

The Evolution of Seminary Formation from the Apostolic Era to the Council of Trent: A Critical Appraisal

Habila T. Daboh

Abstract

Seminary formation as we have it today in the Catholic Church has its roots in Jesus and his college of Apostles. This article using the descriptive and analytical methods discusses the historiography of seminary formation from the first century to Trent. It argues that in the early centuries of Christianity, the Church had difficulties expanding because of clashes between the throne and the altar, as a result, seminary formation was not given sufficient attention, although the challenges priests had with their members were considerably minimal. But as the Church's history unfolded, proper Seminary formation began to be held in esteem. This was heightened by some priests who became boisterous and exotic with dispositions contrary to the gospel they professed. And so, there arose the need for productive Seminary formation of future priests who will reflect the essence of the gospel. The process began with the advent of Cathedral schools and Universities which laid the grounds on which proper formation of priests in academic and spiritual matters was possible, albeit with its difficulties. Nevertheless, the Council of Trent (1545-1563) was a watershed in the history of constructive seminary formation. It was at its 23rd session that the issue of seminary formation was extensively discussed, and promulgation was made on the urgency of erecting institutions to keep together young men preparing for the priesthood. The mode of admission and the sequence of training it recommended are still being periodically updated to meet the challenges of the time; culminating in the demands of the new *Ratio Fundamentalis*. These efforts indicate how seriously the Church has taken formation of future priests to effectively fit those who should be raised to Holy Orders.

Keywords: Seminary, Formation, Priesthood, Schools.

Introduction

To understand seminary formation by its intent, one cannot but trace it back to when Jesus, among his disciples, chose some to be his Apostles. Jesus could be said to be the first Vocations director and Formator; the Apostles as the seminarians. St. Mark narrates thus:

One of those days Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles: Simon (whom he named Peter), his brother Andrew, James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James son of Alphaeus, Simon who was called the Zealot, Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor. Luke 6: 12-16

These words depict a narrative of the invitation that led to the founding of what may be called the Church's first "seminary". The Apostles received three years of informal formation from Jesus before he was taken up to heaven. These three years could be likened to their seminary formation period. Then, at the Last Supper, when their 'Seminary formation' had supposedly been completed, Jesus conferred the priesthood on them. But after His resurrection, He commissioned these 'priests' of His to go out into the whole world and preach the Good News. This act of sending out is seen to be the first pastoral assignment to the 'priests'. After Pentecost, and filled with the Holy Spirit, the Apostles went to different towns and villages to preach using the knowledge they had gained during their formation period with Jesus. Through their encounters with the people, they shared the word of God and established Christian communities and eventually choose and ordained "bishops and priests" for the continuation of the word of their Lord and Master.

The encounter between Jesus and His Apostles inspired the need for a seminary as a place of formation of future priests for the Church. This is not surprising because the word seminary is derived from the Latin word *seminarium*, which was commonly used to describe a place where young seedlings were prepared for eventual transplantation. However, when we talk of seminary in an ecclesiastical set up, it designates a special school dedicated for the spiritual, pastoral, human and intellectual formation of seminarians, who may eventually become priests. It is a process of continuous personal growth and development of young men who are poised to serve God and humanity. The program of formation is holistic and principally covers the areas of human, pastoral, intellectual, moral and spiritual growth.

This article examines how seminary formation started from the first century to the fifth century; a period the seed of formation was planted. It would be important to keep in mind that at this early time, in fact, not until Trent, the word 'seminary' was not in use. This work will also discuss how from the sixth to the eleventh century, a group of young men were schooled in cathedrals and universities for ordination to the priesthood. Then it will discuss seminary formation from the twelfth to the thirteenth century, when formation was

suffering inattention. This paper will further discuss seminary formation from the fourteenth century to the council of Trent, the value of the priesthood and will briefly give an appraisal of the whole system.

Seminary formation from the first to the fifth century.

In the first four centuries, there were no formal record and clear-cut programme for the training of priests. Historians, researchers and archaeologists cannot outrightly hint on any special institution that was set aside for the training of seminarians. But Newman (1909) has recorded a few facts and inferences which suggest that St. John Chrysostom, besides having some catechumen, had a number of students whom he familiarly instructed.

From the work of John Chrysostom, we can retrospectively go back to the Acts of the Apostles which furnishes the names of certain other men who were attached to the apostolic band, the nature of whose work is seen, for example in Acts 16:4. That strictures were exercised for the selection of candidates for ministry is known from Paul's directive to Timothy: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands" (1Tim. 5:22), and he then gave Timothy several other points to guide him in selecting candidates when he said: "The sins of some men are conspicuous, pointing to judgment, but the sins of others appear later" (1 Tim 5:24). In another place, St. Paul said to Timothy, "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Tim 2:24).

Arising from the first century formation to the priesthood, there occurred in the close of the second century, a council of presbyters and a group of deacons to assist a bishop, who was the successor to the Apostles in Christian communities. The presbyters were counsellors to the bishop and assisted him in the governance of Christian communities. Deacons took care of the communities' goods and provided for the needs of the poor, orphans and widows. Later, when the gospel spread especially into rural areas, the presbyters became the bishop's representatives to function in liturgical services (Enrico, 1991). As the presbyters became bishops, it apparently became the responsibility of every bishop to organise chosen young men of proven repute from his diocese to live with him or close to him and learn the priestly ministry, and eventually, become priests as collaborators and possible successors. Villipalam and Vieban argue that in this era, there was no structured and formal style of formation to the priesthood. Villipalam (1899) corroborates thus, "There was no common method or criterion for discerning vocations and for preparing the candidates adequately for their future life and ministry" (p. 12). A view supported by Vieban (1912) when he asserts; "Before the time of St. Augustine (354-430) no trace can be found of any special institutions for the education of the clergy." (p. 695). Formation was left to the whims and caprices of Bishops. It

could be supposed to be structured according to the spiritual and pastoral needs of their domains.

In the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo's episcopal residence was the school for superiors of a great many monastic houses, as well as for many diocesan bishops. Van der (1961), one of his biographers, wrote about the moral upliftment that followed the great bishop's carefully supervised education of the clergy:

The saint left behind him a seedbed of sanctity and what was really the first seminary for priests. It was an imperfect thing, but its essential features were to be repeated through the ages. Augustine could not know what Genserich and Huineric had in store for the African clergy, but though their churches were destroyed their spirit survived *and* has continued to be effective to this day (p. 234).

No other Episcopal residences were used as centres for seminary formation, but Religious convents and monasteries were. Possidius speaks of an existing convent where he housed his clergy. While there, they observed a strict prayer life and study. He insisted, as a condition necessary for ordination, on certain form of maturity, composure, discipline and study (O' Donohue, 1957). This form of formation was not widespread and not all bishops were solicitous for the welfare of their clergy as it is shown in the papal interventions by Gelasius, Leo I, Gregory I, etc. (Tracy, 1965) admonishing bishops to take the formation of the clergy seriously. The practice of assigning a responsible person to undertake the formation of clergy under the direction of the bishop began around this time. Even in the fifth century, formation of seminarians to the Catholic priesthood was still yet to receive a notable boost. The sixth century took a slightly different direction as we can now see.

Seminary formation from the sixth to the eleventh century.

When education started to decline in the Roman Empire, the Church felt the need to educate the children of their members. Bishops also began to establish schools associated with their cathedrals to provide the Church with an educated clergy. One of the earliest evidences of a school established in this manner was in Visigothic Spain at the Second Council of Toledo in 527 (Richie, 1978). There were other learning centres that were under the care of scholarly bishops, in parts of Spain and in about twenty towns in Gaul (France) during the sixth and seventh centuries.

As already noted, the formation to the priesthood was not as organised because of some difficulties arising from the Church and the society of the day. The period between the sixth and the eleventh centuries saw priestly formation,

apart from the cathedral schools, getting more attention from the ecclesial leadership by giving priestly formation instructions to bishops in the Church. During this time, formation to the priesthood began to take shape in the form of giving serious attention through developing and improving on the episcopal (cathedral) and monastic schools that started in the previous century, but a comprehensive history of seminaries was not available for this early period (Confoy, 2005). Formation at this point still relied substantially on the instructions that came from the local bishops.

Progressing slowly but steadily on the seminary formation using the developed cathedral schools, another step was taken at the Second Council of Toledo (527). It was at this Council that the idea of entrusting the formation of clergy to a *praepositus* (The chief) started. The chief here meant the head of the Church, the local bishop. The Fourth Council of Toledo in (633), insisted on the necessity of having the candidates for Holy Orders to live together so that they might be trained together. Some monasteries were also engaged in the formation of clerics, like the monastery of Lerins, and a number of bishops copied this model in their own dioceses. Lapple (1982) captures the influence and achievements of the Benedictine Monasticism with regards to the formation of the clergy: The achievements of the Benedictine monks can be summarized by three symbols: the Cross (they were messengers of the Christian faith), the book (pioneers and preservers of Western culture) and plow (promoters of civilization and new settlements).

The existence of cathedral and monastic schools for seminary formation continued through the last quarter of the ninth century. During this time Islam became stronger in the West and in the East. And this was when the Church had the iconoclast controversy that brought strong disagreement between the Eastern and Western Churches. Also, in this epoch, the Papacy was weak and priests became indolent and care free. This situation muffled the Western Church; and political volatility was prevalent. Lapple (1982) captures it succinctly when he said: "Clergy were controlled by secular rulers and lapsed into illiteracy and unfaithfulness to their vow of celibacy. Even most of the monasteries had lost their fervour and become worldly or corrupt" (p. 40). This is the style of life that some priests maintained, and some thought it was an acceptable way of living the priesthood, and it eventually continued to the eve of the Reformation.

With the worldliness that engulfed some of the priests and given the pastoral concerns of the time, there continued the emphasis to have more formal schools attached to cathedral Churches that would boost the training of young men for the Catholic priesthood. Pope Eugene II in 826 during a Council held in Rome mandated that every cathedral Church must have an adjunct school where

young clergy and those preparing for the priesthood could be formed in ecclesiastical disciplines and secular literature (Pope Eugene II, 826). This instruction from the Pope gave huge opportunities to clergy who were interested in studies not only in ecclesiastical disciplines, but also in secular courses for the benefit of the Church. The study of secular courses by priests brought about a huge success in the fields of science and art as we shall soon see. The emergence of universities in Europe was an important period in the history of the formation of the clergy (Tracy, 1965). Padinjarekuttu (2020) states: universities became the centres of learning but few clergy were able to pursue their studies there. The universities were concerned with secular courses, and as a result, did not offer the candidates any spiritual formation nor prepared them for ministry (p. 83). Consequently, a large segment of the late medieval and pre-Reformation clergy received inadequate training and were very often ordained for an office they were not sufficiently equipped to exercise (Gale, 2003).

The inadequate training and lack lustre attitude of some priests of the pre-Reformation period affected the Church negatively and it continued for some time as Lapple (1992) laments:

The clergy (priests) and deacons of the Catholic Church suffered from lack of education and widespread corruption. Many were poor and worldly, and lived with women in violation of the Church's law of celibacy. Even the Mendicant orders had largely lost their fervour and were the brunt of the satire of the humanists for rivalling thieves and legitimate beggars in their constant quest for money (p. 69).

In a similar report, D'Cruz (2002) gives analogous information of the wretched state of affairs of the formation of the clergy thus:

Before the council of Trent, clergy morale and morality were at low ebb. They were morally deficient, intellectually unqualified and professionally incompetent. The Church was being torn apart of schism and separation. Priests were ordained with little or no theology and spiritual training. Candidates to the priesthood were gathered and taught in a priest's house by an individual. There was no common method for discerning vocations and preparing candidates for their role as priests (p. 272).

This was the situation the church found herself with regards to the unstable seminary formation. But the Church continued to forge ahead using the priests who were ready to serve the people and the Church. This form of disturbing lifestyle of some priests continued into the twelfth century.

Seminary formation from the twelfth to the thirteenth century.

From 1123 to 1215, four of the five Lateran ecumenical councils met at the Lateran Cathedral in Rome, among other important and pressing topics examined, they also dealt with aspects of clerical life. At this point, the issue of clerical style of life was becoming a disturbing spectacle to the Church. At the third Lateran Council in 1179, it was mandated that a priest be appointed to the cathedral and be made responsible and remunerated for the formation of local clerics. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 further required that this priest must be a theologian who would teach Scriptures and Pastoral theology (Papesh, 2004). For a short while, this step eased the disturbing inadequacy of clerical performance but those who qualified for this assignment were few.

The Church was not satisfied with having just a theologian to teach Scriptures and Pastoral theology to seminarians. In the very early part of the 12th century, there arose the need to improve the schools for the training of priests and those preparing for the priesthood. Consequent to this, a general command was passed in 1179 during the third Lateran Council that every cathedral in the universal Church was to establish a benefice for the support of a schoolmaster who would be charged with teaching the clergy attached to the Church (Orme, 2006).

Following the command from the third Lateran Council on the establishment of a benefice for the support of a schoolmaster, the Papal bull *Super specula* of Pope Honorius III in 1183, ordered that some talented young men be sent to a recognized theological school to study theology in order to function well in ecclesiastical matters. At this point, the Church was alarmed that the attention given to the formation of clergy and seminarians was still inadequate. The attitude of some priests towards the administration of the sacraments and their comportment towards their responsibilities were derisory.

Given the already established system of education found in universities at the time, the Church keyed in to train its ministers in them, but this formation lacked the competence that met the need of the Church. It was in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, that the idea of the present formation structures was hatched in university programs in towns of Paris, Bologna and Rome. The courses in these great centres of learning were relevant to both religious and diocesan candidates for the priesthood, but most likely few parish priests were trained in these schools, especially those who were most qualified for the countryside. But the schools were rather established for the "elite ministers for high society," (Confy, 2005). In response to the existing "sorry moral condition of the clergy," residential life with a rigid regimen was established, including compulsory devotions and "demanding ascetism" (White, 1989).

In relation to the intention of improving the seminary formation, the bull *Cum ex eo* of Pope Boniface VIII in 1298 was directed on the education of priests. The thrust of this bull was to educate the parochial clergy in universities. Prior to the promulgation of this bull was the ecclesial practice of sending priests who were principally saddled with *cura animarum* (care of souls) to step out for some further learning in their Church ministry. This became very evident in the thirteenth century but it varied from bishop to bishop (Moorman, 1946).

The practice of sending priests to further their education in universities is still beneficial and has proven to be an achievement for our contemporary Church. The slight difference in this bull is that, it was not meant to establish cathedral schools, but was meant to send out clergy for a while for higher studies. This also gave the clergy the opportunity to interact with other students and to broaden their spectrum of learning. Up till the eve of the Reformation, seminary formation was still in need of concrete solutions. We now see the steps taken in the fourteenth century to tackle the lapses in seminary formation.

Seminary formation from the fourteenth century to the council of Trent.

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the universal Church, on the formation of seminarians and clergy, relied on having a benefice close to the cathedral Church. This period saw priests attending secular universities, after acquiring some knowledge of scripture and pastoral theology, to upgrade themselves in other courses and to maintain a fair playing level ground with the people they ministered to. It also accorded the priests the opportunity to understand the dynamics of the society. Other students aside the priests also had close experiences of the priests. They got to know and accept them as humans called to serve the society on a different level.

This was the period leading to the fire up of the Protestant Reformation in 1517. On the eve of the Reformation, the Church was rich and some priests were living exotic life styles which created some sort of split between them and the people they were meant to humbly serve. There was abuse of the sacraments which made many people to reject some teachings of the Church. Some priests did not respond to the spiritual needs of many a people. In some places, the priests could not speak the local language of the people. This did not jettison the principal causes of the Reformation which were mainly doctrinal and corruption.

The lack of intellectual and moral respectability of the clergy of the day affected their ministerial duties and responsibilities. Of course, it was a problem to Church leadership. And Confoy (2005) captures the situation thus: "during the years preceding the Protestant Reformation, clerical formation in general lacked a solid and well balanced intellectual and moral foundation and a

practical preparation for ministry” (p. 79). It was a difficult phase in the life of the Church as the leaders and the led disagreed on spiritual and temporal matters.

Disagreement between spiritual leaders and the led continued. So, between 1545 and 1563, the Council of Trent had to attend to very pressing issues for the renewal and establishment of a more concrete seminary formation. In an early session of the Council (1546), a decision was made that colleges should be established solely for priestly training in every diocese (c.16, final version c. 18). These schools sought to isolate and protect priestly candidates from the dangers of the world, to educate and form priests who would serve the Church and keep their parishioners away from the aberrations of the era. The intention of the entire Tridentine Decree on Seminaries was to protect 'endangered youth' by removing them from the world and fortify them in their priestly vocation (O' Malley, 2013). The purpose for the establishment of these schools was very clear and sacrosanct. It received applause not only from pastors of the Church but also from the people who felt their spiritual guides were being influenced by secular ideas at the detriment of the Church. Further concrete deliberation on seminary formation continued in July of 1563 at the Council of Trent, in its twenty third session, it issued its Decree on Seminaries. Confoy (2005) pointed out that this decree “represented a major change in seminary training in terms of its reform of the diverse and inconsistent types of formation for ordination that had prevailed globally over the centuries” (pp. 79-80), because prior to this 'inspired' decree, bishops had the responsibilities of training their priests according to their local needs. As a corollary, there existed priests that were trained differently and could scarcely function in the same way when they went outside their dioceses.

The decree for the formation of priests that came from the Council of Trent indicated that “the theological and ascetical training for diocesan priests was based on the model of the risen Christ as priest and victim. The emphasis on priestly vocation that prevailed in this model was less than that of service to the people than of an inner call to life in Christ. The monastic approach to priestly vocation and formation influenced much of the writing on the spirituality of the diocesan priest even until Vatican II” (Confoy, 80). It was at the Council of Trent (1545-1563 Session. 23, c.18), for the first time the term “seminary” was officially used to describe colleges set aside for the training of seminarians as institutions for clerical training. This development, among others, was in response to the rising debilitating effects of the Protestant Reformation that started in 1517 and lasted till 1648. The Council obliged every diocese to erect a seminary for the formation of future priests that could serve the local Church and respond appropriately to the spiritual needs of the people.

In order to go in line with the instructions from Trent, the candidates to the priesthood were expected to possess certain love of spiritual matters and a burning desire to dedicate themselves completely to the service of God in the Church. The young men were to study letters, humanities, chanting, liturgy, Sacred Scripture, and dogmatic, moral, and pastoral theology. Their spiritual formation required daily assistance at the Eucharistic Sacrifice even though, according to the practice of the time, they were permitted to converse with each other only on the days indicated by their Spiritual Directors. Their moral development was also to be supervised to the extent that the disorderly and incorrigible were to be punished and, if necessary, expelled. Certain priests were to be chosen by the local bishop himself as instructors and spiritual guides for the young candidates. The courses also were to be determined by the decision of the bishop, who was the primary formator and judge, as to what would be necessary for the particular circumstances of his diocese.

With the new development and steps taken to implement instructions from Trent, it suffices to know that it is commonly admitted that the most important source of the Tridentine seminary legislation was canon 11 of the synodal legislation promulgated for England in 1556 by Cardinal Pole. This is quite evident from the first draft of Trent's decree, which closely parallels the corresponding section in Pole's *Reformatio Angliae*. As early as 1562, the entire text of the English cardinal's legatine synod was available at Trent, and so, when the members of the commission studying abuses in the administration of the Sacrament of Orders took up the problem of seeking a means whereby the intellectual and moral training of the clergy might be assured, their attention focused easily upon the cardinal's solution: the erection of seminaries at every cathedral Church. The fathers of the Council leaned upon Pole's solution to the problem, and the first draft of their own legislation *de seminariis erigendis* presents a striking similarity to it; although the final document differed from the 11th canon of Pole's synodal legislation.

Sequel to the law on the establishment of seminaries from Trent, plans were put in place to build new seminaries for training of seminarians for the priesthood. The Church in Rome took the lead. Pope Pius IV in 1565 established a seminary for the Diocese of Rome. The Archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, started a Major Seminary under the patronage of St. John the Baptist with facilities for 150 students. In various parts of his Archdiocese, he also founded three preparatory seminaries: one for older students, another for adolescents and a third for younger boys ("Seminary Education" in <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/2020>).

In France, the cardinal of Lorraine, who was archbishop of Reims, took the first steps to implement the seminary legislation. St. Vincent De Paul in 1635

established a seminary at the Collège des Bons-Enfants for students of theology. Later on, he founded Saint-Lazare for young candidates who were studying the humanities. He saw the need to have a Major Seminary preparatory school, and in 1642 he erected a Junior Seminary which he dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo. Prior to the French Revolution, his Congregation directed one-third of all the French seminaries; 53 of them were Major, and nine were Minor ("Seminary Education" in <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion>, 2020). The first seminary in the United States of America started in 1791. It started with four Sulpician priests with five seminarians at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore (Leavitt, 1993).

Having seen the evolutionary development of seminary formation, it goes without mentioning that the priest is important not only to the Church but also to the society he lives and works. It will be appropriate to see why the Catholic priest is valued by the people and society he is called to serve.

Why the catholic priesthood is valued?

Having seen the many different ways the training of seminarians has undergone from the first century to the Council of Trent, it suffices to note that though the training lacked adequate attention, some products of such training fared well and made gigantic impact in the world. The Catholic priesthood has mediated and maintained a state of equilibrium between the sacred and the profane aspects of human society and that has exercised a stabilizing influence on social structures and on cultic organizations. Priests, therefore, sharing in the priesthood of Christ, are members of an institution that regulates the relationship between the divine (sacred) and the profane through the various rituals in the church. Priests primarily exercise their responsibilities in the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the Mass (which is ranked the highest prayer of the Church), blessings, administering the Church's sacraments, visiting the sick and generally providing pastoral care to their faithful.

There are contemporary programs of formation and studies which aim to enable the future priest to effectively serve his ministry. These programs as demanded by Canons 232–264 also refer to the Bishops' Conferences of nations for localized and more detailed regulations on formation as it can constructively impact on their society and environment. As a general rule, the education in preparation for the priesthood is extensive and lasts for a protracted period of time, depending on the national programme of priestly formation. Following the important spiritual services by priests to the people in the name of the Church, they are valued by the people and the Church. Most Catholics do not take their priests for granted because of their sacred power to change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, to absolve sins, to administer other sacraments and ministries. They also know that the priest

acting in the person of Christ as mediator between God and man continues Christ's work of redemption on earth.

In the light of the above, it is important to have a deeper idea how the priest, despite the difficulties of their formation to the priesthood, fared in the course of history; especially some of the things that make the priest to be respected and valued by not only the members of his faith but by the world at large. And it is amazing that despite the difficulties and the inadequacy of the formation of priests, the abuses by priests, their lack of substantial attention by their leaders during the period under discussion, a lot of priests thrived in their places of spiritual assignments and also in the secular world as we can see below.

In secular civilization, the Catholic priesthood has played vital and noticeable roles in many aspects of life and it has also influenced and shaped society admirably. When the Church started as a sect, it grew and expanded and became a religion. This religion which took the name Christianity developed and spread to all nations. Through this religion, morality, science, art, and industry developed. If religion in general, as it is often said, is the mother of all cultures, Christianity then must be accredited as a major source, measure and nursery of all true civilizations in the world (Pohle, 1911).

The Church therefore, through the priests carried the light of faith to all lands, banished the darkness of paganism, and with the Gospel, brought the blessings of Christian morality and education. For instance, what would have become, one may ask, of the countries about the Mediterranean around 375 if the Popes, Bishops and priests had not tamed the German hordes, converted them from Arianism to Catholicism and out of barbarism? Also, the roles played by St. Patrick to Ireland and St. Augustine to England in bringing the light of faith to these nations form part of remarkable human histories. Charlemagne's great work of uniting all the German tribes into an empire was only the glorious fruit of the seed sown by a priest who later became St. Boniface of Certon (755) on German soil and watered with the blood of martyrs. The church is therefore proud of her priests who have so excelled in propagating the word of God and serving the people of God despite the societal odds.

In the light of propagating the Christian faith, priests have also preached, demonstrated and lived the commandment of love of God and of neighbour. By this they raised the standard of morality among the people they lived with. They also lived by preaching love in family life, by waging spiritual war upon superstition and evil customs that stood against the gospel message, by the voluntary practice of the three Evangelical Counsels namely: poverty, obedience and charity. Priests also continued holding out the "imitation of Christ" as the ideal of Christian perfection. This act of devotedness accorded

priests respect and trust that people felt the best spiritual friends they could rely on are priests who serve them.

Priests were also valued and appreciated through the unflinching commitment they gave to societal odds; especially the scourge of slavery, abject poverty and sickness. The efforts of the Church through her priests were at first directed towards depriving slavery of its most repulsive feature by emphasizing the equality and freedom of all children of God. Priests equally worked towards ameliorating, as far as possible, the condition of slaves, and finally towards effecting the abolition of this contemptible bondage. In the same vein, St. Vincent de Paul stood and worked for the poor and the sick. The services of the priests to the most vulnerable in the society could not but endear them to love and long for them.

Historically, the Catholic Church has often been a patron of sciences. According to Hough, (2007), "The Jesuits in particular have made numerous significant contributions to the development of science. For example, the Jesuits, despite their priestly commitments to the care of souls, also dedicated significant study to earthquakes, and seismology, and this has been described as the Jesuit science" (p.68). The Jesuits have been described in historical annals as the single most significant contributors to experimental or investigational physics in the seventeenth century (*Lindberg, et al, 1986*). By the eighteenth century, the Jesuits had, among other discoveries, contributed to the development of pendulum clocks, pantographs, barometers, reflecting telescopes and microscopes; and to other scientific fields as various as magnetism, optics and electricity. Given their commitment, they also observed, in some cases before anyone else, the colored bands on Jupiter's surface, the Andromeda nebula and Saturn's rings. The Jesuits went further to theorized about the circulation of the blood (independently of Harvey), the theoretical possibility of flight, the way the moon affected the tides, and the wave-like nature of light (Wright (2004). With these scientific discoveries by their priests, the Society could not have thrown its face away from these talented and generous men of God. This successful feat has won for the Church and her priests respect and value.

Also, in the field of education, priests were an outstanding contributor to the evolution of education in the imperial times. They were prolific in the foundation and funding of schools and universities. The whole range of education lay so exclusively in the hands of the priesthood during the Middle Ages. Without the monks, the ancient classical literature would have been lost. In relation to this, a medieval proverb ran: *A monastery without a library is a castle without an armory*. The modern maxim, *Education for all*, is a saying first uttered by Innocent III (Pohle, 1911). As noted above, before the foundation of universities, there were the Cathedral schools that were used for seminary formation and other secular disciplines. It was Charlemagne who issued the

capitulary thus: "*Presbyteri per villas et vicos scholas habeant et cum summa charitate parvulos doceant*", i.e. The priests shall have schools in the towns and hamlets and shall teach the children with the utmost devotion. Children, especially of the poor benefitted immensely from these ecclesial schools. This also won priests love and appreciation from the parents of these children.

As if it was not enough, priests were also involved in agriculture. As it was rhetorically asked about whom Europe is primarily indebted to for the clearing away of the primitive forests, for schemes of drainage and irrigation, for the cultivation of new fruits and crops, for the building of roads and bridges, if not to the Catholic monks (Pohle, 1911).

A critical appraisal.

Given that historians are short of chronological information about the formation of seminarians in the first few centuries of ecclesiastical history, the Church was able to garner her available mean resources to train young men into the priesthood. There were no organised structures or established formulae for the formation of seminarians towards the Catholic priesthood as we have today, but those who were trained during this period became successful in their pastoral endeavours.

The New Testament's principles for priestly formation which was used by the Church early in the first century turned out to be the best option. In the *Didache* (teachings of the twelve Apostles) it is written, "therefore, appoint for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, men meek, and not lovers of money, (1 Timothy 3:4) and truthful and proven, and reprove one another, not in anger, but in peace, as you have it in the Gospel (Mt. 18: 15-17)". While the church was engaged in settling doctrinal issues between the Church and some of her members and from the imperial powers, the Church became stronger and gradually improved the formation to the Catholic priesthood through the use of Cathedral schools. The Church therefore has during the centuries undergone lots of transformation with regards to seminary formation. The council of Trent (1545-1563) was the first council that issued and promulgated decrees on seminary and priestly formation. Another decree on the training of priests (*Optatam Totius*) was promulgated by Pope Paul VI, on Oct. 28, 1965. There are many documents of the formation of priests in the Church today. This is done in order to maintain and improve the standard of the Church *vis a vis* the people it is called to minister to.

Despite the efforts to maintain high standards in seminary formation today, the number of seminarians in Europe and America has fallen to a shocking level. The vocation to the Catholic priesthood has drastically dropped, because interest for formation to the priesthood has waned. As the saying goes, 'what comes around goes around'. The Europe that once upon a time was the hub of

missionaries and did send missionaries to Africa is now suffering the dearth of vocations to the priesthood. The Pontifical Yearbook 2019 and the *Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae* 2017, compiled by the Central Office of Church Statistics, published by the Vatican Press shows that “the number of candidates to the priesthood worldwide has decreased from 116,160 in 2016 to 115,328 in 2017, a drop of 0.7 percent. The picture of continental flows appears satisfactory in the African and Asian Church, while in Europe and America the decrease appears very evident” (Vatican Bulletin, 2019).

Hence, in some parts of Africa, for example in Nigeria, interested candidates for the priesthood are turned back in some seminaries for insufficient facilities and the wherewithal to train them. While it might not be totally out of place to think of some form of link between vocation and the African economy, it doesn't deny the existence of genuine vocations either. And the growth of vocations in Africa and Asia has given them the capacity to send missionaries to Europe. The Missionaries of St. Paul (MSP) in Nigeria are already engaged deeply in sending missionaries abroad for this purpose, and it is yielding positive fruits for the Universal Church. On Saturday, 23 June 2018, Archbishop Eamon Martin from Ireland ordained eight priests for the MSP of Nigeria. Speaking after the ordinations, Archbishop Martin corroborated our arguments in these words:

...Next year these young men will be sent to countries all over the world to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ. They are joy-filled, prayerful and restless to begin their missionary work. Eight priests of the Society are already working in parishes in Ireland. My hope would be that African missionaries will help contribute to the new evangelisation of Ireland. They are our children and grandchildren in the faith. Over the years hundreds of Irish missionaries have worked in Nigeria; now we are blessed that the Church in Nigeria is generously sending her missionaries back to us. It is a wonderful exchange - our faith is about giving and receiving, and the reality of today is that in many ways Ireland is ripe for mission and new evangelisation (<https://www.indcatholicnews.com/news>).

There are other Congregations that are into the same missionary endeavour. Painfully, some of the gigantic and magnificent structures that were used for the training of priests in Europe are lying almost empty of occupants. Some of them, for the reasons of maintenance, have either been leased out or sold. One among a few instances is the American College of Louvain. This is the seminary the United States Bishops have administered in Leuven, Belgium, since 1857. It was closed in June 2011. Reason being lack of enrolment for formation to the priesthood. In addition, the seminary had struggled with obtaining qualified priests for its faculty (American Seminary 2020).

It is important to remember that, in order to sustain the early century forms of seminary formation, and to improve on it, especially during this time when the vocation to the priesthood requires substantial attention, the Church has employed some experts to look into ways of sustain and improving the formation of seminarians. And right from Trent, the Church has had lots of documents on the priestly formation such as: The Teaching of Philosophy (1972); The Ministries in the Church (1972); Priestly Celibacy (1974); Adult Vocations (1976); Priestly Identity (1979); Liturgical Formation (1979); Spiritual Formation (1980); Human Mobility and Formation (1986); Admission of seminarians expelled from other institutions (1986); Teaching the Fathers of the Church (1989); and the Propaedeutic Stage of Formation (1987).

In the same light, the role of the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (1990) on priestly formation cannot be ignored. The Synod of Bishops animatedly considered the theme of priestly formation with an integral vision and a broad view of priestly ministry. Arising from the backdrop of this Apostolic Exhortation, the Roman Dicasteries and the National Conferences continued to publish documents on particular issues that are principally related to priestly formation such as: Pastoral Care of Vocations (1992); Training of Formators (1993); The Pastoral Care of Marriage and the Family (1995); Admission of seminarians expelled from other institutions (1996). The Scrutinise for Sacred Orders (1997); the Propaedeutic Stage (1998); Indigenous Vocations (1999); The Priestly Mission (1999); Popular Piety (2001); Migration and Vocations (2004); Homosexual Tendencies and Priestly Vocation (2005); Psychology and Formation (2008); Studies of Philosophy (2011); Priestly Vocations (2012); and the Directory for Priesthood (2013).

The Church today, in her formation of seminarians to the priesthood, should continue to maintain the universally accepted stages of seminary formation in order to meet the spiritual yearnings of our contemporary society. While the Church remains a universal entity, she should consider, as it has always done, but now with much attention the diverse cultures of our people. The forms of seminary formation should be deeply looked into, especially, in the new *Ration Fundamentalis* where emphasis seems to be on intellectual formation at the expense of the spiritual and human. There should be a balance in all. The National *Ratio Fundamentalis* should also have the flexibility of recognising the culture of its people but not in contradistinction to the spirit of the universal Church.

There has been a huge advocacy in today's seminary formation for the use of mobile telephones. While some quarters advocate for total ban, some call for moderation and a prudent use (allotting times and places for making calls). There is no gainsaying that the use of Information and Communication

Technology (ICT) and especially the social media has come to stay in our society. Communication in all forms is very essential in any organisation, the seminary cannot be an exception. There should be, in my opinion, a prudent use of phones and the social media in all seminaries. Desk tops computers and lap tops should be adequately and appropriately used. Because it is better the seminarians are taught the right ways and methods of their use than when they become priests and are unable to use them aptly.

Auto-formation in seminaries has received a huge recommendation by some seminary formation experts. According to this school of thought, when seminarians are allowed total freedom, their true selves manifest, and there will be no room for pretence. And according to them, it is when and only seminarians are free that the formators can assess and evaluate them objectively. However, the freedom should not be absolute and non-negotiable. In other words, seminarians should be allowed guided auto-formation. The availability of formators and their good counsel should be a priority in seminary formation. Some candidates go into the seminary without substantial maturity. For such to be allowed total freedom would be tantamount to destroying their future. They need guidance by their formators while they are allowed quality freedom to be who they are.

Conclusion

“He appointed twelve to be with him and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons” (Mark 3:14-15). This would seem to have set the pattern for seminary formation. Paul using almost the same system of personal accompaniment chose Timothy whom he “wished to go forth with him,” (Acts 16:3) as he delivered to his churches the decision reached by the Council of Jerusalem ca. AD 49.

In the early centuries before Augustine of Hippo, one cannot find any extant evidence of special institutions for the formation and education of seminarians. However, one does find traces of 'seminarian' apprenticeship, in keeping with the model set by Christ. For example, in the *Didache*, priestly service is described primarily in prophetic terms, that is, in terms of witness: ... For they, too (bishops and deacons), render you the sacred service of the prophets and teachers.

Monasteries and Convents were also used as centres for formation to the priesthood. Soon after Augustine became bishop in 396, his Episcopal residence at Hippo became the school where superiors and bishops sent their chosen young men to go for formation to the monastic life and the priesthood. Cathedral schools also played a large role in the formation of candidates for the Catholic priesthood. Some of the young chosen men also went to universities to

learn secular courses and came back for the spiritual courses at the Cathedral schools.

Many Councils were called between the first century and Trent, but these councils were not *ab initio* concerned about priestly formation, they were, to a greater extent, concerned about issues that affected the Church at that time. It was at the council of Trent that the issue of seminary formation was given a strong positive nod.

Seminary formation has a long and formidable historiography. Priests and seminarians should know this in order to appreciate more the common priesthood we all share. This strenuous evolutionary history should spark some enthusiasm in us to confront with humility and more determination the present-day abuses that have caused the Church huge heart aches. Although, despite these unacceptable and inhuman behaviours by some priests, the Church still stands strong and is replete with holy priests who spend almost all their time and energy in truly serving God and humanity.

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