

# PERSONHOOD AND FORMATION: A PHILOSOPHICAL INSIGHT FROM AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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## **Abstract**

The paper identified a direct link between the concepts of personhood and formation. The establishment of this link is warranted by the interdependency in their functionality analogous of the metaphysical theory of matter and form. Formation does not take place in vacuum; human beings are the ones formed for the office of the shepherds of souls in the Church. It follows necessarily, therefore, that the person of the seminarian avails the formation program the bedrock for its functionality. The paper acknowledged the importance of formation as it is obvious in the plenitude of documents from the Church at different levels and epochs emphasizing that the seminarian be formed after the mind of Christ. Moreover, it noted that such documents are very often grounded on various perspectives and theories on the human person from philosophy and theology. Nevertheless, the paper argued strongly from the African purview on the human person that understands the human person as a being ontologically connected and in a relational existence with other realities. Recognizing this in the formation process will go a long way in enhancing the formation program of Seminarians. To achieve its aim, the paper consequently employed the tools of critical, analytical and comparative methods of inquiry. This revealed that with a philosophical insight from an African perspective, there exists an understanding of the similarity between personhood and formation, the latter being a series of conscious activities which an individual is not born with, but something one sets out intentionally to achieve.

**Keywords:** Personhood, Formation, Matter and Form, African Perspective, Christ-like shepherds

### **Introduction**

An individual is usually considered in African culture in relationship with others in the community. The relational consideration among Africans always emphasizes the need to consider others. Mbiti's philosophy of inclusiveness rightly captures this communal orientation in the expression – 'I am because we are'. This constitutes an underlining factor in African postulation on personhood. This paper considers the African notions along different perspectives on personhood and formation noting that the African consideration on the issues of personhood and formation of an individual might prove to be more insightful and fruitful when applied to the formation of African Seminarians than what is bequeathed to us in Western philosophy. Furthermore, the paper uses the Aristotelian theory of form and matter to show the connection on how African consideration of an individual person informs the nature of the formation given to him.

### **Personhood**

In the general parlance, the term, *person* is considered as an individual. It is a term which is employed to give a comprehensive name to man's being – a name expressing its entire reality in an unequivocal way. It never refers to animals or plant but only man.<sup>1</sup> It is a term that describes man in a unique manner, and as possessing abilities which are exclusive to the human race. Such abilities include reason, morality/freedom, consciousness and personal identity among others. This is in line with the philosophical consideration of man as a being characterized by consciousness, rationality, and a moral sense, and traditionally thought of as consisting of both a body and a mind or soul.<sup>2</sup> Aristotle aptly captures this that among animals "endowed with sense" humans were distinct in that "the human race exists by means of art also and the powers of reasoning".

Batista Mondin traces the origin of the concept of personhood to Christianity where man is understood as a being with his singularity, unique and unrepeatable, with substantial equality and dignity - one created in the image of God (*imago Dei*).<sup>3</sup> This "image and likeness" of God in man is understood as be a man's soul. The Christian notion explains what is generally held in Greek philosophy that there exists in personhood is a manifestation of the combination of the spiritual and the no-spiritual. The Greek and Latin cultures existed before Christianity but do not recognize the absolute value of the individual, rather absolute value depend essentially on class, ranks, wealth and race.<sup>4</sup> Hence race

superiority was common before the Christian era when personhood attained an important position as against race because of the effect of the salvific events of Christ's paschal mystery on the salvation of the soul of an individual regardless of race, colour or tribe.

Interestingly, early Greeks philosophers have a long history of postulations on the human person. For instance, Plato presents a dualistic theory on the human person as comprising of the body and the soul. He goes to say that the soul is the principle of life and movement – the essential core of the human person, while the body is inanimate and therefore susceptible to physical actions by this principle of life.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, Plato holds that the soul is not completely unified, because there are competing forces warring within the human person which are known by personal inner experience. Consequently, he divides the soul into three factions: the *appetitive soul* which pulls man to the direction of physical gratification and material acquisition; the *rational soul* which is the voice of reason; and the *spirited soul* which is the willful and dynamic faculty within the soul.<sup>6</sup> Plato found intelligence as “the most divine thing in man, the most essentially human attribute because (it is) the only part of himself which he does not share with the animal kingdom.”<sup>7</sup>

Augustine, in line with the Platonic understanding of the human person, holds that the human person is composite of the body and soul. He also further attributes specific roles to the soul such as the self on which the highest truth can be attained. It is the soul alone that can attain communion with God – the highest truth. It is the image of God and is immaterial.<sup>8</sup> This was the beginning of using Philosophical principles for Christian postulation on *imago Dei* that which Augustine defined as “that principle within us by which we are like God, and which is rightly said in Scripture to be made ‘after God's image’”<sup>9</sup>

Rene Descartes, the father of Modern Western Philosophy, also argues along the dualistic conception of man, namely that the human person is a composite of soul (mind) and body. The body for him is made up of physical substances that interact with the physical world, while the soul is a spiritual substance; it is the “I” (ego), the thinking self, the seat of pure thought that generates ideas.<sup>10</sup> This power of the soul enables man to be conscious of himself without at the same time being conscious of the world. This view will be rejected later on by the existentialist philosophers of the 20th century, particularly Martin Heidegger who conceives man as a-being-in-the-world.<sup>11</sup>

Battista Mondin broadened the understanding on the human person beyond issues of man's composition, noting that the human person can be understood on the ontological, dialogical and psychological levels. The ontological understanding entails the person as an individual of the human species; a unique individual substance with a rational nature.

This involves the “I” in my being that can neither be represented by another nor inhibited in another – the person as he remains in himself. On the psychological level, the person is the fact of consciousness, which is being aware of reality pertaining the existence of the “I”. On the dialogical level, the person is understood as a relational being that interacts with the world and other beings.<sup>12</sup>

Mounier supports Mondin’s claim on the dialogical person by introducing the concepts; vocation, action and communication. For Mounier, the person has a meaning that cannot be substituted, his place in the universe of persons cannot be occupied – this is his vocation. Action explains that the life of a person is a research until death, an anticipated unity that cannot be actualized – a person is an incessant action. He further points out that communication explains that the person is a being that encounters others, a being who interests himself with another in such a manner that he respects his “I”.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, Martin Buber in contributing to the discussion on man proposes that the meaning of the person lies in his relational ability with things other than himself. In other words, man derives meaning through the rapport man has with things. This is because man lives on the shoulder of things; he alters them, uses them, and governs them<sup>14</sup>. In a nutshell, the person is the “I” – the individual that is composed of body and soul and constantly interacts with other beings and with world.

## **Formation**

Formation is a common practice in human communities. It consists of series of activities geared toward making an individual or communities imbibe certain knowledge, tradition, morals and value system. In the earliest times, formation was mostly meant for those to be charged with leadership responsibilities to prepare them for governance. In the ancient Egyptian civilization, for instance, princes were given special and exclusive education by the priests serving at Pharaoh’s palace. Amedeo Cencini posits that formation has three dynamisms which are the educative, formative and the accompaniment. The educative dynamism seeks to draw out the level of awareness of what the person is, so that the person gets the maximum fulfillment of his potentialities; this leads to self-awareness and self-fulfillment. The individual is assisted to develop his natural potentials and encouraged to perfect them for the enhancement of his personality. The formative action implies that the subject is trained to acquire a new identity – formation becomes a discovery of the new and truer self, molded with the truth of the ideal.<sup>15</sup> This is the result of a process marked with shelling of certain aspects of the individual and acquiring positive qualities of the task in view.

A consideration of how the Church views formation will enhance this discuss; the Second Vatican Council emphasizes the importance of formation in its remark that the renewal of the Church depends in great deal upon the priestly ministry animated by the spirit of Christ; hence priestly formation is of critical importance to the Church.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, formation is not a private affair or instantaneous; it does not take place at a particular moment, like a season. Rather, it touches upon the past, present and future of the individual as a pedagogical, theological, initial and permanent process that prepares one to consecrate oneself to God. Formation is offered to whoever has discovered a plan from on high for the self. This is because it is a mystery and divine action which shapes the image of Christ in the heart of those called by God.<sup>17</sup> This entails being accompanied in a journey of transformation. Accompanying means a journey of faith; formation then entails helping the subject to journey towards God and to experience God<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, Pope John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* highlighted four areas of formation; human formation, intellectual formation, spiritual formation and pastoral formation. Human formation helps the individual to attain affective maturity, form his moral conscience, attain series of good human qualities, balanced personality, and good use of freedom. This is the bedrock for other aspects of formation. According to the document, “The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation.”<sup>19</sup> A balanced human formation cannot be substituted for or with anything.

Spiritual formation helps the seminarian to share in the holiness of Christ by entering into an intimate relationship with Christ. Along with other faithful, the candidate to the priesthood strive towards deeper communion with God. According to the Holy Father, the educational process of a spiritual life, seen as a relationship and communion with God, derives and develops from this fundamental and irrepressible religious need.<sup>20</sup>

Spiritual formation, as we have just seen, is applicable to all the faithful. Nevertheless, it should be structured according to the meanings and connotations which derive from the identity of the priest and his ministry.<sup>21</sup>

An integral part of the spiritual formation is prayerful contemplation of the Word of God (*Lectio Divina*) through which the seminary is familiar with the God whom he humbly listens to, and he response to him in prayer. This will be his guide as he seeks Christ in the people.

Next is the intellectual formation which seeks to help the individual acquire academic knowledge; it requires proper training in Philosophy and Theology. According to the Pope, Intellectual formation is deeply connected with, and indeed can be seen as a necessary expression of, both human and spiritual formation: It is a fundamental demand of the human intelligence by which one "participates in the light of God's mind" and seeks to acquire a wisdom which in turn opens to and is directed toward knowing and adhering to God.<sup>22</sup>

These three areas of formation are geared towards pastoral formation which seeks to build the candidate into a priest – shepherd of souls, after the example of Christ, the good shepherd.<sup>23</sup> The whole formation imparted to candidates for the priesthood aims at preparing them to enter into communion with the charity of Christ the good shepherd. Hence their formation in its different aspects must have a fundamentally pastoral character.<sup>24</sup>

This is the most practical aspect of formation. It is the most vivid expression of how well other aspects are properly integrated in the individual. It will be the manifestation of an inner disposition to make Christ in a way that is peculiar to the people he pastors.

### **Hylomorphism**

This section is important because it provides the theoretical framework for this discuss. Aristotle developed the concept of Hylomorphism as he completed issues connected to the process of “changing” and “becoming”. While rejecting the atomist conception that everything is made up of tiny fundamental building blocks of matter, and that change is a rearrangement of these fundamental units, Aristotle holds that all things in nature are composed of form and matter – they are intrinsic principles that make a body come to be as what it is understood to be.<sup>25</sup> Put succinctly, hylomorphism is the theory that all physical things are composed of two principles of being: the prime matter which is an undefined primitive, and a substantial form, which is a definite mode of existence.<sup>26</sup>

For Aristotle, all material things are characterized by two elements of mutability and the different individuals of a species. Form also called formal cause is the essence which accounts for the actual existence of a thing. It is that which determines matter – it defines matter to a particular individual substance. It is also conceived as the design or arrangement of a body in nature. Matter – material cause, indicates the material constituents of a body. It is substance by which a body is made. Matter is indeterminate in itself but determined by form. It is a principle that makes form physical.<sup>27</sup> These two principles are co-dependent and

intrinsically necessary to the existence of a natural body. They share a key relationship simply expressed in the position that form actualizes matter.<sup>28</sup>

As regards the human person, the soul or the mind; which is the principle of life, is regarded as the form, that is, the essence of the human person. The body is understood as the material cause of the human person. This is because the body is the substance or material aspect of the human person and the soul is the principle of individuation that defines what it means to be human; it is that which primarily makes the human different from other natural bodies.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Formation Process Vis-À-Vis Aristotle’s Hylomorphism**

It is with this understanding of the complexity of the human person that formation is discussed here. Formation is aimed at the salvation of souls, but this salvation is achieved through the discipline of the body (1Cor. 9: 27). Hence the body serves as a necessary and indispensable channel to the salvation of the soul. As regards the person to be formed, this principle of form and matter helps the understanding that the body is intrinsically connected with the soul. So, the final point of formation is the mind of the individual – it is formation of the mind. The mind holds the basic principles that inform the voluntary operations – human actions, of the rational man. This emphasizes the position that the body is not the end point of formation but the soul that bears the rational capacity of the human person. All the elements of formation are internalized in the nonphysical aspects of an individual.

### **The Priest – Shepherd of Souls**

The goal of priestly formation can be expressed in the phrase “until Christ is formed in you”. The Church expresses this as being formed into another Christ – *Alter Christus* and even in the exercise of the sacraments, the Priest is not only another Christ but *Ipse Christus*- Christ himself. The various activities in the years of formation prepare the candidate for the Catholic priesthood, a position that places him at the service of God’s people to humbly and carefully guide them to attain the salvation of their soul. This explains why formation necessarily concentrates on providing the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral development required to enable the ordained priest to respond faithfully and effectively to both God’s call and the needs of the Church represented in the pastoral demands of his flock.

Priestly formation must provide the spiritual and personal growth guidance that elicits from the candidate for Priesthood, a prayerful and mature commitment to the way of Christ. This is so that he may speak from the context of the church tradition; fully and authentically

articulate the gospel of Christ; and appreciate God's word and the efficacy of the sacramental life of the Church.<sup>30</sup>

The emeritus Pope Benedict XVI, however sounds a note of warning on the tendencies of being drawn away from focusing on these when, in his homily at a priestly ordination on the 3rd of May 2009 in Rome, commented that the priest is in the world, but runs the risk of also being "of the world". This emphasizes also that formation must instill in the priest the discipline of detachment from the material things of the world.

An essential element of the priestly formation is clearly pointed by Pope Benedict XVI in his remark that Catholic priests appear to spend most of their days serving Catholics, but the role and mission of the priest includes the service of all of humanity. According to him, the priest works to translate the elements of the faith into a language that is accessible to all in the society; he dialogues with and expresses the truth of God, that the human consciousness may be nourished with the fullness of life only attainable through Christ. By preaching Christ, the priest is called to be a peaceful, uniting and joyful presence among Christians and all people of goodwill. And in living the mission of Christ, he further participates and serves in Christ's threefold office as Priest, Prophet and King, already shared through baptism.<sup>31</sup>

There are further insights from the present Pope who opines that priests must be deeply involved in the daily experience of the flock. For Pope Francis, the priest being a shepherd must 'smell like the sheep'. This means that he is to be out amongst the flock entrusted to him – he should be personally close to them. He is not to just be available for the office of celebrating the sacraments alone as central and primary to the priesthood that might be, but be engaged in the lives of parishioners and others in the community entrusted to him.<sup>32</sup> The Pope further emphasizes that a priest is not ordained for his sake but for the sake of God's people. Following the example of Christ the true Shepherd, the priest must be a shepherd ready to lay his life for the flock through selfless service; he must not only feed the flocks with spiritual food but be sensitive enough to their physical needs. By this the gospel message of love will make more sense; in practice and not just spoken words.<sup>33</sup>

A priest is a good shepherd when his motivation is the salvation of the people. Hence, he makes the doctrines of the church available and teaches the true faith. Pope Saint John Paul II had emphasized this saying that the supreme act of a priest is the direction of souls: he must be available to his flock; impart the faith; and be humble to the prompting of the Holy Spirit that he may transmit fruits of love and peace.<sup>34</sup> Finally, Federico Suarez puts this in another way when he says that the success of

the priestly ministry is not judged based on its efficiency but on the impact it has on the lives of people.<sup>35</sup>

### **The African Perspective on Personhood and Formation Personhood**

The African understanding of the person has two dimensions; the normative-social and descriptive-metaphysical. The descriptive-metaphysical dimension explains that the human person is made up of a material aspect (body) and an immaterial aspect (soul) which are inseparable while on earth.<sup>36</sup> This is exemplified in the Igbo conception where man is made of *ahu* (body) and *Mmuo* (spirit).<sup>37</sup> From the Yoruba perspective, man is a composition of at least three elements namely the soul, the spirit and the body. The body is material while the other two elements are non-material. Furthermore, in their metaphysical postulation, man is a composition of body (*ara*), soul (*emi*) and inner-head (*ori*), the last being the metaphysical symbol of human destiny which is externally represented by the physical head.<sup>38</sup> The normative-social dimension explains the person in relation to the community – it is the communitarian perspective. Here, the person draws his identity and essence from the already existing values of the society; this has a social and moral derivation.<sup>39</sup> This goes with both social and moral commitments as an individual within a community. Hence, Ifeanyi Menkiti opines that a person can only be explained with reference to the envioning community.

As far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the community takes precedence over the individual world and history. It is in an ongoing human community that the individual comes to see himself as a man; it is in first knowing his community as a fact of the psycho-physical world that the individual comes to know himself as a durable, more or less permanent fact of this world. The sense of identity of an individual only makes sense with reference to the community.<sup>40</sup>

From the above it is clear that human relationship is a primary element in the determination of the personhood of an individual. This goes a long way to emphasize and show that the human person in African thought system is one that is inherently and intrinsically connected to other individuals in the society – founded on community. This is also built on the belief that the physical is inherently connected to the spiritual in the African worldview. The activities of traditional or native doctors will make this vivid. Even when he lives in isolation and far from the main community settlement, the native doctor is kept abreast with the happenings in the community and constantly intervenes as situations warrant. He is dutiful and maintains a sense of the sacred in an appreciable distance, and yet very close to the people as an

intermediary and a check to the community. Above all, he does not neglect the people in their need or fail to provide prompt directives.

### **Formation**

Formation in Africa is centered on how personhood is achieved. This is because personhood is not something that is given but shown by the society and accepted by the individual. An African has to go through processes of incorporation or initiation. Through initiation an individual is transformed from what he was into who he ought to be. According to Ifeanyi Menkiti, to attain personhood, the individual must undergo a long process and ritual transformation until he or she attains the full complement of excellence seen as truly definitive of man.

During this long process of attainment, the community plays a vital role as catalyst and as a prescriber of norms. As far as Africans are concerned, personhood is something the individual could fail to attain.<sup>41</sup> This implies that the individual must take the ritual of incorporation serious in order to learn the social rules by which the community lives and then attain the necessary excellence in character. Formation is not just about growth in wisdom as one ages, it is in gathering of the traits considered to be definitive of full personhood which necessarily affect the very core of one's being. In other words, for Africans, formation is internalization of traditional or societal virtues to the degree ascertainable that one is qualified for the appropriate rite in the process of initiation. Hence, Dominic Umoh writes that in Africa, initiatory rites constitute a crucial mechanism which guarantees the authentic growth and development of individuals in their communal settings.<sup>42</sup>

Moreover, Augustine Nwoye puts it that formation of the person in Africa is influenced by a number of cultural groups. According to him, socialization occurs through dance, songs, story-telling and heroic recitation. These are avenues through which Africans are taught individually to reflect high level of emotional maturity as projected by the community. The formation program in an African setting include teaching of virtues like, verbal sobriety, diligence, perseverance, patience, moderation among others. These virtues help young Africans to be active and responsible members of the society. The agents of this formation include older adults, school leaders, and social models. Hence, there is a saying among the Yoruba that *aju meji li n b'imo, igba ojo lo n wo d'agba* (It takes two pairs of eyes to bear a child i.e Father and Mother, but two hundred eyes are required to train him). This expresses the traditional belief and practice that a child is not just the child of the parents, but he is the child of the community. Therefore, the upbringing and training is the responsibility of all.

In line with this, Dama Mosweunyane holds that formation in Africa is done within the platform of communalism; children are formed within the community, their wellbeing seen in the welfare of the group and society. Children are trained to participate in the culture and work for the sake of common good. Formation is characterized by transmission of skills and attitudes from generation to generation by words of mouth and the mode of apprenticeship. The Teachers are individuals with lifelong learning and experience. Hence, the children learn from their Teachers by listening to them and imitating their actions in the society.<sup>43</sup> Formation in African Traditional Society is done within the community and for the good of the community. The individuals learn the values that are necessary for active participation, sustenance and growth of the Society. Formation is seen as initiation into the society to attain personhood. It is pertinent to note that personhood is possible through dialogue because it through dialogue that the moral vision of culture is transmitted<sup>44</sup> in the community.

### **An Insights from African insight into the Formation of the Catholic Priest**

Through the varied activities that complimented the seed of faith sown by the early missionaries characterized by unceasing evangelization, Catholicism has grown and has reached many lands of the earth with a variety of cultures. Africa is one of these lands that have received the Catholic faith despite having a culture that is uniquely different from the Jewish and Roman culture in which it grew. Many Africans have imbibed the culture of the Catholic faith in their African societies.

For the Catholic priest to get to the heart of the African society, it is necessary to have a proper understanding of the peculiarity of his flock—its philosophy, methods of socialization and the ideology that feeds its actions. This community orientation would help the priest to better understand his role in the society as one sent to work for the growth of the immediate society he finds himself and the community of the Church at large, after all, every high priest is chosen from among men to represent men in their relationship with God. (Hebrews 5:1)

Being aware that he is intrinsically a being connected with others will help him to acknowledge that he is equal with others in the sight of God and still a man like others. This help the priest to consider himself as a servant and not a king or master over his flock. This will enhance his interaction with the people even outside the celebration of the sacraments. The emphasis here is that the priest needs to be one among the people – like Christ, participating in their life, constantly communicating with them in preaching the gospel and leading all to God.

Furthermore, African traditional practice of formation is largely be imitation - "watch and do-as-I-do". The entails that apprentice focus on the master to understand and be able to do what he has seen the master do. This type of formation is not based on theories. In the same way, the African paradigm suggest that priestly formation should can go beyond theories but lived principles applied in practically lead the people to God.

Another way to consider formation is I regards to how Africans see reality as a whole and ultimately sacred; there is an ontological connection between the visible and the invisible. This understanding when put into formation would help the seminarian develop a deeper understanding of the sacred. This understanding would also inform a deeper understanding of communal existence through which he learns to share in the community life respecting the customs, traditions, ethics and social boundaries of the people.

### Conclusion

The various perspectives of examined in the paper show a connection between personhood and formation. In this paper, personhood refers to what it means to be a human person, while formation can rightly be referred as a conscious activity to fortify personhood, which can simply be expressed as the nature and nurturing of an individual. From the African perspective, it is emphasized that priestly formation, like initiation rites, always focus on grooming priests to be human, insightful, mature, instructed, developed and community oriented persons. This is line with the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria's advocacy that "seminary formation should enable priests to lead a truly priestly life and at the same to be men of their people. It is in the bid to achieve this that the paper posited that formation should be taken to the hearts and custom of our people to enable the priest/seminarian to adhere to beliefs and practices that, in spirit of the Gospel, help him to maintain a communal-oriented individuality as entrenched in traditional African heritage.

### Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup>Battista Mondin, *History of Medieval Philosophy*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1991, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid,p. 244.

- <sup>5</sup> Samuel Stumpf & James Frieser, *Philosophy: History and Problem*, New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2003, p. 59.
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- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.
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- <sup>20</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, No. 45.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>22</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, No. 51.
- <sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul II, *I will give you Shepherds: Apostolic Exhortation: Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2004, pp. 67-88.
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