

From Trent to Today: Revisiting the Decree on Seminaries and its Impacts on Priestly Formation in our Contemporary Age

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Abstract

The decree establishing seminary for training future priests is the most innovative decree of the Council of Trent. With this innovation, the Church showed its bent to get internally reformed and respond to the needs of the time. The decree became necessary following Luther's protest, mainly caused by the immoral, intellectual decadence of the priesthood in the centuries before Trent. There was a need to reform the priesthood in general and its training. This reform was predicated upon the general pastoral outline of the council of Trent reform, *cura animarum*, 'care of souls'. The conciliar fathers, attentive to the Church's previous attempt at educating priests and taking the template of a few reforming schools, decreed that every diocese should have a special institute to train young men for the priesthood. This decree, canon 18, was enacted in Trent during the 23rd session of the council. The effect of this decree on the life of the Church since its enactment is unquantifiable. The essay intends to study the issues leading to the decree, a critical review of the decree and the first reaction of the ecclesial community to this decree. There is also a brief historical analysis of how the formation of priests in the Church has changed and responded to different epochal challenges since the enactment of this canon. This essay concludes with an evaluation of the contemporary disposition of the Church to respond to the signs of time in the training of future priests.

Keywords: Council of Trent, Decree on Seminary Priestly Formation, Reformation.

1.0 Introduction

The Council of Trent was the Church's attempt at responding to issues raised by the protestants in the late medieval. The council also fulfilled the Church's desire to put its house in order by enacting some far-reaching reform decrees, especially related to the parochial clergy and its training. Trent did not provide a specific definition of the Church, as this was not its primary goal. However, the reform it pursued was based on its understanding of the Church's role as a mediator between Christ and the faithful. That understanding was predicated upon "the care of souls" as the primary objective. In the estimation of Antonio Cardinal del Monte (one of the presidents of the council), "the aim of our reforming activity is the revival of pastoral ministry – the 'care of souls.'"¹ The pastoral care of souls (*cura animarum*) was central to Tridentine reform.

If the primary duty of the Church is the care of souls, it follows that those who have been given this task as priests must be well prepared for this mission. This disposition towards internal reform was at the core of Trent's decree on establishing the seminary found in canon 18 which was dedicated to the Reform of the Clergy.² The idea of a Seminary was the creation of the Council of Trent. The seminary, which is understandably the seedbed for the training of future priests, has become proper and characteristic for the formation of priests today. The seminary decree as one of the achievements of Trent has left a long-lasting mark on the Church, Catholic priestly life, and parish ministry. The Tridentine seminary decree heightened the cultic dimension of the Priesthood and refocused churchmen's attention on their pastoral and spiritual responsibility. The far-reaching impacts of that decree on the Church

¹ Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*. Vol. 2. (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons 1961), 356.

² Among all the canon discussed and decreed on the reformation of the priestly life during the 23rd session of the Council of Trent, Canon 18 was the most important. This canon mandated that every diocese was to provide a seminary for the education, especially boys, for the priesthood. See, *Dekrete der Ökumenischen Konzilien*, besorgt von Giuseppe Alberigo, Giuseppe L. Dossetti, Perikles- P. Joannou, Claudio Leonardi, Paolo Parodi in Zusammenarbeit mit Hubert Jedin, Istituto Per Le Scienze Religiose (Hg)3, (Bologna, 1973), 750.

and contemporary priestly formation constitute part of ongoing research. The discourse on seminary is always relevant when situated within the current disposition of priestly formation to respond to issues of humanity's quest for freedom, the need for pastoral creativity to meet the 'signs of time', and the current understanding of obedience. There is also the need for modern and updated priestly education. All these continue to probe the necessity of seminary and priestly formation in this milieu. This paper explores the historical context that led to the decree, the mindset of the Conciliar Fathers about an ideal of priestly formation, and a review of the issues raised in the decree. It also interrogates contemporary issues surrounding the seminary, highlighting the need for practical reforms to confront present pastoral challenges. As the Church has consistently adapted its approach to priestly formation in response to epochal challenges, there is a pressing need for seminary reform to address current needs and challenges.

2.0 Priestly Training Before Trent

The decree on the establishment of a seminary solemnly confirmed as the form of education for clergy on July 15, 1563, in the twenty third session of the council of Trent remains one of the great insights of the Council of Trent. Church history is replete with ideas of priestly training when reconstructing the life of the early Church and the post-apostolic Church of the first and second centuries.³ It has to be acknowledged that there was no special educational institution for the training of Priests before the time of St Augustine. Augustine recognized the need for some form of 'special training' for priests in his native North African Church. According to Frederick van der Meer, Augustine believed that "he could render no greater service to the Church in his part of the world than by creating a new elite,

³ John Tracy Ellis, "A Short History of Seminary Education: I-The Apostolic Age to Trent" in James Michael Lee and Louis J. Putz, ed. *Seminary Education in a Time of Change* (Indiana: Fides Publishers 1985), 3. See also Augustin Theiner, *Geschichte der geistlichen Bildungsanstalten* (Mainz, 1835), 6-8.

educated under his supervision, in his own house.”⁴ This disposition of Augustine to covert his private monastery into a form of priestly training helped reform priests in North Africa. Augustine’s approach to training priests strongly emphasised spiritual formation and theological education as essential components for effective ministry. His priests were equipped to fulfil the pastoral role of guiding and nurturing their congregations while also upholding the purity of the Church through discipline. Augustine also encouraged a sense of fraternity among priests and emphasised the importance of Christian community life, which later inspired Monastic life. His formation model prioritised the significance of sacraments, preaching and teaching, and engagement with philosophy to defend Christian beliefs. The Augustinian model became a reference point for the formation of monasteries and schools for training priests in the medieval period. As Van der Meer explains, Augustine “left behind him, a seedbed for sanity and what was the first seminary for priests. It was imperfect, but its essential features were to be repeated through the ages.”⁵ In the medieval period, this idea of Augustine underwent significant changes from monastic schools, episcopal schools and universities. From those ecclesiastical institutions of the period, there emerged notable figures like St Benedict, St Boniface, St Anselm, St Albert the Great, St Thomas Aquinas, St Bonaventure and John Fisher.⁶ For the most significant part of the medieval period, those ecclesiastical, educational institutions later became universities that educated those preparing for the Priesthood or those already ordained.

With regard to the involvement of the Church’s magisterium in the formation of priests, the general idea of such training began in the 9th century with Pope Eugene II. He declared in 826 that every cathedral should have a cell established “in which young clerics

⁴ Frederick van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, Trans Brian Battershaw and R. G. Lamb (London: Sheed and Ward, 1961), 200.

⁵ Van der Meer, *Augustine the Bishop*, 234.

⁶ Theiner, *Bildungsanstalten*, 15-40.

were to be formed in ecclesiastical discipline.”⁷ The cathedral school was an effort at the formal education of priests even though it was uneven in achieving this aim in different dioceses. Lateran Council III (1179) also took up the question of priestly training. It decreed that “In every cathedral church there should be provided a suitable master who shall instruct without charge the clerics of the cathedral church and other poor scholars.” It stipulated that the master should have an income.⁸ Lateran IV in 1215 also made a decree advocating for instruction for priests after ordination. It decreed that the master must be a trained theologian, and students should be instructed in scripture and pastoral theology. Training after ordination can also be noticed in Popes Honorius III’s legislation (1219) and Boniface VIII (1298). Overall, the reception of these papal and conciliar decrees and their implementation are subject to debate because the centuries leading to the Lutheran revolt and the Council of Trent witnessed many ignorant Priests.

3.0 The Need for Reform of Priestly Training in the Late Middle Ages

As the Middle Ages drew to a close, “a pervading laxity had overtaken the religious orders as well as the secular priests -with high prelates the worst offenders of all, and the result was a situation unparalleled for clerical scandal since the so-called dark ages.”⁹ The secular clergy was the most glaring depiction of the decadence and corruption of the Church within the period. Church historians have attributed many and varied reasons to this decadence. Ignorance was especially outlined as a principal reason for the collapse of the moral and spiritual life of the clerics. Since they had little intellectual

⁷ Michael A. Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 64. See Michael L. Papesh, *Clerical Culture: Contradiction and Transformation* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004), 6. Maryanne Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Perfectae Caritatis, Optatam Totius, Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Rediscovering Vatican II) (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 78.

⁸ Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 64.

⁹ Ellis, “Seminary Education”, 12.

and spiritual education, it affected everything about them, including their disposition towards an ascetic lifestyle. Temporal worries plagued them, and some lived in concubinage.¹⁰ Just like any historical period, there were exceptions because this age also produced outstanding men in theology and moral discipline.¹¹

The level of training and discipline was mainly due to the type of priest. Regular Priests, who operated primarily in urban areas, were more likely to have received a university education, while their secular counterparts in rural communities were less academically exposed. According to Hubert Wolf, many secular Priests struggled with “financial distress which hardly allowed them to study at a university.”¹² Valentine Iheanacho sustains a similar argument. According to him, “the spiritual and material needs of the rural clergy before Trent, more often than not, were a matter of survival of the fittest. The same could be said of their lack of proper supervision”¹³ The common practice in vogue was for a candidate for the Priesthood to hire himself out to a pastor for two years as an apprentice with him and then register with the bishop for ordination.¹⁴ Their training was done in apprenticeship while candidates from noble families with ambition plans for future ecclesiastical careers, attended universities where they had access to good education in theology and, most times, in Canon Law.¹⁵ As Peter Hersche points out, the Priesthood in this period and early modern times was largely heterogeneous. Its numerical strength, societal influence, and training varied from country to country, notwithstanding the homogeneous and widespread apprenticeship

¹⁰ Herman Tüchle, “Das Seminardekret des Trienter Konzils und Formen seiner geschichtlichen Verwirklichung”, in: Remigius Bäumer (Hg) *Concilium Tridentinum* (Darmstadt 1979), 522. See also Ellis, 12.

¹¹ John W. O'Malley, *Trent: What happened at the Council* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2013), 213.

¹² Hubert Wolf, “Priesterausbildung zwischen Universität und Seminar: Zur Auslegungsgeschichte des Trienter Seminardekrets”, in: *Römische Quartalschrift* 88 (1993), 299.

¹³ Valentine U. Iheanacho, “Care of Souls and the Logic of Trent as a Pastoral Council” in *Acta Theologica*, 39(1), (2019), 106.

¹⁴ Wolf, 229. See also O'Malley, 213.

¹⁵ O'Malley, *Trent*, 212-213.

system of priestly formation of the time.¹⁶ The half-baked measures in priestly training and associated problems became quite untenable in Europe in the early 16th century. They contributed to the slipping of the German Catholic masses led by Martin Luther into the Church of Reformation. Pope Adrian VI was elected pope amid this crisis in 1522. He acknowledged the depravity in the Priesthood. He indicated the need for reform in his letter to the Diet of Nuremberg in 1522 with the following words:

Holy Scripture declares aloud that the sins of the people are the outcome of the sins of the Priesthood ... We all prelates and clergy have gone astray from the right way, and for long, none has done good; no, not one ... Each of us must consider how he has fallen and be more ready to judge himself than to be judged by God on the day of His wrath.¹⁷

Adrian VI did not live long to enforce the desired reform. The need for clerical reform and training occupied the attention of different Church leaders and scholars during this period. According to Wolf, "It was evident that such untrained priests were hardly up to the challenges of the Reformation."¹⁸ Pope Paul III eventually set up a commission to study the question of priestly reform. In the explication of Herman Tüchle, "The problem faced by the first reformist cardinals appointed by the Pope to a special commission was the rush of unqualified clerics to the ordinations."¹⁹ The commission of nine members, with four Cardinals, was headed by Cardinal Gasparo Contarini. It recommended the introduction of a formal examination before ordination.²⁰ While the commission was

¹⁶ For a detailed social historical study of the Church and the priesthood slightly before Trent and modern time, see Peter Hersche, *Muße und Verschwendung: Europäische Gesellschaft und Kultur im Barockzeitalter*, Vol. 1. (Wien: Herder, 2006).

¹⁷ Adrian VI to Chierigati, November 1522, Ludwig Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, Vol. IX (St Louis: Herder, 1910), 134-135.

¹⁸ Wolf, "Priesterausbildung", 229.

¹⁹ Tüchle, "Pas Seminardekret", 532.

²⁰ This recommendation is contained in Johannes Dominicus Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, Vol. XXXV (Paris and Leipzig: Welter, 1902), 347-355.

concerned about those admitted to Holy Orders, there was no corresponding interest in the report about creating an institution to train and prepare young men for entrance into the Priesthood.

Next in this spirit of reform was an imperial reform in 1563 in Vienna that suggested that universities be built where future priests would be trained. Although the cost-effect was high, the timing of this bold suggestion was very close to the end of Trent. For this reason, the Conciliar Fathers at Trent came to a compromise between having a university with financial costs or a unique institute for training priests. This compromise, over time, proved prudent. The Tridentine model was an improvement of the already existing cathedral school. It came in due course to shape and dominate Catholic priestly training for over three centuries. The primary concern of Trent was on the part of the Church to eliminate the causes that had led to the Reformation. It is not surprising that the Council Fathers unanimously saw the catastrophic level of education of the secular clergy as one of the main evils to be eradicated.²¹

Within the same period, some notable individuals embarked on the Reformation of priestly training. Their reform efforts served as a template for the council fathers in their deliberations. Notable among those pre-conciliar reforms are:

1. German College in Rome: Because of the effect of the Reformation, the German world experienced a decline in the vocation to the Priesthood. The need for an institution dedicated to training Germans for the Priesthood greatly interested Cardinal Marone. He had worked in Germany as a papal nuncio and experienced the decline. Leveraging on the newly founded Society of Jesus, with a disposition towards reform and education of priests, Cardinal Marone would convince Pope Paul III and the curia of the need to establish a school in Rome for the formation of young Germans to be ordained priests. This idea gave birth to the Collegium Germanicum of the Jesuits founded in Rome in 1552.”²²

²¹ Wolf, “Priesterausbildung”, 229.

²² Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient: Dritte Tagungsperiode und*

2. Cardinal Reginald Pole's efforts at reforming the Church in England resulted in the English Synod of 1556 in London. "Reformatio Angliae" is important in the history of the Tridentine decree on the formation of priests. Attempts at restoring Catholicism in England created a template for priestly formation that the Trent decree would adopt in the formation of priests. Because Marone admired Pole's seminary idea, under the presidency of Cardinal Marone, Trent adopted Pole's seminary experiment in England.²³
3. Bishop Giberti's school at the Cathedral of Verona deserves mention. His goal was to train young priests and young men preparing for the Priesthood.²⁴

4.0 The Decree on the Establishment of Seminary Training and its Review

During the discussion on the general need for priestly reform, which began on 12th May 1563, canon 16 (the final version, canon 18) for the training of future priests was introduced to the fathers by the president, Marone. In this canon three drafts were presented and debated one after the other. The debates lasted some weeks and centred around the definition of a seminary. Jedin highlights how the conciliar fathers, relying on previous reforms about Catholic education in general, wanted a special school with elements of the previous attempted education of priests. It would be a unique institution to provide quality education for future priests.²⁵ At first, the element of the school was more in the foreground. It was later placed more in parallel with the educational function of the College of the Jesuits. After that, the seminary was to be seen as a college with the particular purpose of training secular priests. Given this conception, "the seminary was not supposed to take the place of

Abschluss, IV (Überwindung der Krise durch Marone, Schließung und Bestätigung), (Wien: Herder 1975), 73.

²³ Jedin, *Konzils von Trent*, 73.

²⁴ Jedin, *Konzils von Trent*, 73.

²⁵ Jedin, *Konzils von Trent*, 74.

the universities, but to stand alongside them, not to replace them, but to be a beneficial addition.”²⁶ On July 15, 1563, during the 23rd solemn session at which the doctrine of the sacrament of Holy Orders was proclaimed, the decree on the establishment of seminary was published, mainly taken from the 18th and last canon of the final draft.²⁷ The original intention of conciliar fathers was to give all candidates for the Priesthood a university education. They could not immediately realize that original aim on account of financial reasons. Hence, in the explication of Wolf, the bishops settled for the possibility that “poorer candidates should also be given a solid minimum education.”²⁸ The Tridentine Seminary decree sought to merge the practical visions of the English Church reform and the religious and educational dispositions of St Ignatius of Loyola.²⁹ The overall aim was to give proper training to all who would be entrusted with the care of souls.

Church historians and commentators on the Council of Trent generally agree that the usefulness of this canon in the future development of the Church cannot be overemphasized. Pallavicino Sforza once remarked about the decree: “many were of the mind that whatever other good remained undone, this alone recompensed for all the labours and anxieties which the fathers had experienced.”³⁰ In Michael A. Mullett’s estimation, “if nothing had been done towards the renewal of the Church in the late Middle Ages, but initiate the setting up of diocesan seminaries for priests; it would have done a great deal.”³¹ In another manner, Mullet expresses the view that the decree alongside its innovation, “provided the Church with a trained and devoted clergy who deserved much credit

²⁶ Tüchle, “Pas Seminardekret”, 527.

²⁷ *Dekrete der Ökumenischen Konzilien*, 750. See also O’Malley, 212.

²⁸ Wolf, “Priesterausbildung”, 232.

²⁹ Tüchle, “Pas Seminardekret”, 531.

³⁰ Pallavicino Sforza, *Istoria del Concilio*, vol. X edited and trans. By Francescantonio Zaccaria Mendrisio: Minerva Ticinese, 1836], 223. See also O’Malley, 212.

³¹ Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 65.

for the subsequent gains of Catholicism.”³² A few other salient issues in the decrees are worth highlighting.

The decree was modelled after the Lateran Council III (1179), which directed that cathedral schools as a sort of colleges be established for the training of future priests. The decree equally owes a lot to Cardinal Reginald Pole, and the synodal decree on the training of priest for the English Church.³³ Every cathedral and metropolitan Church were mandated to build a special institution for the education of future priests, and poorer dioceses could pull their resources together to erect one seminary for their area.

While the decree made establishing a seminary mandatory for every diocese, it did not state that everybody ordained must be educated in the seminary. This is to be understood within the Tridentine understanding of the seminary which was conceived as a service to poor youth who desired the Priesthood but could not afford a university education. In this regard, the seminary was to be a place where the essential minimum of education was provided for all candidates for the Priesthood but most especially for poor children whose parents could not pay for their seminary training. This aspect of the decree gave it a solid pastoral bent. The decree was pastoral in tone and its canonical orientation. Its attentive care toward boys from poor financial backgrounds who might be unable to pay for their education remains remarkable. It must also be noted that the decree did not exclude children from wealthy families apart from the fact that their families ought to pay the cost of the training. It made the training of priests one of the primary obligations of the diocesan bishop, who was responsible for training his priests.

The short introduction of the decree, points to the need for early education in piety and religion. This was done with the awareness of the burden of original sin on human beings since, without the extraordinary grace of God, constant perseverance in the ecclesias-

³² Mullett, *The Catholic Reformation*, 65.

³³ Henry. J. Schroeder, ed., *Canons and Decree of the Council of Trent, Original Text with English Translation* (St Louis: Herder, 1941) 175-179.

tical life and the Priesthood was considered impossible.³⁴ The decree established the minimum age for admission into the seminary, together with the ability to read and write. An overview of what is to be taught, but, specific subjects were not given in the decree. In this study requirement, the fathers were vague. Although the fathers did not specify what the students were to study, they outlined the theological content needed in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and confession. There was no division of studies on the basis of the age group of the students. The fathers were less ambiguous on the spiritual formation of the candidates and, more specifically, on the following areas: wearing clerical garb, assisting at Mass, monthly confession, receiving Holy Communion and adhering to the spiritual director's advice. In addition, students were to receive a tonsure while entering the seminary. This was a sign of being set apart because religious men and women had great honour in the late Medieval time.

The management of the seminary was of great concern to the Tridentine fathers. As the proprietor of the seminary, the diocesan bishop was to appoint competent teachers to the seminary. There was an emphasis on the quality of those who were to teach in the seminary. They are not to be just priests, as in the previous apprenticeship system. The would-be seminary teachers were expected to be men of integrity and knowledgeable in theology. The impression is that the seminary administration was topmost for the fathers. Apart from a few introductory lines and directives on the faculty, the rest of the pages were dedicated to administration and financial issues.

One major challenge for the Fathers during the debate on the seminary was the question of finance. They wanted to ensure special provisions were made to finance the seminary project. Therefore, "Its directives on financial support to seminaries indicate the council's highest premium on the training of future priests who were to be entrusted with *cura animarum*".³⁵ As far as the Conciliar Fathers

³⁴ Tüchle, 527. See *Dekrete der Ökumenischen*, 750.

³⁵ Iheanacho, 106.

were concerned, no effort was to be spared in raising funds for such a worthy project, described by it as a “holy and pious work.”³⁶ This is very important because a lot has been written on the scandalous lifestyle of pre-Tridentine rural clergy. There has not been a balanced acknowledgement of the economic needs of rural clergy who never had the structural and financial support that the post-Tridentine Church was ready to accord to the secular clergy.³⁷

The Tridentine decree on the establishment of seminaries should be commended for its bold innovation, which has contributed tremendously to the training of priests in the Catholic Church. However, situating the decree within the general principles of counter-reformation, it seems to have come late and fell short of the agitations of the protestants. Just like the commission set up by Pope Paul III a few years before the council, the decree was more concerned about preventing the ordination of unsuitable candidates who might inhibit the pastoral care of the people of God. Trent and its decree on establishing the seminary were essentially directed towards reforming the Church from the inside.

5.0 A Short Overview of the Reception of the Decree on the Seminaries

In his description of the outcome of Trent, Peter Hersche expresses the view that “The Council of Trent had set high moral standards for the clergy; satisfying them entirely would have made everyone a potential saint, but the reality was natural, and the Council Fathers certainly knew something else.”³⁸ Naturally, there exists a divergence between the ideal of Trent, its concrete applications and realizations.³⁹ Analyzing the details of the reception of Trent’s Decree on priestly training is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is essential to note the following:

- I. The reception of the decree did not happen all at once. It took decades as a lot depended upon the political will of a

³⁶ Iheanacho, 106.

³⁷ Iheanacho, 106.

³⁸ Hersche, 296.

³⁹ Wolf, 233.

country's ruler and those of its bishops for ecclesiastical reform.

- II. One thing remains true, the decree somehow shaped individual countries' spiritual, pastoral and historical destinies that bordered on different national characters and adaptation to local circumstances and realities.
- III. Papal nuncios in different countries repeatedly pushed for the establishment of seminaries. The manner of execution was by no means uniform. The seminary was an idea whose practical implementation belonged to those responsible, in this case, the bishops. The decree left much leeway.⁴⁰
- IV. While Trent made the establishment of a seminary obligatory for every bishop, it did not make the seminary an express condition for receiving ordinations. The decree did not give specific instructions about the duration of the seminary or the division of seminarians into different groups or classes.⁴¹
- V. There remained in the background the possibility of ordaining people without seminary training which even in some places continued after the council. Many bishops could not shoulder the task of funding a seminary at the time.

The Tridentine decree was received in Rome and some Italian dioceses, even though some dioceses did not immediately establish seminaries for a lack of financial resources. Pope Pius IV established a seminary in Rome in 1565, which served as a model Tridentine seminary. Charles Borromeo was another example. He ensured the decree was well received in his region, where seminaries were established on the Tridentine model. Individuals like Philip Neri established Oratory to train secular priests, who later inspired some notable figures to train secular clergies in the 17th century. The

⁴⁰ Tüchle, 531.

⁴¹ Tüchle, 532.

spirituality and formation of diocesan seminaries were shaped in France by outstanding men like Cardinal de Berulle, Vincent de Paul, and Jean Jacques Olier.⁴² They founded religious congregations that were dedicated to the formation of priests. The establishment of seminaries contributed to the reception of Trent in France and around Europe before the French Revolution. Having championed the reform at the Council of Trent, Spain was well disposed towards the reception of the conciliar decree. The seminary decree was not initially well received in the German world. There were a few reforming German bishops with their cathedral chapters amongst other prelates who saw no need to spend money on establishing seminaries. The few built were modelled after the Jesuits who cared for many of them.

The 19th century was when the Council of Trent's Decree on the seminary became fully implemented in many places around Europe. Wolf notes that the period of secularisation, especially from 1803 and up until the beginning of the First World War in 1914, was marked by a series of disputes between universities in Europe and the Church.⁴³ The uneasiness about secularism and enlightenment led many bishops to devise solutions to get around intellectual hostility from the secular climate in Europe. The solution was the ecclesiastical tightening of the training of priests in seminaries which encouraged the building of seminaries. An interpretation of the decree of Trent from the 18th to 19th centuries ushered in the debate about the conciliar intention for the establishment of seminaries. Church leaders and scholars like Augustin Theiner argued that the panacea against hostile secularism was the seclusion of the Tridentine Seminary since universities had opened the door to "frivolous spirit and inclined towards paganism."⁴⁴ Henceforth, seminaries became increasingly to be regarded as full-fledged academic institutions to protect those preparing for the Priesthood from the enlightenment that had taken over the universities.

⁴² Confoy, 80.

⁴³ Wolf, 219.

⁴⁴ Wolf, 220.

The aim of post-Tridentine seminaries in the 19th century came to be that of helping candidates to develop a habit similar to monastic life with strict obedience. The original intention of the conciliar fathers at Trent was to guarantee basic education for the poorer candidates evolved and took other motifs as dictated by circumstances and ecclesiastical needs, especially within the context of the 19th century. Klaus Unterburger argues that the refashioned idea of priestly training, “superficially described as the pre-modern, Tridentine priestly image itself, came about late due to numerous transformations and modernization processes.”⁴⁵ The seminary ideal of this period raised the image of the priest beyond the cultic model that has always been associated with Trent. It placed the priest on the ethical plane with a sound education. The Priesthood and its training came to be seen as a counter-symbol against a materialistic image of man and the alleged hedonism of modernity. The Priesthood was considered a commitment to Christian hope against a worldly logic. Unterburger identifies four things that characterized priestly training in this period: “A spiritualization, an academisation, a homogenization and an episcopal domestication of the priestly profession.” All four, according to him, “created a new ideal image and a new habitus of priestly existence.”⁴⁶

The 19th-century priestly training harmonized Jesuit intellectualism and monastic spirituality through asceticism and contemplation. The seminary became a full-fledged academic and spiritual institution with the sole purpose of producing sound priests who were obedient and willing to defend the Church against any attack. These ideas and values succeeded in creating a homogenous priesthood as the Church stepped out of Europe and evangelized all parts of the world with priests trained within that European environment. With a theology of the Priesthood centred around the “ascetic ideal of dying away from the world and the fulfilling love relationship with Christ,” the priestly image of the 19th century

⁴⁵ Klaus Unterburger, “Zwischen Ganzhingabe und Überforderung: Erfolg und Grenzen des Priesterbildes des 19. Jahrhunderts” in: *Communio: Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift* 1 (2022), 17.

⁴⁶ Unterburger, “Priesterbildes”, 20.

became too idealistic and closed upon itself. The Church saw itself sandwiched in a world that it perceived as materialistic, which clamoured for modernization and democracy.⁴⁷

6.0 Engaging a Contemporary Discourse on Seminary Formation

Among the many issues that the Vatican I did not address was the issue of priestly training. However, Vatican II stepped up to remedy this by renewing the life of the Church and ministry. The Church is now defined as a divine mystery of love and a holy people of God, which complements the pre-existing concept of the Church as a hierarchical society. Vatican II's teachings on seminary are grounded in the overall ecclesiology of the Church as the people of God. An idealistic priestly formation isolated from the world was deemed insufficient to meet the Church's current needs and the complexities of modern society. Therefore, the Vatican II seminary model takes a broader view of the Church and the world. It is important to note that this is not just an adjustment to the seminary demands in light of a changing world. Instead, it is a continuous endeavour on the part of the Church to attend to the yearning and aspiration of humanity based on contemporary ecclesiological understanding.

Seminary formation that began with Trent and its decree has evolved. As an ecclesiastical institution, it has responded to the needs of the Church in different epochs since 1563. Since seminary training has been consistently structured to address the need of every epoch, there is a current need for practical reforms of the priestly training that go beyond issuing statements and Church documents.

In Europe and America, a substantial decline in the vocation to the priesthood and apathy towards the Christian faith has eroded the strict seminary training obtainable in the Post-Tridentine seminary; in some cases, question the necessity of seminary education. On the other hand, many African countries and some Asians are battling increasing growth in the vocation to the priesthood, making it difficult to differentiate between false and

⁴⁷ Unterburger, "Priesterbildes", 21.

genuine vocations. Harnessing this ministerial apathy in some parts of the world and concurrent growth in other parts remains one of the challenges of 21st century priestly training. The extent to which the current formation program can respond to decreased and excessive desire in faith and vocation to the priesthood is worth a discourse.

The Post-Vatican II ideal of the Priesthood seems grounded on the pillar of intellectual formation. This intellectual formation, however, has not been able to blend with the dynamics of contemporary society. While the seminary academic curriculum has mainly remained homogenous and stable in many countries, there is a constant challenge in inculcating the Church's ideal of priestly intellectual training in a constantly changing world. Intellectual training in seminary often dwells on manuals, lacking creativity. Also, the current intellectual formation in the seminary is battling to synergise with cultural values in different parts of the world outside European context.

The pastoral formation that occasionally encourages seminarians' involvement, even during their studies, in the pastoral life of the Church is to be commended. This is unlike the previous centuries that separated seminarians from the world for fear of modernity. Nevertheless, harmonising this noble idea with the genuine meaning of obedience and its current limit is challenging. There seems to be a growing tendency to present those seminarians in some parts of the world as servants rather than pastoral agents. Pastoral works often end in obedient service to priests instead of learning the dynamics of pastoral life. Amid some improvised societies, there is also the danger of clerical arrogance and materialism among the priests assigned to form these young men pastorally.

Spiritual and Human formation involves the necessary affective maturity needed for someone to live a priestly life and become an effective pastoral minister. The post-Vatican II Seminary training is battling between developing sincere spirituality and honest human development among seminarians. The effect of genuine spiritual development helps human development since both go together. However, good in themselves, the current traditional routine prayers and occasional spiritual direction have become too mechanical for

the sincere growth of the seminarians. Along with the question of human development lies the discourse about maturity, development of virtues and issues about human sexuality concerning priestly training.

Given this fact, it remains to be asked, what should be the drive of seminary formation in the contemporary time with its advancement in science and technology, coupled with demands for freedom and social inclusion?

Modernity has redefined the concept of leadership. It emphasizes participatory leadership, where ideally, everyone's opinion matters. Vatican II partially recognized this form of government with its theology of collaborative ministry. Since the priest has long been held as the leader of the parish community, has the seminary been able to prepare seminarians to become servant leaders who consult and listen or has the old-fashioned leadership model prevailed? There is an urgent need for seminaries to be able to train young men to lead with humility and respect for their lay collaborators.

The clamour for freedom is part of the recent significant changes in our world. According to the Church, this bluster for freedom must go with responsibility. Forming young men to minister in this environment when freedom is no longer a privilege, the seminary should train students to reconcile freedom with obedience and responsibility, especially in line with the nature and use of authority in the Church. How are seminarians to be given a genuinely liberal education that is available today, free from the modern dictatorship of relativism? Furthermore, to what extent should the principle of withdrawing clerical candidates from the world be modified to leave space for genuine spiritual and human development that can serve as a panacea to current abuses in area of sexuality and other human endeavours?

These questions have largely been answered in Vatican II documents on priestly formation, *Optatam totius*, Pope John Paul II's *Pastoral Dabo Vobis*, and the numerous documents from the Holy See and episcopal conferences of different countries. Some of those documents are very evasive and vague in answering these questions. There still exists in many places an apparent gulf between the desire of the Church and the actual practice of training accountable church leaders.

7.0 Conclusion

The Council of Trent was the best counter-reformation offered by the Church amid the Protestant revolt that threatened the very existence of the Church. At the heart of this reform was an attempt to cure the Church of clerical moral recklessness that provoked the protest. The conciliar decree that established seminaries for the training of poor young men for the Priesthood sought to remedy the immediate ecclesiastical situation of the time. This paper examined the historical issues at stake and the Church's previous attempts to educate priests. As has been demonstrated, those past attempts helped the conciliar fathers at Trent enact a decree that has guided the Church in training future priests. The decree itself was not uniformly received and implemented in different countries. It took a while before it became accepted and reached its zenith in the 19th century. The prevailing circumstances of the time led to the development of a priestly image that was closed in on itself, with high ethical and intellectual standards. Those ideals were considered important since they helped the Church to defend itself against external rational threats. The seminary as an institution within the Church continues to evolve and adapt amidst changes with regard to times, circumstances, places and needs of the Church. Keeping in mind the changes that have confronted contemporary societies in many areas, there is a need for practical reforms capable of addressing these challenges in priestly training.