam totius* (OT). It should be noted that in the decades before the council, as Katarina Schuth recalls from most published articles of seminary formators, the formation of seminarians was perceived to be too isolated and they were, therefore, not equipped to face the world and its challenges. One of such authors, Stafford Poole, a Vincentian, recommended that "if the seminary is to keep abreast of the modern world, it is going to have to be reunited organically with lay education."⁴

It was therefore not surprising that OT saw pastoral formation as the framework for all other aspects of formation.⁵ Spiritual formation "should be closely connected with the doctrinal and pastoral."⁶ The study of philosophy and theology should be taught in a way that their connection with the mysteries of Christ and the faith and life should be evident.⁷ There is, however, no specific mention of human formation in OT. Nevertheless, elements of human formation are present when it asks for the need to ascertain the freedom of the candidate, his ability to

bear the burden of the priesthood and also the maturity needed to undertake the obligation of celibacy.⁸

It is instructive to note that human formation, which was not clearly explicit in OT, was taken as the basis for all other areas of formation: spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral in PVD. While OT presents pastoral formation as the framework for all other aspects of formation, in PVD, human formation is taken as the foundation of all other aspects of formation. In fact, citing the synod fathers, PVD notes that “[t]he whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation.”⁹ PVD believes that a thorough human formation that is open to the truth comes to completion in spiritual formation.¹⁰ It shows how human formation is at the foundation of intellectual formation when it notes that the latter is a fundamental demand of the human intelligence by which one participates in the light of God’s mind.¹¹ Here one could read the intimate link between philosophy and theology. After affirming how human formation leads to spiritual and intellectual formation, PVD then shows how these form the content of pastoral formation, which “cannot be reduced to mere apprenticeship aiming to make the candidates familiar with pastoral techniques.”¹²

One can say that OT and PVD sought to harmonise the classical seminary training of monastic model with helping the future priests face the challenges of the contemporary world. OT shows how this is to be achieved by proposing that pastoral formation should be the framework of all other areas of formation. PVD seems to shift this framework to human formation, while at the same time giving more substance to pastoral formation. This did not however, concretely remove the tension between the monastic model and facing the challenge of the world that was already present in the introductory pages of OT.¹³ Perhaps it is for this reason, that despite its clear vision of how priestly formation should go, OT asks that each bishop or episcopal conference should domesticate or inculcate its proposal on priestly formation.¹⁴

Some countries and dioceses have attempted this domestication of the vision of the council by the periodic publication of a program for priestly formation.¹⁵ In Nigeria, what is mainly obtainable in this regard are the handbooks/rules and regulations of the seminaries.¹⁶ They are usually anchored around the seminary horarium, content of courses, social behaviour of seminarians, and a brief philosophy of formation. The presentation of the four areas of priestly formation usually defines the seminary’s philosophy of formation. This presentation also tends to be elaborate in showing the formative principle behind each rule. Here, one could find the tension between the monastic model of formation and training the candidate for the world. For example, one of the rules

and regulations published by SS. Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, Ibadan, states: "To avoid a diminution of their fervour for the interior life, and the distraction of their attention from sacred studies, Seminarians shall not go out except at set times for outings, and in exceptional cases for a grave reason and with the approval of the Dean of Students. However, after Christmas break, the Year VII Students have a general permission daily after lectures."¹⁷ The seeming opposition that this rule reflects between the residency of the seminarian in the seminary and his outings is revealing. When this is put bluntly, it can be said that the seminarian who goes out often risks losing the fervour of his interior life and distracting himself from his seminary studies. Anyone who has been to the seminary or is familiar with seminary formation would know that there is some truth in this rule. The ordinary horarium of the seminary is quite tight. So, if a seminarian goes out often or indiscriminately, then he may not properly apply himself to the seminary program. While this is a given fact, the way the rule is worded presumes some inability of the seminarian to make use of his discretion in going out, hence he is advised to only go out on outing days or with permission for a grave reason. Only those seminarians in the final year, and after the Christmas break, when they must have been promoted as deacons or deemed fit to be ordained deacons, can enjoy some general permission in going out.

However, one could argue that since only adults are admitted to the seminary, that is, students presumed to be qualified for a university education, should they not be given more discretion in deciding when to go out, and thereby facilitate growth in training in freedom that OT and PVD speak about? Here, one who is familiar with how some seminarians perceive the seminary as a prison yard would see how this impression resonates in the tension between the monastic model of formation and openness to the world. It can be said that this impression, justified or not, is what gradually grows to facilitate the discontinuity that manifests itself between seminary formation and priestly life.

Just as the tension between outing and residence in the seminary resonates the difficulty in harmonising the monastic model of formation and openness to the world, another area that reflects this challenge is the ban on the possession and use of private mobile phones by seminarians. Like the presupposition on the rule on outings above, it is reasoned that the possession of a personal cell phone would greatly distract students from applying themselves to their program of formation. One thing clear about the ban on personal cell phones is that despite the strict punishments that go with possessing one, such as a probation or expulsion, some seminarians still keep their personal phones. There seems to be a deep lack of inner conviction about why they should not

have a personal cell phone. The consequence of this is that it could promote a subculture where the seminarian hides certain aspects of himself so that the whole self is not brought out for formation. Such subculture could promote a general lack of sincerity towards formation. At this point, beyond the ban or permission of private cell phones, we could anchor a major reason why there is often a discontinuity between seminary formation and priestly life in the existence of a subculture in the seminarian that does not make the candidate fully open to formation. The lack of realization of the harmony that should exist between the monastic model of formation and openness to the world is the context for the growth of this subculture.

Generally, one could describe a subculture as the presence of some beliefs and practices that are at variance with the belief of the larger group. In this case, it means the existence of certain beliefs and practices in the seminarian that are at variance with the practices and expectations of elements of his priestly formation and priestly ministry. It could be credibly said that it is this subculture that comes into the open at ordination and manifests itself as a rupture between priestly life and seminary training. For example, what is also at stake in a seminarian possessing cell phones against a clearly stated ban by the seminary's rules and regulations is the grooming of a subculture of disobedience. If the candidate is to be formed in learning how to obey for supernatural reasons, he should be ready to obey a law that is not sinful, even though he is not personally convinced about the reasonableness or validity of that law. No one can practice ecclesiastical obedience if he only wants to obey what he is convinced about.

But it is one thing to state a problem and its consequences, while it remains a task to confront the root cause of a problem and work towards a solution. Let us now move towards more effective ways to find a continuity between seminary formation and priestly life.

Continuity between Seminary Formation & Priestly Life

The major cause of the discontinuity between seminary formation and priestly ministry that we have identified is the tension between the monastic model and facing the challenges of the world. This can also be described as the context of the problem. But it is not a context that is detached from the substance of the problem. There is need to harmonise the strength of the monastic model and the relevance of openness to the world. This is indispensable for domesticating a credible formative program that would be well assimilated and lasting. A significant point of departure here is that the monastic model or the isolated seminary environment should not be considered as existing against the world, the way the aforementioned rule of SS. Peter and Paul on outing seem to

have been phrased. One central message that the future priest would have to teach the people is how lay persons in the middle of the world can have an interior life. The interior life is not something that should exist outside the world, but it must form how we live the world. This fact can be explained by the way Joseph Ratzinger understands the model of an open Church. He first notes that there should not be opposition between the Church and the world, because the Church is not world-less (*Weltlos*). The world is not a place that exists besides the Church, just as it does not exist for itself because its history and development is closely tied to the history of humanity. The biblical picture, however, shows that the history of human relationships exists in ambiguity because of the goodness and the evil present in human history. For this reason, Ratzinger notes that the dialogue between the Church and the world should reject a one-sided demonisation of the world, and a one-sided glorification of science and technology. The crucial element of this dialogue is not a matter of the degree of the Church's openness to the world, but how the Church is open to the world.¹⁸

In the same vein, the enclosed set up of seminary formation should not be conceived as a place designed in opposition to the world. Rather, it should be viewed as a place to prepare the future priests for the world they will live and exercise their priestly ministry in. When this is concretely understood, it would be easy to see that for example, it is more profitable that the seminary environment teaches the seminarian how to use and keep a personal cell phone than to have a ban on keeping one because of perceived abuses. In this way, a vital aspect of the self, that is, the use and possession of a personal handset, is made open to formation. Such efforts at formation would be directed to drawing out formative ethics on the use and ownership of cell phones rather than disciplinary measures to ban them. In this way, one would be able to avoid the growth of a subculture that is at odds with the formative culture of the seminarian.

What this example of the cell phone points to is that the more seminarians are made to be open, the better they can be formed. The affirmation of PVD that human formation is the basis of all other areas of formation can be interpreted along this line: only when the seminarian is open or the enabling environment is created for him to be open, can he be formed in all areas of priestly formation. When PVD states that human formation entails the capacity to relate with others, it implies that only one that can relate with others can also relate with God. If God is personal, without a capacity to form personal relationships the candidate will not be able to deal with God as a person. It is for this reason that the *Ratio Fundamentalis* says that a well-structured humanity is indispensable for a true spirituality.¹⁹ When a true openness leads to the development

of a sound spiritual life, the seminarians' intellectual formation will be driven by love for the truth. It is a love for the truth that is founded on a genuine human inquiry and faith. In this case, fidelity to the Church's teachings or orthodoxy will not be viewed as a mere adherence to some prescriptions. Rather, they will be a motivation of the human inquiry for the truth. Just as being critical does not turn one to being sceptical, so being faithful to the Church's teachings does not make one uncritical or unable to ask Mary's question to Archangel Gabriel's message: "How shall this be done, since I do not know man." (Lk. 1:34).

In this respect, the seminarian will not see the expectations of his state and the priestly ministry as mere rules and regulations to keep. Rather, they will be seen as truths to live out. He will not see himself as doing something extraordinary in taking up the obligation of celibacy. Rather, when celibacy is understood and accepted with formation in the four areas, it will first be seen as a specific way to live out the virtue of chastity. The well-formed seminarian knows that every Christian, including married persons are called to live that chastity. It is in this respect that celibacy will be understood as a joyful renunciation of what one considers great and beautiful. This frame of mind makes it easy to exercise vigilance and avoid any occasion of sin or compromising situations out of a firm conviction, and not simply to put up some external appearance.

It is precisely for this reason that PVD identifies the formation of conscience and maturity as indispensable for human formation. This formation is the best guarantee for exercising authentic freedom and responsibility. The emphasis on formation must seek to address the conscience of seminarians, make them always recognise their freedom to be priests, and how that freedom could also make them to properly discern a choice for a different state of life. With such a mindset, just as the seminarian could in freedom decide not to continue in the seminary, so does the seminarian that looks towards the priesthood prepare himself beyond priestly ordination. The seminary horarium would be seen as a means for that formation, an aid to developing a plan of life. One significant fact of the horarium is the daily recitation of the divine office, which only clerics and religious are obliged to recite. Seminarians recite it daily as a way of helping them to form the habit that would enable them to take up this future obligation. But on certain days in the week, like their free days and outing days where the regular horarium does not apply, seminarians are asked to say these prayers privately. This, I believe, is one of the best ways to gauge whether seminarians are imbibing a prayer life that will lead them into the priestly ministry. There are slim chances that the seminarian who does not say his prayers on those free days will do so in the priestly ministry.

Such days that seminarians are asked to do their prayers privately cannot be assessed by external disciplinary measures. This is where a good culture of spiritual direction is indispensable in the seminary. Here, many seminaries in Nigeria would need to do better. Some don't have sufficient number of spiritual directors compared to the number of their seminarians, and quite often, most spiritual directors do not have the training that is comparable to that of their other colleagues. It is not so common to find spiritual directors who have studied up to doctoral level as we have in those who teach other courses in philosophy and theology. There is need for more time, personnel, and resources to be invested in spiritual direction in our seminaries. A good culture of spiritual direction will help the seminarian assimilate the elements of his formation in greater depth. A seminarian who does not go for spiritual direction often, or who lacks a good culture of spiritual direction, will also not be able to give spiritual direction to others. Little wonder that there are frequent complaints that most priests are not disposed for spiritual direction. What we often have are problem centered counseling sessions. A systematic culture of spiritual direction, where the Christian is led to live a balanced interior life with the goal of holiness of life is frequently lacking for many lay persons. The root cause of this problem might be traceable to how seminarians have been formed in the culture of spiritual direction.

This point on spiritual direction already draws our attention to how a good human and spiritual formation also leads to a good pastoral formation. This pastoral formation will be supported with clear ideas that are informed by a sound intellectual formation. Philosophical studies must prepare the mind to think clearly; to appreciate the foundation of objective truth and knowledge and the subjective dimensions in which these have been expressed throughout history. Such an opening creates the enabling environment for a theological formation that is orthodox and at the same time critical. With the guidance of Scripture and the Church's teachings, in critical dialogue with other human disciplines, the seminarian will be equipped with the content of his pastoral ministry. Such content cannot be a mere acquisition of knowledge to be dispensed, but it must always have depth in the candidate's personal conviction and way of life.

It is for this reason that the seminarian's intellectual and spiritual formation must be sufficiently exposed to Catholic tradition in a way that every seminarian would adopt models from the great spiritual masters and saints. This exposure, which should already begin in the spiritual year program, would help the seminarian to have tested guides and their rich experiences to draw from. When this is lacking, as people always look for models, in their craze for relevance, the seminarian or priest easily picks up models that are at variance with his formation as we see in

the corrupt pentecostalism that is afflicting the priestly ministry of some today. This lack of having true models is not helped by the fact that many of these practices that are contrary to a sound priestly ministry as we find in the preponderance of healing and deliverance ministries, seem to be tolerated in the dioceses. The seminarian could therefore grow with a mentality that certain practices not in tandem with his seminary formation could be practiced as priests. Little wonder that one often hears that seminary formation is not practical for the pastoral ministry. But the fact is that it is a seminary formation that has not been well imbibed and the existence of a certain subculture groomed within and outside the seminary that is ultimately responsible for the rupture between seminary formation and priestly ministry.

Finally, one cannot rule out the role of formators in helping seminarians inculcate the seminary formation. It is a time-honoured recommendation of the Church that only the best of priests or those who exercise their priestly ministry with integrity should be sent to be seminary formators.²⁰ This must be followed religiously. While on-going formation of formators is important, the seminary system should have an internal system of accountability where formators can always have personal and communal review of their participation in the formation program. For example, at the end of every course, there should be a way of evaluating or getting feedbacks about how the course has been taught by the formator or lecturer. This helps to maintain a certain standard among formators.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that the discontinuity that exists between seminary formation and the priestly ministry can be traced to the tension between the monastic or enclosed seminary set up and openness to the world. Both dimensions have strengths that can be harmonised when they are not seen in opposition: the enclosed seminary set up is to prepare the seminarian for the world he is going to serve. Therefore, rather than seeing the world as something to protect the seminarian from, he should be prepared to live in the world. As advised by PVD, human formation should be taken as the basis of this formation. Here the emphasis on formation in conscience and openness would allow the seminarian grow in a maturity that would enable him to exercise his freedom responsibly. This would avoid the growth of any subculture, within and outside the seminary, that leads to hiding aspects of the self that become manifest after ordination to create a rupture between seminary formation and priestly ministry. With such a strong human formation, the candidate is disposed to having a personal relationship with God which makes him imbibe his prayer life beyond the mere

observance of routine or seminary horarium. The prayer life should be founded on an interior life that is open to the truth and founded on an intellectual formation that is orthodox and critical. This helps to shape a pastoral formation which flows from a deep interior life. The role of spiritual direction in helping the seminarian grow in this interior life cannot be overemphasized. The seminary must always be equipped with well formed spiritual directors, just as it should be for other formators who must have a systematic program of on-going formation. It is hoped that when the right environment is created for the seminarian to open up himself for formation with an exposure to the tested models of Catholic spiritual and intellectual traditions, the seminary formation will find a continuity in the priestly ministry.

Endnotes

¹ John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis* [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests], Vatican Website, March 25, 1992, accessed February 23, 2020.

² *Ibid*, 76. (sic)

³ Cf. Katarina Schuth, *Seminary Formation: Recent History— Current Circumstances— New Directions* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 11, John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What Happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 201

⁴ Poole, *Seminary in Crisis*, 14, 28–29; also as quoted in White, *The Diocesan Seminary in the United States*, 413. All cited in Katarina Schuth, *Seminary Formation: Recent History*, 23

⁵ Vatican II, *Optatam totius*, 1

⁶ *Ibid*, 8

⁷ *Ibid*, 16-18

⁸ *Ibid*, 4

⁹ John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 43; Synod Proposition, 21

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 45

¹¹ *Ibid*, 51

¹² *Ibid*, 58

¹³ Katarina Schuth notes how this tension was expressed: "From the first paragraph onward considerable disagreement is evidenced between the traditional and the progressive council fathers about the direction OT should take. In the introduction, the document first acknowledges the "supreme importance of priestly formation" and in the same sentence goes on to assure the more traditional bishops that it would strengthen the regulations that had long been in use and shown to be sound. At the same time, it promises those who see the need for a new kind of seminary that it has added new elements that "correspond with the constitutions and decrees of this council and with the changed conditions of our time" (OT Introduction). The prescriptions of the decree directly concerned the training of

diocesan clergy but were to be appropriately adapted to all clerical training, including religious and monastic priests.” Katarina Schuth, *Seminary Formation: Recent History*, 14

¹⁴ Vatican II, *Optatam totius*, 2.

¹⁵ For an example of such programs in the United States, for example, see Katarina Schuth, *Seminary Formation: Recent History*, 19-32.

¹⁶ See for example, Catholic Major Seminary of All Saints, *Handbook of the Seminary of All Saints* (Benin City: Floreat Systems, 2014); Seminary of SS. Peter & Paul, *Rules & Regulations* (Bodija, Ibadan: Claverium Press, 1987); Seminary of SS. Peter & Paul and Seminary of All Saints, *Handbook on the Social Behaviour of Seminarians* (Benin City: Floreats Systems, 2015)

¹⁷ Seminary of SS. Peter & Paul, *Rules & Regulations*, 44

¹⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, “Der Christ und die Welt von Heute.” In *Dogma und Verkündigung*, (Donauwörth: Erosch Wewel Verlag, 1973, Reprint 2005), 179-189

¹⁹ Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, Vatican Website, December 8, 2016, accessed February 28, 2020, 93

²⁰ John Paul II, *Pastores dabo vobis*, 67