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## Priestly Formation in Africa in the Light of the Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis

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## PRIESTLY FORMATION IN AFRICA IN THE LIGHT OF THE *RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS INSTITUTIONIS SACERDOTALIS*

This chapter<sup>1</sup> reflects on the particular challenges facing priestly formation in Africa in dialogue with the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*.<sup>2</sup> First, it explores the reception of the new *Ratio* in Africa. Then it exposes the challenges facing seminary formation in Africa, with particular reference to Nigeria and Cameroon. Finally, it focuses attention on the future of priestly formation in Africa and what values, especially African, can be mobilized for genuine formation of priests in the years to come.

### 1. AFRICAN RECEPTION OF THE *RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS INSTITUTIONIS SACERDOTALIS*

The new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* renews the last one, which dates back to 1970,<sup>3</sup> though updated in 1985 with footnotes in the light of the new *Code of Canon Law* (1983). It has to be read in connection with other major documents, especially, *Optatam totius* (OT),<sup>4</sup> *Presbyterorum ordinis* (PO)<sup>5</sup> and *Pastores dabo vobis* (PDV).<sup>6</sup>

When I told a confrere formator about the promulgation of a new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (RF) by the Congregation for the Clergy, he exclaimed: "Another document on formation? We have not finished reading the older ones." This is very similar to the reaction of other formators in Nigeria and Cameroon with whom I have spoken.

Nevertheless, seminary formators and bishops in Africa generally welcome the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. They underline that it upholds and confirms the concern for the transformation of seminary formation which has occupied the major part of reflection of different Episcopal conferences as well as national and regional seminaries' commissions in Africa for the past ten years. Three major documents<sup>7</sup> published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria testify to the work done so far . . . The Catholic Bishops of Cameroon dedicated their 41st Seminar (8–13 January 2018) to reflection on seminary formation and the study of the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. I was privileged to be present in Yaounde at the same time for the 1st Symposium and General Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Africa and Madagascar (COMSAM) under the title *Consecrated Persons, Identity and Mission*. It was enriching to confront the different visions of formation between bishops, religious superiors, and formators.<sup>8</sup>

*emphasis on the pastoral dimension of formation and the value of the community in priestly formation*

In line with their various experiences, African formators and pastors identify two major emphases of the new *Ratio* that are very relevant for priestly formation in Africa, namely, the emphasis on the pastoral dimension of formation and the value of the community in priestly formation.

### ***The Priest as Pastor***

The new *Ratio* underlines the pastoral identity of the priest. The unifying element in the formation is to help the seminarian develop “pastoral charity” (RF 42). The priest is being trained to be a disciple of Jesus Christ and has been constituted to be a pastor and leader (RF 32). Hence, initial formation should be of a missionary character meant to help the seminarian configure himself to Christ in pastoral ministry (RF 57).

This explains the simplified structuring of the different stages of formation: first cycle: “discipleship stage”; second cycle: “configuration stage” and the third stage, which is the diaconate ministry or “pastoral synthesis.” It is noted also that formation does not end with initial formation. Every priest remains responsible for his “ongoing formation” (RF 80–88). This ongoing formation as well “implies a continuous conversion of heart, the capacity to see one’s life and its events in the light of faith and, above all, of pastoral charity, by way of a total gift of self to the Church, according to the design of God” (RF 56). This is an added advantage compared to the 1970 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* which seemed to give the impression that the priest is primarily a man of the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.

*The new emphasis on the pastoral dimension of priestly formation is important for Africa*

The new emphasis on the pastoral dimension of priestly formation is important for Africa because, as Jordan Nyenyembe<sup>9</sup> rightly argues, African Catholic priesthood inherited two viruses: the “virus of Christendom,” inherited from the West, and the “virus of Chieftdom” or the “*Igwe syndrome*,” inherited from African traditions. The virus of Christendom refers to the Tridentine emphasis on the priest as “an administrator of the sacraments and the teacher of the faith.” This definition favors sacredness. The priest is set apart from the rest of the faithful, superior in holiness. This gave rise to a “destructive clericalism . . . Priests behave as if they are bionic superhumans . . . They tend to be judgmental, hypocritical and insensitive to the sufferings of lay people.”<sup>10</sup> They form a caste class among the people of God. The chieftdom virus, or the *Igwe Syndrome*, accounts for the priests comporting themselves as family or village chiefs. This gives rise to personality cult. The emphasis on the priest as pastor helps to avoid the tendency to clericalism and personality cult.

*Emphasis is no longer on the formator but on the community of formators preparing future pastors of the Christian communities*

### ***The Value of Community in Priestly Formation***

Generally, it is taken for granted that religious priests live in community, hence formation for community living is central in their formation. This has not always been the case for diocesan clergy. However, the new *Ratio* insists on the community dimension of the formation of priests. The different stages of formation take place in community. “Community life during the years of initial formation must make an impact on each individual, purifying his intentions and transforming the conduct of his life as he gradually conforms himself to Christ” (RF 50). Hence the “Seminary community is indeed a family” (RF 52).

Emphasis is no longer on the formator but on the community of formators preparing future pastors of the Christian communities. This is in line with OT that says the community of seminary administrators and teachers constitutes one family with students under the leadership of the rector (OT 5). PDV calls the seminary “an educational ecclesial community” as well as “a particular educating community.”<sup>11</sup> Since the priest is called to be responsible for a community, he should be a man of communion.<sup>12</sup> Right from the propaedeutic stage, the seminarian is inserted in the pastoral parish community, which provides help for the educational journey toward a mature, responsible freedom.<sup>13</sup> This resolves the problem of individualism. Priestly ordination is not lived as triumph of the individual but as the fruit of a community accompaniment. In the community, the seminarian is accompanied to contemplate Christ the Pastor. He is called to configure himself to Christ, becoming a disciple of Christ the Pastor. Vocation is not a personal project but a gift to the community.

African formators and bishops appreciate the emphasis on community because it corresponds to the African vision of the human person. In African traditions, the human person is understood as part of a network of relationships within a community. The best word to define this network is “relatedness.”<sup>14</sup> This is embodied in the Igbo proverb, “*Ife kwulu, ife akwudebe ya*” (something stands and something else stands beside it).<sup>15</sup> Eastern and Southern Africans call it *ubuntu*. Our existence is bound together. “My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours.”<sup>16</sup> This means that to exist is to be related in a multiplicity of ways. On the other hand, what is not related does not exist.

As Uzukwu rightly stated, “the fundamental assumption that reality is plural—dual or twinned, multiple or a combination of twinned components—structures the human access to the universe.”<sup>17</sup> The realization of one’s life follows the logic

*The identity of the human person is not fixed; it is not given once and for all*

of a harmonious vision that encompasses the individual, the community and the cosmos. The society is ready to fight any disorder that endangers this harmony. However, the community itself is not absolute. The Igbo name for community is: *obaneze*, that is, *oha-na-eze* (the multitude and the kings). The community is constantly checked and structured by the ancestors, *chi* (the other of the human person) and the gods. The identity of the human person is not fixed; it is not given once and for all. It is always a process and a task to be accomplished. The human person is in becoming and his or her possibilities are beyond the present conditions of his or her existence. The truth of one's identity unfolds in the process of communion with others.

African formators and pastors think that bringing the sense of the community into seminary formation gives a sense of solidarity. This is in line with the notion of church as family of God, which constituted a major option made by *Ecclesia in Africa*. While recognizing the importance of biological blood ties within families and ethnic groups, it noted that the baptismal ties transform and transcend ethnic divides. Even beyond baptismal ties, the church recognizes "creation's new and integral sense of kinship with God derived from its relationship with the Son of God who has become the Son of man,"<sup>18</sup> ingeniously designated as *the ofilience* by Archbishop Anthony Obinna of Owerri. While African seminary formators and pastors welcome the emphasis on the pastoral and community dimensions of priestly formation as being in consonance with the practice in African seminaries, they also search for ways to address other major challenges facing formation in their respective seminaries. I will present some of them here with special reference to Nigeria and Cameroon.

## **2. PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF PRIESTLY FORMATION IN AFRICA**

*Africa is blessed with vocations. Many young men want to give their lives to Christ as priests*

### ***Accompaniment in Overcrowded Seminaries***

Africa is blessed with vocations. Many young men want to give their lives to Christ as priests. In fact, some dioceses and religious congregations do not conduct vocation drives as such. Their major headache is how to manage the numbers that come. The Spiritans in Southeast Nigeria alone have to discern how to take only 30 candidates out of the more than 500 applications they receive in a year.

*seminaries in Africa are over-crowded*

The other side of the coin is that seminaries in Africa are over-crowded. The statistics of different major provincial seminaries in Nigeria for the 2017/2018 academic year are very interesting in this sense. Bigard Memorial Seminary,

Enugu (832); Seat of Wisdom Seminary, Owerri (533); Seat of Wisdom Seminary, Ariam Campus (190); Michael Iwene Tansi Seminary, Onitsha (291); St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary Awka (397) and Sts. Peter and Paul Bodija (579); St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary Makurdi (397); and St. Joseph's Seminary Ikot-Ekpene (462), etc. This is without counting many other seminaries that belong to different religious institutes. In a good number of these seminaries, students live two or sometimes three per room. The major seminaries in Cameroon have lesser populations: Nkolbisson (109), Bafoussam (98), Douala (100). Yet the bishops and formators feel the weight of the numbers.

The population of the major seminaries has to be viewed in line with the demographic factor of African local churches and Christians in general. African church leaders appeared to have been taken unaware, and most of them found themselves unprepared to handle the overwhelming increase and rise in population of African Christians in their local churches.

In these contexts, close accompaniment of seminarians as required by the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (RF 44–49) becomes very difficult. In an attempt to measure up, some formators are obliged to adopt a policing approach based on fear and intimidation. Sometimes they may be tempted to use some student functionaries to spy on their fellow students. This can create a submarine mentality in students and hinder proper accompaniment.

### ***Formation by Example***

Accompaniment requires that formators be good models. PDV states that “the priests, as the ministers, the ‘elders’ of the community, will be in their person the ‘model’ of the flock, which for its part is called to display this same priestly attitude of service toward the world—in order to bring to humanity the fullness of life and complete liberation.”<sup>19</sup> It insists that “the greater or lesser degree of the holiness of the minister has a real effect on the proclamation of the word, the celebration of the sacraments and the leadership of the community in charity.”<sup>20</sup>

To train such priests, the formator himself will have to be a model to those placed under his charge. Having been a formator for fourteen years in France and in Nigeria and now Councilor for formation in our congregation for six years, I can confidently attest that a good number of formators are good role models. They accept their weaknesses and try as much as possible to give a good example of life to the seminarians. Many priests run away from this ministry because they know that it is very demanding. A seminary formator is a “seminarian” because he is the first to submit himself to the

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rules and regulations of the formation community. Seminarians watch formators very closely. Before endorsing any principle or value, they consider the credibility of the person representing or transmitting the value.<sup>21</sup> Is he authentic, sincere, coherent, available and competent? Can I entrust my destiny to him? This means that they expect the formator to risk his own personal experience while taking into consideration their own individual experiences. Pope Paul VI put it right: “Modern man does not listen to masters but to witnesses, if he listens to masters it is because they are witnesses.”<sup>22</sup> It is equally true that some formators do not measure up to the expectation associated with their noble task.

### ***Lack of Trained Formators***

Good accompaniment depends also on the competency of formators. We have to remember the saying that *nemo dat quod non habet*. “No one gives what he/she does not have.” Many priests are thrown into these seminaries as formators without adequate formation. A good number of them have distinguished themselves academically in many disciplines and have Masters degrees and PhDs, but this is not sufficient to be a formator. A good number are simple, good and prayerful priests. This is equally not sufficient. Formation requires some specific skills that have to be acquired through a specific formation. Formators suffer because of lack of skills. Seminarians suffer as well because they expect to be accompanied by formators who know the art. How can one guide others on the road if he does not know how to read the road map?

### ***Correspondence between Formation Values and Influence of the Outside World***

The big problem is the counterproductive influence of parish and diocesan priests on the seminarians. One of the greatest challenges of formators is to face the questions of students regarding the difference between what is taught in the seminary and the lifestyle of certain priests they encounter in the parishes and chaplaincies where they go for apostolic work. One of my colleagues once took the risk of making the analogy of driving school. Briefly, he said that in driving school people are taught to hold strictly to the rules, and they have to follow them, but when they get their driver’s license, they can decide to drive the way they like at their own risk and peril. In other words, as long as they are in the seminary, seminarians have to strictly adhere to the rules; what they do after ordination is at their risk and peril. This perilous analogy even complicated the embarrassment and confusion. My answer is always that seminarians should look up to those priests who

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are doing well. A good number of priests are making honest efforts to uphold the dignity of the priesthood. One who freely decides to be a disciple of Jesus, the pastor, should not allow himself to be carried away by any counterexample he encounters around him.

It is important to note also the influence of the larger society on both seminarians and their formators. Both come from the same society like the rest of the citizens of their countries and are all in one way or the other under the same sociopolitical, economic and cultural influences. During holidays, they all return to their homes, families, parishes, towns and cities under the same “spells” that control the variables of every other member of society. They are also affected by interreligious or inter/intra-ethnic conflicts or other situations of near-war conflicts.

Of great influence on priests and seminarians today is the form of ministry proposed by the new religious movements—for example, the prosperity Gospel and healing ministry. These are copied by most Nigerian powerful priest-healers whom the seminarians and young priests nowadays tend to imitate.

The family background of the seminarians is equally important, especially the dependence culture of African societies. How do seminary formation and church leaders handle the question of financial maintenance of the clergy, especially diocesan and future diocesan and religious priests in an African context? This is one of the cogent factors that is causing a lot of anti-evangelical behaviors of not only priests but, especially, seminarians. Most of the seminarians and some of our young priests fear that their bishops or dioceses have no stable and sustainable financial arrangement for priests' maintenance, especially, in sickness and old age. Hence the tendency to strive for self-survival. On another note, a good number of bishops evaluate their priests by their capacity to generate significant funds for the diocese. Those who do not measure up in this regard are relegated to the background or even transferred to poor parishes. The search for money becomes part of survival strategy.

Again, seminary formation in Africa, till now, has yet to emphasize the aspects of skill acquisition and the need for personal initiatives on the part of individual candidates for the priesthood so that they become more “self-sustaining.” Seminarians view priesthood as a profession in the church where things are provided for them, as and when due, without much personal input other than the normal ministry of celebration of sacraments and parish management as pastors. The dependence culture is also seen in the seminary formation and training of future priests, where things are to be provided for them without any effort on their part.



### ***Intercultural Living in Formation Communities***

Intercultural living is not easy to handle in formation communities. We have noted above that Africans appreciate community living and, in fact, life is lived in community. However, African solidarity is undermined by a strong sense of tribalism and ethnicity. This can undermine genuine formation in seminaries which are generally provincial or interprovincial. It happens often that there are strong rivalries among people from different cultural groups or ecclesiastical provinces. Some staff members may be tempted to protect people of their diocese, province, culture, or country and filter confidential information to them.

In some extreme cases, congregations are slow in accepting people from certain cultural backgrounds because they are afraid of intercultural encounter. Unfortunately, some of these congregations toe the line of some myths surrounding the history of relationship among different cultures in a given country. Some cultures could be tagged as domineering; others are tagged as immoral or laissez-faire, and so on. It can also happen that some people from a particular culture take it for granted that it is their right to rule others and therefore would not accept leadership of someone else from another group. Other people who identify with the minority may adopt the posture of resistance to the “dominant culture.” This type of tension undermines the building of brotherhood in the formation community and in the wider community of priests in the ecclesiastical provinces.

### ***The Use of Modern Technologies***

Formators constantly face the dilemma of how to control the use of modern communication systems in formation communities.<sup>23</sup> The candidates coming to the formation communities are already “digital natives.” They are absorbed in the internet culture of the here and now.<sup>24</sup> Their culture is that of the “interruption technologies” because of instant messages, e-mail alerts, SMS alerts, video chatting alerts, etc. The individual is enticed to be present to all these solicitations. The desire to live in the present leads to situations of stress and internet addiction. The “digital natives” in the formation communities are constantly connected to the web, television, internet, smartphone, Facebook, Skype, and Twitter. This has an influence on their concentration on the formation being proposed to them as well as the formation of their identity. This has resulted in an increased individualism and a weakening of community life and community spirit. Another consequence of the culture of immediacy is the crisis of long-term commitment.<sup>25</sup> Many young priests and religious are finding it difficult to stay for a long time in a particular mission or apostolate.

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The Nigerian Seminaries' Commission banned the use of cell phones in diocesan major seminaries in order to help the seminarians concentrate on their formation. However, the seminaries belonging to religious congregations decided to allow seminarians to use their cell phones. First, because they believe that the ban was useless since the seminarians used their phones in secret and that created more headaches for the formators. Second, they think that it is better to reflect with them on the reasonable use of such means and on the consequences for their freedom, character formation, and growth.

### ***Lack of Funds for Formation***

Bishops and religious superiors do not have sufficient funds to take care of the formation communities in Africa and in Nigeria in particular. The lack of finance is seen in the poor quality of infrastructure, the poor quality of the food given to the seminarians and formators as well as the inadequacy of staff welfare. In some cases, seminarians are asked to make financial contributions to the seminaries and take care of part of their upkeep. This makes them victims of some rich benefactors and benefactresses, thereby compromising their moral integrity. Seminaries find it difficult to pay external staff who come in to teach some courses required by the different universities to which they are affiliated. This affects the input of those external lecturers. On the same note, resident staff are tempted to look elsewhere for money to take care of themselves. This creates the situation whereby some formators transform themselves into “daylecturers”: they deliver their courses and spend the rest of the time outside looking for money to complement the meager resources offered to them. This weighs down negatively on the quality of formation.

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In the light of the above-mentioned challenges, what would be required for a more genuine priestly formation in Africa? What might seminary formation in Africa look like in the years to come?

### **3. TOWARDS A MORE GENUINE SEMINARY FORMATION IN AFRICA IN THE NEXT TEN YEARS**

In order to prepare quality priests, seminary formation in Africa in the next ten years should strive to overcome the two above-named viruses of “Christendom” and “Chieftdom.” In addition to the recommendations of the new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, I would add that seminary formation needs to be done in connection with a critical dialogue with good African cultural values. Moreover, more effort needs to be made: to

reflect on the ethical use of modern technologies; to ensure that the number of trained formators matches the number of students; and to strengthen rigorous discernment.

### ***Incorporating African Values in Formation***

Formation takes place in a particular culture. Vatican II defines culture in the general sense as: “all those things which go to the refining and developing of humanity’s diverse mental and physical endowments.”<sup>26</sup> Whether we like it or not, people reflect their cultural heritage and human context; their knowledge and experience are mediated to them through their language and culture. Anyone wishing to communicate in an adequate fashion absolutely must take these things seriously. It is always delicate to know to what extent cultural values have to be integrated in seminary formation. The relationship with the culture is delicate because formation can copy the positive and negative dimensions of a particular culture. For example, the chieftom mentality has been absorbed by priests without much questioning. However, avoiding cultural insertion of formation is not a lasting solution. What is required is a critical encounter with African cultures. This involves identifying within the same culture with values that serve as constant critique and correction of the chieftom mentality.

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This is what the whole question of inculturation of the Christian faith is about. Inculturation is a term used in theology to define the encounter of the Christian message with a particular culture in which the Christian message is expressed through the values of that culture and the same culture is transformed by the Christian message. The best definition to date is that given by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, former superior of the Jesuits:

*Inculturation is the incarnation of the Christian life and message in a concrete cultural milieu in such a way that not only is the Christian message expressed through the elements of the culture in question but also this experience becomes a principle of inspiration and at the same time a unifying norm which transforms and re-creates this culture, being by consequence at the origin of a new creation.<sup>27</sup>*

What are those African cultural values that help foster more genuine priestly formation? I will underline three among others, namely, *servant leadership*, *the value of an oath*, and *confidentiality*.

### ***Servant Leadership***

The priest is called to build up the community of the children of God beyond ethnic, sociocultural, and political

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divides. He does this by totally consecrating himself to the entire church. Despite the abuses of power and the noise made by dictators, traditional African leadership comprises the critique of the chiefdom virus. One of the highest offices in African traditions is that of the elder and manager of spiritual affairs. Nsukka people in Eastern Nigeria call him *Onyeisi* or *Eze Muo* (*Leader* or *King-manager* of spiritual affairs). He must demonstrate human and spiritual maturity. He consults and dialogues patiently. He arbitrates litigations, takes decisions when necessary, and speaks the truth without fear or favor. His goal is always to create harmony and unity in the community of the living and the dead, community of the visible and invisible beings.

In order to excel in the art of good leadership, seminarians will be taught to be leaders who uphold the fraternity of the people of God beyond ethnic divides. In response to this challenge, the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria insists on servant leadership. It states that to avoid clericalism a priest should lead a Christian community by radically conforming to Christ's teaching by his own mode of leadership.<sup>28</sup>

### ***Respect for a Covenant***

Another dimension of the African sacred tradition is the respect for a covenant, which the Igbo tradition calls "*Igba-ndu*." Traditional African religion chooses and commissions priests who minister at the traditional "shrines" in the villages and families before the advent of Christianity, and even today. This commits the person to the destiny of the people through the process of oath taking. A given word is respected. It is sacred. When a priest, an initiated person, or a titled person takes an oath, he or she keeps it. It means that before entering the covenant, the person has examined himself/herself and has weighed his/her capacity to keep the oath. He or she passes through a process of initiation during which experienced and titled persons weigh the person's capacity to keep an oath. This capacity can also be built up during this process of initiation, which involves learning, understanding the history and tradition of his or her people, the bonds and boundaries, the secrets and taboos.

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Traditional African priests remain faithful to their calling not necessarily because of the oath but primarily because of the respect for the tradition which the ancestors have left for society's continued existence. Called by the community through the process of divination performed by the elders, the priests in African traditional religion are chosen to officiate as representatives of the living and the ancestors themselves. They

do so by offering prayers and sacrifices to the Creator through the mediation of the same ancestors.

Bringing the traditional value of the covenant into the training of Catholic priests helps one to understand the value of the vows and promises priests and religious make. A vow or a promise is a commitment of oneself before God and the entire community. Such a commitment, which involves giving one's word, cannot be broken without consequences for the person and the community. This is why the preparation for priesthood is long (ten to eleven years). Enough time is needed for initiation into the mystery of the priesthood and to help the candidate build up the capacity to endure in the covenant. He learns to understand that his vocation is not for himself but for the good of the people of God. His destiny is tied to that of the people of God through his configuration to Christ, the mediator between God and man.

*his vocation is not for himself but for the good of the people of God*

### ***Confidentiality***

Very close to the value of an oath is confidentiality: the capacity to keep a secret. In African traditions, initiated people should keep secrets.<sup>29</sup> The breach of confidentiality is regarded as a serious offence and often leads to severe punishment and even ostracism when it concerns the community. Bringing the value of confidentiality into seminary formation demands that candidates be schooled in the virtues of prudence, honesty, gentleness, patience, endurance and, above all, self-control. Somebody who cannot control his mouth cannot make a good priest. How can he keep the secret of confession? How can he protect the privacy of those who confide in him? How can he build up a healthy community?

*In African traditions, initiated people should keep secrets*

### ***Reflect on the Ethical Use of Modern Technologies***

In the spirit of Pope Francis's Message for the 48th World Communications Day, the formation of priests and religious should face the challenge of the new technologies. In a presentation at the Seminar for Formators at the Bigard Memorial Seminar, Enugu, on 8 May 2010, Martin Yina<sup>30</sup> rightly pointed out that the church has always upheld the importance of social communication in the task of evangelization.<sup>31</sup> Instead of banning the use of cell phones, what is needed is to form the consciences of the candidates in formation on the ethical use of all forms of communication. These include ethical issues such as lying, misrepresentation, secrecy, disclosure, and the right to privacy, which often surface not just in organizational, mass, and computer-mediated communication but in the most informal and intimate contexts as well.<sup>32</sup> Formators and students have to

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*Bishops may have to courageously consider breaking down the population of vertiginously populated seminaries*

reflect on the ethical question of whether a particular act or form of communication contributes to authentic human development and helps individuals and communities to be true to their transcendent destiny.<sup>33</sup> Does their participation in the digital environment help them to grow in humanity and mutual understanding? Do the new technologies really offer them opportunities for authentic encounter and solidarity?

***Ensure the Number of Trained Formators Matches the Number of Students***

While Africa owes immense gratitude to God for the increasing number of vocations, bishops and formators should seriously reflect on the connection between the number of seminarians and quality formation/accompaniment. It is not responsible to simply declare that it is God who gives vocations. The number of students should be manageable in such a way that they receive an acceptable accompaniment. The church has a moral responsibility to give every candidate a proper formation. Consequently, if a student offers himself to become a priest, the church has the moral obligation to help him reach that objective. There should be a good ratio of trained formators to the number of students. This means that the formation of formators should be programmed and adhered to. Trained formators are needed to ensure the one-on-one accompaniment of the students. This is the heart of the accompaniment process. It is within this forum that many issues for growth come up for the individual student and are subsequently followed up.

Accompaniment in big formation communities should be better structured, by creating smaller communities/fraternities within a bigger community. Each fraternity should be accompanied by a community of formators and a spiritual director. Bishops may have to courageously consider breaking down the population of vertiginously populated seminaries. This can be done by building smaller formation communities in the form of a *collegio* outside the seminary compound—either for each diocese or for multiple dioceses, to maintain the interdiocesan character—and placing each of them under the care of a certain number of trained formators. The students can attend lectures in the seminary and return to their communities for specific formation. This has already been attempted by Bishop Anthony Gbuji, bishop emeritus of Enugu, who built Nchatancha community from where the seminarians of Enugu Diocese go to the Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu.

This was equally the goal of Archbishop Albert K. Obiefuna when he insisted, against the wish of some members and clergy of his diocese, on the creation of another major seminary at Onitsha, the Blessed Tansi Major Seminary, to

reduce the number at the Bigard, Enugu. He did a similar thing as bishop of Awka, when Sts. John and Paul Major Seminary was built, to decongest the faculty of philosophy of Bigard, Seat of Wisdom and Ikot-Ekpene seminaries. As he explained in his pastoral letter,<sup>34</sup> he did so in line with the local church's contextualization and actualization of the recommendations from the Synod of Bishops on Priestly Formation, which John Paul II presented in the post-synodal exhortation, PDV.

### ***Strengthen Rigorous Discernment***

For discernment to be genuine in the seminaries, especially, in intercultural contexts, formators, bishops and religious superiors have to stick to certain principles. First, it must be noted that though people are influenced by their cultures, it is not the culture that is called but the individual person and each person is unique. In the assessment/evaluation, formators should try to be as close as possible to the church's directives. It is necessary therefore to verify whether the motivations of the young candidates correspond to the demands of Catholic priesthood. They will verify particularly the availability of the candidates to live out the evangelical counsels in total submission to God. They will verify the suitability of the young candidates: good health, absence of incompatible engagements, right intention and readiness to allow oneself to be guided by another in the process of formation.

The effectiveness of this assessment/evaluation will depend on the follow-up bishops and religious superiors provide. If a bishop or a religious superior simply overrules the recommendations of the formators, the whole dynamic of formation is weakened.<sup>35</sup> Some students could feel untouchable and protected by their superiors/ bishops and by consequence become resistant to the formation process in the community.

### **CONCLUSION**

The new *Ratio Fundamentalibus Institutionis Sacerdotalis* offers a good opportunity to renew priestly formation in Africa. The emphasis on the pastoral and community dimensions of formation is highly appreciated by African seminary formators and pastors. They recognize this to be in consonance with the practice of formation in their different seminaries.

The *Ratio* also help store visit some challenges of priestly formation in Africa. These include: an insufficient number of trained formators in overcrowded seminaries, the personal witness of formators in the seminaries and of priests in the pastoral field, intercultural living and the use of modern technologies in the context of formation.

*it is not the culture that is called but the individual person and each person is unique*

*If a bishop or a religious superior simply overrules the recommendations of the formators, the whole dynamic of formation is weakened*

A more genuine formation, in the light of the new *Ratio* will require that the above identified challenges be faced and addressed. Moreover, efforts need to be made to mobilize some tested African cultural values, like servant leadership, the value of an oath and confidentiality in the training of future priests.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Reproduced with permission from *Models of Priestly Formation. Assessing the Past, Reflecting on the Present, and Imagining the Future*, 179–200. Edited by Declan Marmion, Michael Mullaney, and Salvador Ryan. Copyright 2019 by Order of Saint Benedict. Published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota.
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8. I am very grateful to Msgr. Benoit Kala, the secretary general of the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Cameroon, a veteran formator, who accorded me a long interview at the end of their meeting. I am equally grateful to Fr. Vitalis Anaehobi, assistant secretary general of the Regional Episcopal Conference of West Africa (RECOWA), for making time to share his experiences as formator.
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