

**DISCONNECT BETWEEN SEMINARY FORMATION AND
THE PRIESTLY LIFE AND MINISTRY:
THE MISSING LINK**

Benjamin Ezulike¹

ABSTRACT

The term “disconnect” suggests a divide or gap between two entities, events or situations. In the context of the preparation for the priesthood, it refers to a situation where the many years spent in formation seem not to translate into an effective priestly life and ministry. One can identify a disconnect when the actions and overall comportment of the priest do not seem to reflect the principles, values and noble qualities that were supposed to have been imbibed during his formation in the seminary. In exploring the reasons for the disconnect, the searchlight is beamed not only on the factors that could hamper the actualization of the potentials of the seminary as an institution but also on the disposition and qualities of the candidate that could either facilitate or impede the internalization of the ideals of formation. Bridging the gap between seminary formation and the priestly life and ministry makes some crucial demands both on the seminary and on the candidate under formation. On the part of the seminary, it is a call to constant updating, reassessment of the long-term effectiveness of formation strategies, attentiveness to the signs of the times and a more creative approach to human formation that aims at enabling the candidate for the priesthood to become a mature and balanced person and not a submissive conformist. On the part of the individual, openness to and wilful cooperation with the formation process are indispensable. No matter how constantly revised and updated the seminary programme is, authentic formation can never be realized if the

¹Rev. Fr. Dr. Benjamin Ezulike is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Ekwulobia. He is a Formator and a Lecturer at Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu.

individual being formed does not have the right disposition and firm resolve to take advantage of the opportunities provided in the seminary programme for growth and sustained self-improvement.

1.0. Prelude

This paper was inspired by my discussions with some newly-ordained priests about their experiences: the initial shocks, the discoveries, the challenges and their assessment of how the formation they received in the seminary either succeeded or failed to prepare them for the challenges they encounter in their priestly life and apostolate. Their opinions about effectiveness in the priestly life vis-à-vis their views about the justification of the long years spent in seminary formation, especially the major seminary, call for sober reflection on the perceived disconnect between the formation received in the seminary and the challenges they face in their lives and apostolates as priests. Coincidentally, the reason stated for the choice of the theme of the Bigard Annual Colloquium held on September 30, 2022 re-echoed the same concern:

[There is] deep-seated widening divide between what the Church teaches and what seminarians and priests believe and also do. This widening gap ranges from moral, doctrinal, social, liturgical, cultural and canonical issues. Many either forget or directly put aside what they were taught in the seminary and appropriate a belief system that is diametrically opposed to the teachings of the Church and worse still impose such belief system on those under their charge.²

A similar remark underlining the incongruence between formation and lived experiences of some priests was made by Abuh in his paper entitled “Human Formation and its Dimension in Priestly Ministry” presented at the conference of the Rectors of Nigerian seminaries in 2017:

There are complaints today of some immature priests in virtually all the dioceses and Religious Orders in this country despite what may

² A. Ikpenwa, *Seminary Formation: A Period for Authentic Catechesis and Witnessing*, Bigard Annual Colloquium 2022, Bigard, Nigeria, p.2

be considered a robust formation programme in our seminaries and houses of formation.³

The concerns expressed in the works cited above are not unjustified speculations. They are real. From different forms of abuse of the pulpit to poor human relationship that scatter the flock instead of bringing them together; from manipulative use of the sacerdotal office for self-enrichment to flagrant disregard of decency in the pursuit of wealth; from competing with Pentecostal pastors in popularity and theatrical performances in the name of the so-called healing ministry to the perpetuation of all sorts of liturgical aberrations, the list can go on and on. Recently, I attended the wedding anniversary of a friend where I concelebrated with a group of priests. A younger priest was invited specifically to give the homily which practically turned out to be a pre-planned fundraising drive. To put it mildly, it was a display of oratory, sophistry and crafty citation of promise-laden biblical passages aimed at inducing the listeners to donate more generously. Everything taught in the seminary about homily and the observance of decorum in the liturgy was either suspended or consciously ignored. Prayerful reflection on the scriptural readings of the day was replaced with daring predictions about the miracles and divine favours waiting to be claimed by those who were willing to walk up to the sanctuary and make generous financial donations. The homily that turned into fund raising lasted for 1 hour 48 minutes. At the end of the Mass, I engaged in discussion with the young priest to express my reservations not only about making the homily an opportunity for fundraising but also about the manipulative undertone of most of the claims he made and the strategies he employed. His response was blunt: *“Father, there is a big difference between the seminary and the parish. Forget the theory and all the grammar about liturgical aberrations. When you face the challenges we face in the parish, you will understand; experience will teach you; your language will*

³ E. Abuh, “Human Formation and Its Dimension in Priestly Ministry”. In M. Nzukwein (Ed.), *The Challenges of Priestly Formation and Christian Witnessing in Nigeria*, (Angwan Dabba: Institute of Pastoral Affairs, 2021), p. 134.

change.” Those words seem to suggest that the seminary formation and the priestly apostolate in the parish are two different worlds completely disconnected from each other.

Mine is a reflection that seeks to explore the missing link or disconnect between the formation received in the seminary, especially the major seminary, and the challenges the priest is exposed to in his life and ministry. The question could be framed in different forms: could it be that the seminary and all the formation it offers lose their relevance in the face of the demands and challenges of the ministry? Could there be something needed for a successful priestly ministry that the seminary formation fails to offer? Are the parameters for measuring success and effectiveness in the pastoral work of a priest different from the principles taught and the formation received in the seminary? Do the demands and challenges of parish apostolate or any other pastoral engagement after ordination render everything learnt in the seminary through all the years of formation obsolete?

2.0. Contextualizing the Disconnect

The reality of a gap between the formation received in the seminary and life and ministry of the priest after ordination cannot in any way be generalized. Many priests often express their profound sense of indebtedness to the seminary and recount with delight how the formation they received in the seminary contributed in no small measure to who they are and what they do as priests. Holding on to those principles imbibed in the seminary and applying them creatively in their lives and ministries as priest, they go about doing the correct thing, finding joy and contentment in the pastoral duties and touching others positively by their conduct, exemplary lives and inspired homilies. That said, it is equally a fact that in some cases, the years spent in the seminary and the entire formation process appear to have little or no continued influence on the lived experiences of some priests. Some do not hide their disenchantment with the entire formation process. Often, the stories they tell about

their days in the seminary smack of bitter feelings, regrets or indifference.

The term “disconnect”, in the context of the present work, refers to a situation where the efforts and strategies put in place in the seminary to ensure proper formation of the candidate for the priesthood according to the mind of the Church seem not to translate into a creative, fruitful and fulfilling priestly ministry. It equally arises when the conduct and expressed convictions of the priest appear to be incongruous with the character expected to have been formed in the seminary. One can infer that there is a disconnect between seminary formation and the priestly ministry when the actions, attitude and overall comportment of the priest do not seem to reflect the principles, values and noble qualities that were supposed to have been learnt and assimilated during the years devoted to formation in the seminary.

Holding on to the principles and values imbibed in the seminary does not imply being stagnant or unable to explore new ways of doing things. One needs to grow, to engage creatively with new realities and be willing to confront present challenges with an open mind. No one expects the life and ministry of the priest to be a continuation of the seminary routine and programme. However, if the relevance of formation does not stop at preparing candidates for ordination but (more importantly) includes equipping them for the ministry, then it is logical to expect that the principles and values acquired during formation must remain indispensable points of reference that provide the priest with the basic tools he needs to navigate the murky waters of daily challenges in their pastoral work. Reliance on tried and trusted principles does not stifle meaningful creativity but rather facilitates the latter. There are many factors that could account for the choices an individual makes or what he retains as value. However, when there is a gap between what was supposed to have been learnt in the seminary and what the priest believes in or does after ordination, the tendency is to question either the

effectiveness of the process and strategy of formation or the individual's ability or failure to take advantage of it.

3.0. On the Role and Potentials of the Major Seminary Formation

The Church is optimistic that the seminary, especially the major seminary, is able to provide the candidates for the priesthood with the formation they need for effective priestly life and ministry. While acknowledging the need for a collaborative effort of the whole Church beginning with the family in nurturing and fostering priestly vocation, the Vatican II's decree on priestly training, *Optatam Totius* underlines the indispensable role the seminary plays in forming candidates for the priesthood. More specifically, the document notes: "Major seminaries are necessary for priestly formation. Here the entire training of the students should be oriented to the formation of true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd."⁴

The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (1985) not only reaffirmed the optimism expressed in *Optatam Totius*, but also goes on to outline concrete rules guiding seminary formation. Like in the *Optatam Totius*, the document acknowledges the specific role of the major seminary as a house of formation and indicates that "it is the responsibility of the major seminary to take care of the vocation of candidates in a clearer and more complete way." (*Ratio*, 20)

In his post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the present day entitled *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II re-echoes the recognition of the bodies and organs that contribute to the fostering of vocation before going on to emphasize the peculiar role of the seminary as a house of formation:

The "seminary" in its different forms ... more than a place, a material space, should be a spiritual place, a way of life, an atmosphere that fosters and ensures a process of formation, so that

⁴ Paul VI. "Decree on Priestly Training", *Optatam Totius*. 1965, 2

the person who is called to the priesthood by God may become, with the sacrament of orders, a living image of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the Church.⁵

The continued relevance and indispensability of the seminary, especially major seminary as an institution charged with the responsibility of preparing candidates, not just for ordination but for the priestly ministry remains indisputable. However, the need for constant review of formation principles and strategies with the view to forestalling possible lapses and discovering areas of necessary improvement in the light of the present-day reality cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, when there are loopholes in the system of formation or when the seminary fails to pay attention to areas that need proper updating and improvement, the quality of the formation received by the candidate is bound to be adversely affected. This in turn can constitute a fertile ground for the seed of disparity and inconsistency between the challenges the priest would face in the ministry and the principles and values he was supposed to have imbibed during formation. It is therefore pertinent to examine the possible factors that could create some difficult challenges for the formation process in the major seminary and hamper its potentials to ensure suitable formation of the candidates for the priesthood.

3.1. Factors that may Impede the Actualizations of the Potentials of the Major Seminary

The focus on the major seminary does not ignore the fact that the preparatory stages of formation and their impact on the candidate have huge implications for the individual's disposition to and internalization of the major seminary formation. So, some of the issues that can hinder the major seminary from actualizing its potentials may not be completely unconnected with those preparatory stages that provide the individual with the basic socio-cultural, mental and psychological structure with which he comes into the major seminary.

⁵ John Paul II. "On the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day", *Pastores Dabo Vobis*. Vatican City. 1992, p. 42.

3.1.1. Character Template Formed Prior to Enrolment in the Major Seminary

Insights from developmental psychology and sociology have shown that the basic templates and presuppositions with which individuals approach life generally are formed very early in life by the combination of biological, cultural, social and other factors. Right from the family, the seed of character is sown in the individual. The family environment, relationship among siblings, parental influence and the totality of values the individual imbibes in the family already set the pace for the individual's identity formation. One equally needs to take into account the developmental stages of early and late childhood, peer pressure and the socio-cultural milieu in which those early stages of character formation are negotiated. The individual's experiences in the minor seminary and the spiritual year formation contribute to the multi-layered experiences that play significant roles in his character formation. So, the candidates admitted to the major seminary are adults who already have a sense of identity formed by multiplicity of experiences. The basic presuppositions and character template each individual brings into the major seminary can either facilitate his internalization of the major seminary formation or constitute a hindrance that needs to be addressed in order to make him more favourably disposed to the formation process.

3.1.2. Non-harmonised Preparatory Programme and Selection Process

In Nigeria, candidates who come to the major seminaries for formation (where most of the major seminaries are provincial seminaries belonging to many dioceses) are drawn from different dioceses. The minor seminaries, spiritual year seminaries and other preparatory programmes the candidate must pass through before being admitted to the major seminary are organised by the respective dioceses. Although there are general guidelines to regulate the formation received at these preparatory stages, there seems to be no harmonised programme adopted by dioceses across the province. Each diocese is at liberty to formulate most of the details of the programme. Even the process of selecting those who qualify to

proceed to the major seminaries are carried out by the respective dioceses. With the exception of the basic academic qualification required for admission to tertiary institution, each diocese selects the candidates they send to the provincial major seminaries based on their own criteria, without any input from the major seminary. When the preparatory programme is not harmonised, the candidates who come to the major seminary to begin their priestly formation as a set may constitute a heterogeneous group with unequal background and preparedness. Without denying the positive value of heterogeneity and the richness that comes from diversity, the lack of harmonisation of the preparatory programme prior to admission to the major seminary is bound to create some difficulties. One may not rightly expect to get the same level of engagement and outcome from people coming from unequal background and selected based on criteria that is not harmonised.

One way to ensure a harmonised process of admission could be to constitute an inter-diocesan board of selectors charged with admission of candidates to the major seminary. Membership of such board could be made up of selected members of the major seminary formation team and independent experts in the fields of psychology, spirituality, human development and academics. Mindful of the fact that the *Ratio Fundamentalis Sacerdotalis* calls for “a serious examination of individual young people to be carried out - with the help of experts - throughout the period of studies” (39), the need for the involvement of experts in the initial decision of who is admitted in the first place can only be a step in the right direction.

3.1.3. Strict Enforcement of Regulations Versus Training in Self-management

Rules of conduct and enforcement of discipline have always been part of the formation programme in the major seminary. Assessment of compliance with the rules and regulation contributes to the determination of the suitability of the candidate for the priesthood. In a house of formation, ensuring that the rules and regulations are duly followed and respected is indeed of paramount importance. However, emphasis on compliance with the rules and regulation

needs to go hand in hand with bringing the individual under formation to understand the rationale behind those rules and regulations. The Second Vatican Council sets out clearly the paradigm for meaningful emphasis on and enforcement of discipline in the major seminary. More than being merely a means of creating order, enforcement of discipline should aim at training the seminarian in self-mastery and mature exercise of freedom.⁶

Given the huge number of seminarians in most of our major seminaries in Nigeria today, it is only fitting that adequate strategies are put in place to promote the observance of the rules and the enforcement of discipline. It would be naïve to assume that hundreds of young men could live together and follow the programme of formation without putting in place some means of ensuring compliance with laid down rules and regulations. However, it must also not be denied that, while strategies of enforcement of discipline and compliance with rules may achieve a palpable sense of order, they may not guarantee the development of self-mastery and mature exercise of freedom that would extend the relevance of those rules beyond the confines of the formation house. It is highly possible that, faced with a regime of emphasis on the rules and strict strategies of measuring compliance, seminarians may have the unhealthy impression of the seminary being a kind of a highly controlled environment where all they need is to lie low, conform to the strict demands and wait for the morning after ordination for the dawn of freedom. When a candidate's disposition towards formation is that of mere conformism devoid of conviction, the gap between the values imbibed during formation and life after ordination is bound to be wide.

It is therefore imperative to strike a balance between insistence on compliance with the rules and a committed effort towards forming the individual in responsible exercise of freedom and self-management. Besides, those admitted to the major seminary are already adults whose ability to make informed decisions is not in doubt. The greater concern should be how the seminary environment

⁶ Paul VI. *Optatam Totius*.1965, 11

enables the future priest to train himself to be an informed agent of his actions; to be able to make responsible choices and do things out of conviction rather than just mere conformity to established norms. Sheering rightly notes that,

The seminary is training men, not boys. It should have an atmosphere of freedom, responsibility and accountability. If its discipline is not internalized, there will be disastrous consequences in the lonely life of the future diocesan priest. If it is too harsh, it may produce harsh priests, nearer in spirit to the Pharisees than the Good Shepherd.⁷

It may appear risky in a house of formation to put the emphasis on individual's free choice as against the attitude of unquestioned conformism. However, promoting a relaxed (not permissive) environment where seminarians are not afraid to make mistakes knowing they will be corrected without being victimized is worth the risk. It is better to focus more on forming seminarians to become free agents who understand the rationale behind the rules and observe them out of a free volition, than promoting enforcement strategies that achieve immediate order at the cost of lack of conviction. Ultimately, the purpose of the rules and regulations in the seminary is to train the seminarian in self-management. The *Ratio* underlines that in addition to serving the purpose of ensuring an ordered community, the regulation, when freely embraced by the seminarian, trains him to manage himself in a purposeful manner when no one will be there to direct him (cf. *Ratio*, 26). Come to think of it, on that morning after ordination when there will be no rising bell, no auxiliary, no dean of administration, which one will have an enduring impact on the young priest: series of rules observed out of compulsion without any personal conviction, or a formation in self-management that emphasised understanding the relevance of the rules even when no one is watching?

3.1.4. Formators-seminarians Relationship

The Church recognises the indispensable roles major seminary formators have to play in the formation of candidates for the

⁷ J. Sheering, *Priests for the People*, (Abuja: Gaudium et Spes, 2008) p. 22.

priesthood. The Second Vatican Council's Decree on Priestly Training enjoins formators to "be keenly aware of how much the success of the students' formation depends on their manner of thinking and acting."⁸ In the post-synodal document *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the two major tasks set before those charged with overseeing the formation of candidates for the priesthood include discernment and accompaniment. The formators are not there simply to monitor, assess and write reports; they are there primarily to accompany the candidates and assist them in the all-important project of discerning their vocation.

The formators-seminarians relationship must therefore be built on trust if the ideals of formation are to be realized. Human beings have the natural tendency to bring out their best when they are inspired with the confidence that comes with trust. On the contrary, when trust is lacking, people tend to withdraw into their shells. The success of formation is not measured by how perfectly the seminarians conform to the rules. Rather, it is measured by the extent to which they are willing to be themselves without being scared about making mistakes. That is where the mentoring role of formators proves to be very crucial. When seminarians see the formators as elder brothers they can trust and confide in, the seminary becomes truly a home that can make lasting positive impact on them; impact they will continue to cherish long after they have left the institution.

As impressionable young adults, the seminarians' expectations and image of the priesthood are shaped by their encounter with the priests they meet, especially their formators in the major seminary and those they encounter during apostolic work. Their understanding of priestly fraternity is bound to be shaped by the type of relationship they see existing among priests in the formation team. When the unity, fraternity and seamless collaboration that ought to exist among the formators are shaky or even non-existent, it sends the wrong and unhealthy signals to the seminarians. Suffice

⁸ Paul VI. *Optatam Totius*.1965, 5

it to say that, more than having a collection of intellectual giants who are versed in their different fields of study, seminarians need formators they can look up to as role models. Yes, the formators may not be perfect, but their friendly disposition, simplicity of lifestyle, availability and above all, their easily-noticeable sense of unity and collaboration with one another are indispensable elements that will determine the nature of the lasting impact of the seminary formation in the life and ministry of the young priest after ordination.

3.1.5. Reading the Signs of Time: Need for Constant Updating

We live in an ever-changing world. A Latin adage has it that “*Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis*” (The times change, and we change with them). Ours is an era where “the notion of authority and religious obedience is seriously being altered by modern concept of obedience and autonomy.”⁹ Crucial questions need to be asked about how the formation process and strategies in our major seminaries are constantly being updated in order to make them more relevant to the changing times and contemporary challenges. How do we prepare the future priest to be able to exercise his priestly ministry with sound judgement, maturity and openness to dialogue in an era where unquestioned submission to tradition and authority is being redefined by the quest for individual autonomy nurtured by a more assertive and critical mindset? A formation process that fails to be sensitive to the need of the time could end up producing candidates that are unable to find their footing or are grossly incapable of creative engagement with the challenges of the pastoral ministry.

In the face of the constantly evolving socio-cultural trends that characterize the contemporary society, the candidate preparing for the priesthood needs to be sensitive to and in touch with the direction

⁹ J. Mmadueke, “The Consecrated Life in the Mission of the Church: The Religious as Seen by Diocesan Priests”. In M. Nzukwein (Ed.), *The Challenges of Priestly Formation and Christian Witnessing in Nigeria*, (Angwan Dabba: Institute of Pastoral Affairs, 2021), p. 4.

the society is going so as not to find himself completely out of touch with the lived experiences and the existential struggles of those to whom he will be sent as priest. To forestall a situation where the young priest feels alienated from contemporary issues or finds himself incapable of creative engagement with those issues, the curriculum and other extracurricular activities in the major seminary need to be organised in a manner that creates room for exposure to and critical engagement with the burning issues, debates, questions and misconceptions that dominate the contemporary socio-cultural space. A programme of studies that ignores the need for constant updating and only goes on to perpetuate the rigid recycling of formal themes is bound to produce individuals that are not in touch with contemporary realities. Such programme of studies can only widen the gap between formation and the challenges the priest is bound to encounter in his pastoral work.

Having highlighted the ways in which possible loopholes in the institution of formation itself can prepare the ground for the possibility of gap between formation and the priestly ministry, it is expedient to explore how such gap can be created by the individual himself. The seminary and the entire formation process may have all the potentials of providing the candidate with all the opportunities for self-improvement, learning and growth. Yet, the truth remains that: *quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* (whatever is received, is received according to the mode of the receiver).

4.0. Focus on the Candidate

At the centre of the entire formation process is the individual who presents himself for formation and around whom the whole programme or strategies of formation revolves. Okeke rightly observes that “the focus of formation is the candidate as an individual, a unique person with specific needs, values, characteristics and attitudes.”¹⁰ People come to the major seminary from diverse backgrounds. Each brings the baggage of his past, his

¹⁰ U. C. Okeke, *Love Has to Be the Reason*, (Bodija: St. Paul, 2019), p. 48.

family history, the socio-cultural specificities of his upbringing, the undying influences of past and present relations with friends and significant personalities in his life. As indicated earlier on, these biological and socio-cultural factors are bound to shape the disposition with which the candidate approaches the major seminary formation. The focus in this section is on the conscious actions, omissions, mental or psychological disposition of the individual during the formation years that determine his internalization of the formation principles and values.

The extent to which the opportunities provided in the seminary can be properly utilized depends to a large extent on the candidate's freedom of choice. The candidate has the power to decide either to open himself up to formation or to pass through the system without actually being part of it. In his metaphysics of moral, Kant talks about the freedom of the will and the power of the individual to choose for himself what counts as a cherished end:

I can indeed be constrained by others to perform actions that are directed as means to an end, but I can never be constrained by others to have an end: only I myself can make something my end.¹¹

The individual's power to choose for himself what counts as a desired end or goal has far-reaching implications for formation. When a choice is freely made without coercion, the individual is more disposed to pursue the desired goal with determination and unshaken commitment.

Another factor that determines the individual's attitude to formation is motive. In the pursuit of every human endeavour, motive is of paramount importance. Simply put, it refers to the reason for which a particular goal is pursued. Call it the driving force that inspires and sustains one's commitment to a particular endeavour. Motive determines, not just the level of commitment with which a cause is pursued but also the enthusiasm with which it is sustained. Indeed, "anticipated outcomes are commonly generated from the underlying

¹¹ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor, (Cambridge: University Press, 2017), p. 156.

general motives and values of the person.”¹² Motive sustains and gives continued meaning and relevance to the present and the future of any endeavour. Such is the case for the entire project of priestly formation. Motive is the basic foundation upon which the entire edifice stands. No wonder the Second Vatican Council insists that, in determining the suitability of the candidate for the priesthood, “an inquiry should be made into the candidate's proper intention.”¹³ When the intention for which the candidate desires to become a priest is faulty, everything falls out of place. Wrong intention or faulty motive constitutes a serious obstacle to meaningful internalization of formation values. It equally destroys effectiveness in the priestly ministry given that the individual concerned will always tend to align his views and the choices he makes with that wrong motive that is at variance with the ideals of the priestly vocation. Think of someone who sees the priesthood as merely a career opportunity. The period of formation will likely be devoted to fine-tuning the skills he needs to establish the connections that will facilitate his access to social mobility and satisfy his quest for relevance. This is far from the ideal of priestly formation understood as a period of sustained growth in the understanding of the mysteries of God and of allowing oneself to be led to a deeper encounter and oneness with Christ.

One may equally have the right motive but for one reason or the other, is unwilling to make himself fully available to formation. When he was the Rector of Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, His Lordship, Most Rev. John Okoye (Bishop of Awgu) always challenged seminarians to “donate” themselves to formation. This self-donation underlines the need to trust the system and allow oneself to be positively influenced by the programmes, initiatives and opportunities for self-improvement and growth made available in the seminary. The English adage has it that you can take a horse to the stream but can never force it to drink water. The prospects of

¹² U. C. Okeke, *The Future of the Catholic Priesthood in Igboland: Dangers and Challenges Ahead*, (Nimo: Rex Charles & Patrick, 2006), p. 94.

¹³ Paul VI. *Optatam Totius*.1965, 6

the seminary for intellectual, spiritual, human and pastoral formation can only be realized if the individual under formation is willing to take advantage of the opportunities, imbibe the principles and personalize the formation process.

Another tendency that has the potential of rendering the period of formation irrelevant to the priestly ministry is when the individual under formation has other goals in mind while keeping the priesthood as one of the many options on the table. Such a candidate may be exceptional in keeping the rules and excelling in different areas of formation while consciously working his way towards the actualization of other goals, like travelling abroad for greener pasture. The priesthood is kept as a viable escape route just in case the other options fail to materialize. Such divided attention and lack of single-minded commitment are bound to affect the quality of formation received.

After ordination, the transition from a highly regulated life in the seminary to a seemingly more relaxed one in the rectory could present some adaptation challenges. No rising bell, no routine manual labour, no regular lectures, no examination, no formator watching and taking note, the list can go on. The change in daily routine may give the impression that one is thrown into a world completely different and disconnected from the life in the seminary. Such assumption of disconnectedness can derail the creative reinterpretation and gainful employment of the values imbibed during the formation years to foster meaningful engagement with the demands of the priestly ministry. One of the immediate dangers is the urge to be accepted; to fit into a perceived framework dictated by the expectations of those to whom one is sent. In our society today, the queer distinction between the so-called powerful/spiritually-gifted priests and ordinary priests seems to have become the order of the day if care is not taken, the young priest may find himself overtaken by the desire to be counted among the “powerful and spiritually-gifted” priests. The pressure coming from people’s expectations, often fuelled by a faulty definition of what counts as an effective ministry and the eagerness to fit into those expectations

may push the young priest to lose touch with the basic principles and values inculcated in him all through the formation years prior to ordination. Oburota notes: “A priest can lose focus about why he wanted to become priest at the beginning. This loss of focus can lead to aberration.”¹⁴ It can also create room for identity crisis that, when not handled properly, can push the priest farther away from the original motive that inspired his desire for the priesthood in the first place.

Social relations and exposure to social network present unique challenges to the internalization of formation. It raises even more concern in our contemporary society where technology has redefined social interactions, removed the barriers of distance, threatens privacy and makes access to the entire world just a click away. With an enlarged social network thanks to the 21st century massive technological breakthroughs, the candidate under formation is exposed to the world as much as his contemporary in a secular university. The implications of such unbounded exposure are enormous. On the one hand, it provides a vast opportunity for the individual under formation to widen his horizon, to keep abreast of the evolution of trends and overall direction of the society in which he lives and to explore the many abundant opportunities social networks offer for self-development and easier interaction with others. On the other hand, the possibility of abuse in the use of and exposure to the social media via the internet poses enormous challenges to formation houses confronted with the need to shut off unnecessary distractions and promote the undisturbed focus that facilitate sustained assimilation of formation values. The greatest challenge is how to put in place the necessary regulations that will promote a balanced use in which prevention of abuse does not strangle the healthy exploitation of the benefits.

¹⁴ A. Oburota, “Forgetting You Are a Priest”, in J. O. Oguejiofor & A. C. O. Oburota (Eds). *Challenges of Priests in the 21st Century*, (Awka: Demercury, 2011), p. 26.

During the formation years or in the course of his life and ministry as a priest, the individual cannot be completely immune from the impact of the societal trends, cultural and socio-political realities around him. These and other challenges of daily life are bound to subject the firmness of his convictions to constant test. The goal of formation as well as the rationale of having the seminary is not to shield the future priest from exposure to challenges and the realities of life. Seminary was never intended to be a bunker hiding the candidate for the priesthood and keeping him “safely” away from social realities. On the contrary, sufficient exposure to the challenges posed by those realities is highly needed if the future priest will be able to confront the contemporary age with all its complexities. Here is the question: to what extent is the candidate, be it during formation as a seminarian or after his ordination as a priest, able to interact with complex social networks and relations without becoming a victim of what Gergen describes as “the technologies of social saturation [which] are central to the contemporary erasure of individual self”?¹⁵ Perhaps the answer lies in the cultivation of those human qualities that promote stable character and enable the individual to nurture and maintain a healthy sense of personal identity.

The laying on of hands and the anointing the candidate receives on the day of ordination do not bring about an automatic change in character and attitude. It is the identity and character nurtured all through the formation years that are carried into the priesthood where it is still constantly subjected to renegotiation in the face of present realities and challenges. A stable sense of identity enables the individual to resist being carried around in all directions like a leaf floating on water. A priest with a stable sense of identity will not rush into the so-called healing ministry just to satisfy the gullibility of his flock. He will not allow himself to be ruled by popular opinion. As a balanced person, he understands that

¹⁵ K. J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, (New York: Basic Books, 1991), p. 49

awareness of and sensitivity to what goes on in the society around him does not imply allowing those events to dictate his convictions and identity.

The formation of the individual to become a balanced human person could be considered the most important goal of the entire programme designed to prepare the candidate for the priestly ministry. Perhaps, it was in recognition of this fact that John Paul II gave pre-eminence to human formation above the other pillars of formation (spiritual, academic and pastoral), referring to it as the basis of all formation. Human formation provides the necessary firm basis upon which the other aspects of formation are built. His explanation of the goals of authentic human formation underlines the necessity of acquiring those qualities that are indispensable for meaningful relationship in view of the pastoral ministry:

Future priests should therefore cultivate a series of human qualities, not only out of proper and due growth and realization of self, but also with a view to the ministry. These qualities are needed for them to be balanced people, strong and free, capable of bearing the weight of pastoral responsibilities. They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially, to be balanced in judgment and behaviour.¹⁶

In outlining the expected qualities that human formation should inculcate in the individual, Pope Saint John Paul II drew inspiration from previous official documents of the Church which explore the need for the cultivation of such qualities and how they stand to contribute to the efficiency of the priestly ministry. (cf *Optatam Totius*, 11; *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 3; *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, 51). Though configured to Christ by virtue of the sacrament of the Holy Orders, the priest is human and sent to minister to the people of God, not as an angel but as a human person. In this task, a stable sense of who he is as a human person, the level of his mental and psychological wellness, his affective

¹⁶ John Paul II. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992, p. 43.

maturity and the overall qualities he has to relate with others and make positive impact on them are indispensable factors that make for an effective priestly life and ministry.

In order that his ministry may be humanly as credible and acceptable as possible, it is important that the priest should mould his human personality in such a way that it becomes a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with Jesus Christ the Redeemer of humanity.¹⁷

Human formation is all about moulding that human personality that is indispensable for effective pastoral ministry. The world outside the seminary, the challenges of the priestly apostolate, the expectations of the people to whom the priest comes to minister, constantly evolving socio-cultural landscape, these and many more are bound to challenge previous assumptions and could necessitate the rethinking of the applicability of most of the templates that worked for the candidate in the formation house. The test of sound character and a balanced personality lies in the ability to maintain a stable sense of self built around core values and principles. This is the human quality that gives one the stability to face the constantly-evolving landscape of social interactions and daily challenges without being swallowed or defined by them. Noogle describes that stable inner self anchored on one's core values as "the basis and the ultimate court of appeal for the reflective self-adjustment that allows the self to react and develop in response to changing conditions, improved information, and increasing self-awareness."¹⁸ It is one's personal convictions rooted in a stable inner self that provide the most reliable base upon which the life-long growth and sustained nurturing of a healthy sense of identity are anchored. Again, the base is reliable, not because it is perfect but because it is that core of one's being where capabilities acknowledge deficiencies and embrace

¹⁷ John Paul II. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ R. Noogle. "Autonomy and the Paradox of Self-creation". In J. S. Taylor (Ed.) *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 100.

them with an unwavering determination to grow. When that core or centre is shaky or highly insecure, one tends to engage with others or attend to issues with gross inconsistency. Individuals with unstable inner self could easily run into crisis as they battle with the compulsive crave for acceptance.

5.0. Conclusion

The need to close the gap between the formation received in the major seminary and the priestly life and apostolate makes some crucial demand both from the seminary and the candidate under formation. From its Tridentine roots to the present day, the seminary as an institution has continued to evolve. Its continued relevance is not in doubt. Nevertheless, without constant updating and attentiveness to the signs of the times, the possibility of meeting up with its lofty prospects could be shaky.

No matter how constantly updated and revised the seminary programme is, authentic formation can never happen if the individual under formation refuses to take advantage of the opportunities the formation offers for that self-transformation that is the goal of the many years devoted to formation. The Holy Spirit remains the principal agent in the whole project of formation. However, the individual under formation is an indispensable partner in that project. A stable inner self is an indispensable precondition for proper internalization of the seminary formation. The same stable character is the quality needed to uphold the principles and values imbibed in the seminary and employ them creatively and creditably in the pursuit of a life-long process of growth as a priest. The need for a more creative approach to human formation in the seminary is not negotiable. For, it holds the key to those priceless human qualities that are indispensable for a stable character and sense of self-identity. When that stability is not there, one feels insecure. The door is then thrown wide open for all kinds of desperate attempt to fill the void.