

IMPACT OF CHALLENGES WITHIN THE SYSTEM OF FORMATION ON FORMANDEES' INTELLECTUAL, HUMAN, PASTORAL AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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Abstract

The training of candidates for the Catholic priesthood is a crucial process that molds the pastoral, intellectual, human, and spiritual aspects of the prospective clergy. With an emphasis on the Society of African Missions (SMA) Formation House in Bodija, Ibadan, Nigeria, this study examines the challenges present in the current priestly formation system. To learn more about how formation programme are carried out and experienced by formators and seminarians, data was collected through participant observations, interviews, questionnaire, and document analysis using a convergent parallel mixed-method. Cultural tensions, contextual constraints in spiritual and psychological accompaniment, fear of formators, lack of effective communication are only a few of the major issues that the findings highlight. The study makes use of human development theory of Erik Erikson and transformative learning theory of Jack Mezirow. The target population is the seminarians of SMA Formation House Bodija. Gaps in the combination of seminarians' growth and modern pastoral needs are also highlighted by the study. A more dynamic and participative model of priestly formation, training for formation staff and contextual sensitivity are highlighted as ways to improve the efficacy of formation processes. The study adds to the continuing discussion on the value and reform of seminary education in the quickly evolving African and international ecclesial landscape. It analyses the data using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Keywords: Challenges, Formator, Formation, Formandee, transformation, Confidence, Trust, Spiritual Direction.

1.0 Introduction

At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus Christ chose among his followers twelve apostles who lived with him. The time they spent with Christ enabled them to learn from him. Strengthened by the Holy Spirit, they were able to continue to bear witness to Christ in the world after his ascension. Following the footsteps of her founder, The Roman Catholic Church continues to train people who will carry out the mission entrusted to her. Knowing very well that human beings are imperfect beings, the Church always tries to improve the system of formation. Despite the constant effort of the Church to improve the system of formation, there are challenges that formandees face. How do those challenges

affect the overall growth of formandees?

This article used convergent parallel mixed-method to look at how formandees' intellectual, human, pastoral, and spiritual development is affected by difficulties within the formation system. The study aims to identify areas that need renewal and offer insights that can support more integrated, responsive, and life-giving formation processes by examining how systemic inadequacies affect each of these characteristics.

2.0. Challenges in the system of formation

According to Cambridge dictionary, a challenge is defined as something that requires great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully and therefore tests a person's ability.¹ The existence of a gap between the behaviour of some priests and what is expected from them shows the presence of challenges in the system of formation. What are the challenges in the system of the formation to the priesthood that prevent the transformation of seminarians?

2.1. Various challenges in the system of formation to the priesthood

In order to identify the challenges of the system of formation to the priesthood, this part of the article will present a short literature review on them.

Oseni Ogunu in his article “religious life in the orientation of the Church: the challenge of formation in Nigeria”² used an analytical method to present the orientation that the Church is giving to the formation of consecrated people and the challenges that the formation of consecrated people is facing in Nigeria. Ogunu's article is a useful descriptive survey that accurately reflects Church perspectives and highlights significant difficulties in the formation of future priests in Nigeria. Its appeal to commit to Christ via formation is successful. But it can be greatly enhanced, if its conclusions were supported by empirical study, Nigerian and African theological perspectives were consulted and intercultural processes in Nigeria's religious mosaic were highlighted.

Konrad Joseph uses a qualitative approach in the context of spiritual formation in India to explore the issues of sexual abuse in the Roman Catholic Church.³ According to this study, the problem of clerical sexual abuse is a great challenge to the formation to the priesthood today. This problem is real, pertinent, and complicated. It is a complicated issue that defies easy explanations or straightforward fixes in both the priesthood and society at large. This article provides a comprehensive analysis. By emphasizing the value of holistic training in tackling the sexual abuse epidemic within the Catholic Church, the article makes a substantial contribution.

In order to investigate the state of Holistic and integral Formation, and its effects at the initial and ongoing stages of the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God's formation in Fatick, Senegal, Patrice Sene, Elizabeth Ngozi Okpalaenwe, and Patrick Mwanja⁴ employed a convergent parallel mixed method in the context of religious life formation in

¹ www.dictionary.cambridge.org.

² OSENI OGUNU, “Religious Life in the Orientation of the Church: The Challenge of Formation in Nigeria,” *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* 15, (2019): 45.

³ KONRAD JOSEPH, “Formative Perspectives on the Sexual Abuse Crises in the Catholic Church”, *Dharmaram Journal of Psycho-Spiritual Formation* 10, 1, (January 2019): 18.

⁴ PATRICE SENE, ELIZABETH NGOZI OKPALAENWE & PATRICK MWANIA, “Holistic Formation for Effective Pastoral Ministry of Hospitaller Order of Saint John of God in Fatick, Senegal”, *Journal of African Interdisciplinary Studies (JAIS)*: ISSN 2523-6725 (Online) 7, 1, (January 2023):112.

Kenya. They look at the difficulties that the Hospitaller Brothers of Saint John of God face in their initial and continuing stages of holistic formation. According to this study, the process of formation is a lifelong one that necessitates the integration of some dimensions. Examining thorough religious formation in an African context, this article seems to be a worthwhile endeavor. The following would strengthen its scholarly footprint: Improved contextual and theoretical framing, a clearer methodological transparency, a stronger connection between formation inputs and ministry outputs, broader stakeholder participation, especially from laity voices, and recommendations that are both actionable and replicable.

A key work in Catholic moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor* addresses current objections to the existence of objective moral truth. John Paul II highlights the relationship between freedom and truth: true freedom must be in line with truth, not personal preference. This work stresses the Church's dedication to truth and dignity and offers a strong, logical argument against moral relativism. This reality is a great challenge that formees face in their process of formation. *Veritatis Splendor's* more doctrinal tone and structure, however, may limit its usefulness as a pastoral tool, particularly in the modern setting of formation that emphasizes accompaniment, conscience, and personal narrative.

In the framework of formation in Roman Catholic Church, Thomas Joseph Parayil⁵ employed a qualitative approach to investigate the positivity of artificial intelligence (AI) in his article “challenges of formation in the Era of AI.”⁶ He carefully navigates potential and moral ramifications of AI. According to the study's findings, AI offers the Church both chances and problems for growth. How do formees and the formation mechanism handle those challenges?

The impact of terrorism on Nigerian religious life was studied using a qualitative approach by Gregory Ekene Osuji and Everlyn Oluoch-Suleh,⁷ which looked at the influence of the terrorist group's operations in Jos Catholic Ecclesiastical Province of Nigeria. According to the study's findings, priests and religious have been internally uprooted by terrorism and many of them are traumatized. Since they are insecure, they operate with a great deal of worry and live in constant fear. What impact does this have on seminarians who are still in formation? Are they prepared to deal with this reality by the formation system? This study offers a qualitative investigation of the effects of terrorism on Jos's clergy, which is desperately needed. Its first-person stories are brave and powerful. The authors might do well to improve methodological detail, deepen theoretical scaffolding, define vocational paths, and provide more practical, localized responses, particularly within diocesan infrastructure, in order to make the work more academically sound and pastorally impactful.

⁵THOMAS JOSEPH PARAYIL “Challenges of Formation in the Era of AI”, *Dharmaram Journal of Psycho-Spiritual Formation*, 15, 1,(January 2024): 3.

⁶PARAYIL, “Challenges of Formation in the Era of AI”, 3.

⁷GREGORY EKENE OSUJI & EVERLYN OLUOCH- SULEH, “Influence of Terrorism on the Vocation and Ministry of Priests and Religious in Jos Ecclesiastical Province of Nigeria”, *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* 3, 2B (2015): 461.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. SMA seminarians conceal a lot of facts because they are dishonest from their home					
2. The fear of the formators prevents the formees to disclose their true self.					

1. What are the main obstacles preventing SMA seminarians from becoming more open during the formation process?

Question 1: SMA seminarians conceal a lot of facts because they are dishonest from their

Response options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	3	7.1%
Agree	1	2.4%
Neutral	9	21.4%
Disagree	20	47.6%
Strongly Disagree	9	21.4%

Of the 42 respondents, 29 deny that SMA seminarians are dishonest in keeping information from their families. Just 4 people agreed or strongly agreed, while 9 remained neutral. The data collected indicates that most respondents did not agree that SMA seminarians conceal information because they are dishonest in their personal lives. This implies that seminarians are generally seen as honest, even while the presence of indifferent responses indicates that some respondents are uncertain or would prefer not to make a judgement.

Question 2: The fear of the formators prevents the formees to disclose their true self.

Response options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	10	23.8%
Agree	14	33.3%
Neutral	13	31.0%
Disagree	4	9.5%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.3%

Formees' fear of their formators prevents them from being honest, according to 57% of respondents. 31% are not sure about this statement. As per the findings, 31% of participants expressed impartiality; however the majority (57%) said that formees' fear of the formators prevent them from being genuine. 12% didn't agree. This suggests that fear is viewed as a barrier to sincere self-disclosure throughout the formation phase. The high level of neutrality can be a reflection of the delicate nature of the subject or a vague personal experience. The general trend, however, indicates that many seminarians may struggle to completely express who they truly are, which has important implications for the formation house's interpersonal environment and level of formation.

Question 3: What are the main obstacles preventing SMA seminarians from becoming more open during the formation process?

The responses of this question can be grouped under the following themes:

- Theme 1: Personality type. A respondent affirms that he does not see any obstacles in the system preventing seminarians to be opened but “all go down to personality.”⁸
- Theme 2: Peer pressure
- Theme 3: Paying too much attention to other people formation stories. 3 respondents think that the main obstacle preventing SMA seminarians to be opened during their formation is the fact that they pay too much attention to the formation story of others.
- Theme 4: Lack of trust and confidentiality is a serious obstacle that hinders openness of formees.
- Theme 5: Family background and cultural related factors.
- Theme 6: Environment in the formation house
- Theme 7: Maturity of formators.
- Theme 8: Problem of accompaniment.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Being honest in formation can lead to delay or expulsion.	4	11	17	9	1
2. The formators' main responsibility is to assess and monitor the formees.	4	14	11	11	2
3. A major contributing factor to seminarians' dishonesty is peer pressure.	3	7	14	15	3

1. How do priests who have finished the SMA formation programme fare if they lack trusts and confidence during seminary formation?

Question 4: Being honest in formation can lead to delay or expulsion.

⁸Seminarian of Philosophy 3, 13 May 2025.

Response options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	4	9.5%
Agree	11	26.2%
Neutral	17	40.5%
Disagree	9	21.4%
Strongly Disagree	1	2.3%

The response demonstrates a range of viewpoints. Ten respondents disagreed with the belief held by 15 that being honest during formation could result in a delay or expulsion. In the meantime, a sizable percentage (40.5%) remains neutral. This implies that the matter is delicate and not universally understood. There is no agreement on the statement, according to the findings, but the fact that more respondents lean towards agreement than dissent indicates that there is a culture of caution or anxiety about being completely truthful in the formation setting. The high neutrality highlights the fact that many people could be reluctant to voice their opinions, perhaps because the subject involves formators' power dynamics.

Question 5: The formators' main responsibility is to assess and monitor the formees.

Response options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	4	9.5%
Agree	14	33.3%
Neutral	11	26.2%
Disagree	11	26.2%
Strongly Disagree	2	4.8%

The results of this question show that although a sizable portion of respondents, roughly 43%, believe that the formators' principal duty is to analyze and monitor formees, a sizable portion either disagreed (31%), or stayed neutral (26%). Seminarians might not completely identify with an evaluation-centered model of formation, based on this conflicting perception. The responses instead indicate that formators are expected to provide direction, companionship, and personal assistance in addition to monitoring.

Question 6: A major contributing factor to seminarians' dishonesty is peer pressure.

Response options	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	3	7.1%
Agree	7	16.7%
Neutral	14	33.3%
Disagree	15	35.7%
Strongly Disagree	3	7.1%

The findings show that dishonesty among seminarians is not typically thought to be primarily caused by peer pressure. 33% of respondents were neutral, 43% disagreed, and 24% agreed with the statement. This distribution shows that other factors, such as institutional cultures of fear, may have a greater influence on dishonesty than peer pressure. The high degree of neutrality also may mean that seminarians view dishonesty as a complicated problem that is difficult to pinpoint.

Question 7: How do priests who have finished the SMA formation programme fare if the lack trusts and confidence during seminary formation?

The responses of this question can be grouped in the following themes:

Theme 1: Difficulty to work with people

Theme 2: Transfer of frustration to others.

Theme 3: Lack of confidence and trust. This can be seen in this response: “Poor decisions; most become their true self after formation.”⁹

Theme 4: Low self-esteem and inferiority complex.

Theme 5: Arrogance and anger.

4.0. Suggestions to promote an integrated priestly formation

As stressed in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and *Ration Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, integrated priestly training aims for the seminarian's harmonious development in the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions. The following useful recommendations could assist to improve an integrated formation to the priesthood.

Suggestions

Since family life has a significant influence on an aspirant's emotional and relational development, psychological screening can be a very useful tool in assisting vocation directors and formators in understanding the aspirant's family background. The psychological screening of formandeas is “an important component of ordination, suitability, and risk evaluation to ensure that representatives of religious organizations are equipped, motivated, and safe for a life commitment to a faith vocation.”¹⁰ The screening can identify attachment styles developed throughout childhood, the impact of conflict, neglect, or overprotection in the family, and parental views that influenced the candidate's sense of self-worth, trust, and capacity to relate to authority. This aids in determining whether or not the applicant established healthy emotional bonds and coping strategies.

The inability to ensure a balanced integration of the formation's academic, pastoral, spiritual, and human components is one of the main challenges noted in the study. “Seminary formation leaves an enduring impact on seminarians that extends far beyond the confines of the seminary walls. As seminarians journeyed through their formation, they are

⁹Seminarian of Philosophy 4, 21 May 2025.

¹⁰ALEXANDER JACK & DANIEL T. WILCOX, “The Psychological Assessment of Clerics”, *Pastoral Psychology* 67, 1(2018): 55.

immersed in diverse values, teaching, and experiences that hone their character and worldview.”¹¹ Since human formation is the cornerstone of the formation, promoting human values (honesty, sincerity, etc.) among the formandees is crucial. To address this, workshops, seminars, and psycho-spiritual evaluations are important.

Fear is a term used by formandees to describe an emotional or psychological conflict between them and the people who formed them. This fear is frequently relational, emotional, or psychological rather than bodily. It shows a lack of transparency or trust in the setting of formation. An authoritarian formation style, a lack of trust and communication, a punitive or unbalanced evaluation approach, cultural background, and prior experiences can all contribute to this fear. Addressing the spirit of fear is crucial to fostering an atmosphere of freedom, trust, and genuine development in formation houses. Openness, genuineness, and discernment are all impeded by fear. Integral formation requires these components. The seminary must be a community of trust and fraternity rather than one of control or intimidation, according to *Patores Dabo Vobis* and *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*.

Listening is not a passive activity during the priestly and missionary training process; rather, it is a way to show love and service. For the formandees, a good listener serves as a mirror, mentor, and healer. By listening to individuals committed to his care, the formator can gain insight into their inner lives, challenges, and goals. The ability to listen is crucial for the formator because it enables him to enter the person's heart and assist in identifying the Spirit's activity.¹² Paying close attention to what is being said makes the person feel appreciated, respected, and accepted. It lessens anxiety and promotes openness when discussing challenges and feelings.

Barriers of mistrust, suspicion, or fear can be broken down with effective communication. Formandees feel valued, heard, and understood when formators address them politely and clearly. Open communication fosters a trusting environment where formandees can freely share their ideas, challenges, and areas for improvement without worrying about being judged. The basis of true formation is this trust.

Formandees' evaluation of formators is a participatory process that, when carried out with maturity, respect, and an open mind, has the potential to significantly alter the system of formation. Formators traditionally evaluate their formandees, but when formandees are also given the opportunity to evaluate the formators, the process becomes more humanizing, reciprocal, and synodal. Accountability and transparency are encouraged when formandees are given the chance to assess formators. Formators are more inclined to carry out their duties with greater integrity and self-awareness when they are aware that they are also assessed by formandees. It stops excessive rigidity or abuse of

¹¹JINGGLE C. SELGAS, CEE JAY M. JALANDONI, JUNJIE L. CALMA, & RENE D. ADORABLE, “Charting the Path of Formation: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Acquired Values of Former Seminarians in the Seminary formation,” *Jurnal Studi Agama* 8, 2 (2024): 14.

¹² CONGREGATION FOR CLERGY, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation (Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis)*, 43.

power. Formandees' assessment of formators encourages co-responsibility in formation, which is consistent with Pope Francis' desire for a synodal Church that hears all opinions. Everyone stops being merely a passive recipient and starts actively participating in the process.

5.0. Recommendation

In the light of the research's main findings regarding the impact of the challenges in the system of formation on the growth of formandees, the following recommendations are made:

- **Improve Formator – Formee Communication Channels**

More deliberate and organized communication channels should be created by formation teams. Open forums, feedback systems, and regular one-on-one conversations can all assist close the communication gap and foster a more positive forming atmosphere. It is important to urge formators to use culturally sensitive communication techniques and pastoral listening techniques.

- **Promote a Culture of Trust, Openness, and Psychological Safety**

The formation community should provide an environment where formandees feel comfortable sharing their issues without worrying about unfavorable outcomes in order to eliminate fear, dishonesty, and a lack of transparency. Increased transparency may be supported by anonymous feedback platforms, private counselling services, and group trust-building initiatives.

- **Improve Psychological Screening and Background Assessment**

A more thorough psychological assessment carried out by trained experts should be part of the recruitment process. To make sure that candidates have the fundamental human traits required for priestly formation, this may entail personality testing, emotional maturity exams, and extensive background investigations.

- **Ongoing formation of the formators**

Ongoing training in topics like human formation, counselling, conflict resolution, intercultural competency, and modern psychological realities impacting young adults should be provided to formators. Any formation programme's success depends on having well-trained formators.

- **Implement Clear Formation Policies**

It will be easier to eliminate uncertainty and avoid misunderstandings if there are clear instructions about expectations, communication protocols, confidentiality, and disciplinary procedures. Fairness and accountability are promoted by transparent policies.

6.0. Conclusion

This study looked at the impact of the challenges in the system of formation to the priesthood on the growth of the formandees. The results showed important problems that

have impacts on the formation process's efficacy and quality. The communication gap between formators and formees, the presence of fear and dishonesty among some candidates, the lack of transparency in relationships, and the gaps in formators' continued training and readiness were some of the most significant obstacles. These difficulties demonstrate the need for a more comprehensive and human-centered approach to priestly training, one that promotes openness, confidence, emotional development, and sincere spiritual development.

Although this study has yielded valuable insights, the subject is still large and merits more investigation. To ascertain whether these difficulties are common or situation-specific, future research should compare SMA Formation House where questionnaire were administered with other Catholic formation institutions.

In Summary, priestly formation is not merely an academic or spiritual training; it is a process of transformation aimed at shaping the whole person in the likeness of Christ the Good Shepherd. When the challenges are properly addressed, through regular human accompaniment, effective communication, professional evaluation and continuous formation of formators, the formation system will continue to be a fertile ground for nurturing priests who are not only competent ministers but also authentic witnesses of God's love and mercy in the world.

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