

QUEST FOR SYNERGY BETWEEN SEMINARY FORMATION AND CONTEMPORARY PRIESTLY PASTORAL PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY OF NIGERIA

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Abstract

The formation of candidates for the ministerial priesthood and pastoral ministry is very vital to the life and mission of the church. Priests are trained and formed in the course of lengthy period of initial formation in the seminary and ongoing formation outside the seminary in priestly life and ministry. Despite extensive training, a disconnect exists between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice. This paper explores the root causes of this disconnect, seeking synergy between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice. Using qualitative research methods, findings indicate a significant relationship between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria. Causes of the disconnect include inadequate seminary formation stages, lack of collaboration, and influence of Pentecostalism. Recommendations include adhering strictly to the directives of the 2016 Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis and integrating pastoral theological studies into seminary formation.

Keywords: Seminary, Formation, Priestly, Pastoral, Ministry and Practices

1. Introduction

The Catholic Church in Nigeria is experiencing a remarkable surge in priestly vocations, contrasting with the dearth in Europe and America.² In 2023, Africa saw a 2.1% increase in priestly vocations, with Nigeria a significant contributor.³ The Dioceses of Minna and Nsukka exemplify this

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² Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, *Called to Love Ethical Standards for Clergy and Seminarians in Nigeria* (Abuja: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2006), viii.

³ Pontifical Yearbook 2023, accessed 6/11/2025

growth, with priest numbers more than doubling⁴ and nearly doubling,⁵ respectively, over the past decade. Rose Uchem hails this as a blessing for the church in Africa.⁶ More so, Nigeria's vocations boom is not only a blessing to the local Churches in Nigeria but also a gift to the global Catholic community. Many Nigerian priests are being sent on mission to serve in dioceses facing priest shortages in the United States, Europe,⁷ and other parts of the globe.

However, amidst this boom, concerns arise about priestly fidelity to gospel values. Some priests' lives contradict their commitment to chastity and celibacy,⁸ while others misuse their position for personal gain. The Catholic Bishops of Nigeria lament the exploitation of religion for material prosperity and the rise of pseudo-ministries.⁹ As a result of these practices by some Catholic priests, the situation has raised concerns about the quality and effectiveness of seminary formation, suggesting that it may be contributing to the problems faced by the church. This tallies with the thoughts and understanding of scholars like Rose Uchem,¹⁰ Mike Utsaha,¹¹

⁴ Samuel P. Gwimi, *The History and Development of Catholic Evangelisation in the Niger Province now Minna Diocese* (Port Harcourt: Integrated Sciences, 2020), 289.

⁵ Vocational Boom in Nigeria: Diocese Doubles Number of Priests in 10 Years - ZENIT - English accessed 6/11/2025

⁶ Rose Uchem, 'Formation for Ministry in the Contemporary World : Towards Holistic Seminary Formation in Nigeria' accessed 8/11/2025, (PDF) Towards a Holistic Seminary Formation in Nigeria: Forming Candidates for Ministry in the twenty-first century.

⁷ Pope Francis gives thanks to young Nigerian priests and nuns who answered God's call - EWTN Vatican accessed 6/11/2025

⁸ Alan Schreck, *The Compact History of the Catholic Church* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2011), 69.

⁹ Hope does not Disappoint: Working Together for a Just Nation *A Communiqué issued at the end of the Second Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) held at the Diocesan Retreat and Youth Development Centre, Nto Ekpu Ikot, Nko, Obot Akara L.G.A., Ikot Ekpene Diocese, Akwa Ibom State, 11-19 September 2025.*

¹⁰ Uchem, 'Formation for Ministry' accessed 8/11/2025

¹¹ Mike Utsaha, 'Seminary Formation Today: A Lay Person's Perspective' *The Aquinas Journal* Volume 5, (June 2012), 78-79.

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Andrew Otu¹² and Francis Nass.¹³ Pope Leo XIV puts this truism succinctly: ‘In recent decades, the crisis of trust in the Church caused by abuses committed by members of the clergy has filled us to shame and called us to humility. It has made us even more aware of the urgent need for a comprehensive formation that ensures the personal growth and maturity of candidates for the priesthood, together with a rich and solid spiritual life’.¹⁴

It is against this background that this paper, ‘Quest for Synergy between Seminary Formation and Contemporary Priestly Pastoral Practice: A Case Study in Nigeria’ is anchored with the following objectives:

- To explore the conceptual understanding of disconnect between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria.
- To establish the reality/truthfulness of disconnect in priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria with supporting indexes.
- To investigate the possible root causes of the disconnect in priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria.
- To explore the extent to which seminary formation is linked to the root causes of the disconnect in priestly pastoral practice

Therefore, the paper discusses first the methodology including the justification and significance of the study, the presentation of the research data and findings, discussion of the findings, major recommendations and a conclusion.

2. Methodological Approach and Population Sampling

The study is basically qualitative in its methodological approach, which generally speaking helps generate a deep and nuanced understanding of a

¹² Andrew A. Otu, made this contribution on the Priests Discuss Social Media Platform, 16th August 2022

¹³ Francis J. Nass, ‘Integral Priestly Formation in Contemporary Nigerian Society: Challenges and Prospects’ *Journal of Pastoral and Spiritual Theology*, Vol. 3, (2025), 344.

¹⁴ Leo XIV, ‘A Fidelity that Generates the Future, Apostolic Letter of the Holy Father on the Sixtieth Anniversary of the Conciliar Decrees *Optatam Totius* and *Presbyterorum Ordinis*’, (Vatican City: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2025) 10.

given phenomenon.¹⁵ Two qualitative research methods were employed namely, content analysis and focus group discussion. Specifically, the focus group discussion enables the gathering of information from multiple participants. The contextual setting was at the instance of National Seminaries Committee Meeting and Workshop on the theme of ‘The Disconnect between Seminary Formation and the Pastoral Ministry of Priests in Nigeria’; held at St. Augustine’s Major Seminary Jos, Plateau State Nigeria, from 1st to 5th May 2023. Despite the inherent weakness of subjectivity and bias in the focus group method, its selection for this study is *ad rem* because of the nature of the subject matter, the context of and participants in the investigation, as well as the method’s ability to provide detailed contextual insights of people’s experiences.

Furthermore, for population sampling, the participants consisted of formators, predominantly Rectors of seminaries and male religious houses of formation across the nine ecclesiastical provinces of Nigeria. Focus groups were designed to foster interactivity, with participants complementing each other’s perspectives. By encouraging open discussion, participants were able to share their thoughts and opinions, either supporting or opposing previous statements. This dynamic environment stimulated participants to raise issues that may otherwise not have emerged. The approach promoted in-depth exploration of responses, respectful challenge, and clarification, creating a space for participants to engage with each other’s views. As a result, this strategy facilitated active participation and contribution from all participants, enriching the qualitative data collected in the study.¹⁶

3. Justification of the Study

The justification of the study is in the use of focus group discussion for its methodological approach to generate data for discussion. This is because numerous scholarly qualitative research works through content analysis of documentary sources such as those of Rose Nkechi Uche,¹⁷ Benjamin

¹⁵ Kleindienst, Petra. ‘The Role of Education on Human Dignity: Fostering Peace and Diminishing Violence’ *Religions* 15, no. 1 (2024), 66. accessed 24/10/2025 <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15010066>.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*,

¹⁷ Uchem, ‘Formation for Ministry’

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Ezulike,¹⁸ and, James Kumba Nyabera, Aloys Otiero Ojore and Laurent Magesa¹⁹ were published in the past as well as various seminars were organised with beautiful and rich paper presentations on same and similar subject matter with a view to cushioning the effects but to no avail. Since it is common knowledge that one cannot be doing the same thing at all times and expect different results, the adoption of focus group discussion which involves seminary formators in seeking solutions to the problem is justified. The present work, while making minimal use of content analysis of documentary sources, relied heavily on focus group discussions with seminary formators in general but specifically Rectors of seminaries and male religious houses of formation to generate data. Generating data from those directly responsible for seminary formation is the main justification of this study.

4. Significance of the Study

The significance of this article is first to the Catholic Church the world over. Priests, though incardinated and ordained for particular churches and religious congregation, share in the universal mission of the church. For priests, through sacred ordination are configured to Christ, Head and Shepherd of the Church with universal bearing, are called to serve the global church and not just their local dioceses.²⁰ Secondly, the study is significant for church in Nigeria, its hierarchy that is worried and expresses concern at the rate of unorthodox practices in priestly pastoral ministry,²¹ to Christ's lay faithful who are upset when they encounter such inappropriate practices,²² and, to various teams of seminary formators, involved directly in the formation of seminarians.

¹⁸ Benjamin Ezulike, 'Disconnect between Seminary Formation and Priestly Life and Ministry: The missing link' accessed 30/11/2025 Disconnect Between Seminary Formation and the Priestly Life and Ministry: The Missing Link – Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu accessed 30/11/2025

¹⁹ James Kumba Nyabera, Aloys Otiero Ojore and Laurent Magesa, 'The Effects of Formation on Priestly Ministry Amidst Contemporary Challenges in the Catholic Diocese of Homa Bay, Kenya' accessed 24/10/2025 <https://www.ijassjournal.com/2022/v519/414665929.pdf>

²⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, December 7, 1965, 10.

²¹ Hope does not Disappoint, 11-19 September 2025.

²² Utsaha 'Seminary Formation' 78-79.

5. Research Data and Discussion Findings

Here, the results generated from the focus group discussion is presented and the findings discussed. We begin with the making of the focus groups.

The Making of the Focus Groups

The participants were divided into buzz groups of between seven and ten. The division was done according to the ecclesiastical provinces across the country in order to sample balanced data. The number of participants from some provinces were fewer, and as such, they were merged to get the required number of between seven and ten. Thus, participants from Lagos, Ibadan and Benin-City Provinces were merged together to form one focus group. Likewise, participants from Onitsha, Owerri and Calabar ecclesiastical Provinces also formed one group. In all, there were five focus groups including those of Abuja, Kaduna and Jos Provinces reflecting the nine ecclesiastical provinces of the country.

Research Data

Data was generated from the focus group discussions addressing the four research objectives.

To explore the conceptual understanding of disconnect between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria

This seeks to explore the Conceptual Understanding of disconnect between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria. The various focus groups returned data with descriptive words and phrases like: separation from, detachment from, a gap, a rupture, severance, departure from, to let apart from the real source and total derailment. These words and phrases indicate that the participants had a clear conceptual understanding of disconnection between seminary formation and the exercise of priestly pastoral ministry in Nigeria, to mean that there is a separation or departure or derailment etc., from the ideals, principles, objectives of seminary formation in priestly pastoral practices in Nigeria.

Establishing the reality/truthfulness of disconnect in priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria with supporting indexes

On the subject matter of indexes of the disconnect, there was a unanimous consensus that indeed, there is disconnection between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practices in Nigeria, in the sense that the ideals and

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objectives of seminary formation are to some extent flouted and lacking in pastoral practice. Data from focus group discussions employed numerous words and phrases to describe the indexes including: living flamboyant life style, absenteeism - where priests are neither available nor accessible, negligence on the part of some priests who abandon their duties to seminarians and catechists, pursuing their own businesses rather than that of Christ. There are liturgical abuses/aberrations with celebrations devoid of rubrics, syncretism and the blending of the Christian faith with fetish and Traditional Religious practices in the name of inculturation. Some priests abandon the ideals of Church doctrines through unorthodox preaching in the delivery of homilies and sermons with poor scriptural and theological content. In some cases, preaching is turned into entertainment with Pentecostal coloration. There is also lack of accountability, lack of the culture of maintenance, acting contrary to church laws and diocesan policies. There is also serious disregard for the demands of chastity and celibacy.

Furthermore, while some priests are involved in pursuance of personal interests such as materialism expressed in money making, the acquisition of houses, cars etc; others too are using the priesthood to advance their personal interests such as finding a way to get out of the country to Europe and America, becoming partisan politicians, joining the army, navy, air force and the police force. On the increase are also instances of neglect of the poor while embracing the wealthy and politicians. Very prevalent also is the seeming loss of priestly identity with a show of arrogance among some priests who exhibit in character and mentality the posture of we have arrived. Some priests' way of life is far from the ideal, indicating a total lack of mentorship especially of young priests. Francis Jauro Nass laments and summarises the indexes of the disconnect in these words: 'The lack in pastoral commitment, moral probity, inordinate materialistic tendencies, over-socialisation of matters of faith and spirituality, frequent display of disobedience to the local ordinaries or superiors on the part of priests is highly disturbing'.²³

²³ Nass, 'Integral Priestly Formation' 344.

To investigate the possible root causes of the disconnect between seminary formation and pastoral practice

Here, the research objective investigated and established the root causes of the inappropriate pastoral practices in priestly ministry in general. The participants were united in pointing out that numerous were the possible factors and root causes of the disconnect. Principal among them is having and harbouring wrong motives for desiring to be priests from the beginning. Among the wrong motives spelt out were: parental rather than the individual seminarian's vocation, the prestige of being a priest, and the fact that the society dignifies the office of the priest. Others include the utility of being a priest, those in the priesthood are the ones who make it in life, and the flamboyant lifestyle of priests. There is also lack of workable welfare packages for priests when ill-health strikes and in retirement from ministry. This gives rise to fear of the future and as such, plunge priests into all forms of unorthodox pastoral practices in view of taking precaution and preparing for life out of, ministry.

To explore the extent to which seminary formation is linked to the root causes of the disconnect in priestly pastoral practice

The participants in the focus group discussion were made to explore and discuss the issue of the link between the root causes of the disconnect in priestly pastoral ministry and seminary formation as it is operational. According to data generated, seminary formation was designed in four stages namely: the spiritual, the philosophical, the theological and the pastoral stages of formation. The robust discussions, which took place in the light of these stages resulted in the following findings:

The Spiritual Year stage of Seminary Formation

The objective of Spiritual year formation is designed to purge and purify candidates for the priesthood of their negative motives for desiring to be priests and enhance the positive ones. Unfortunately, this is not the case; because in the first place, young inexperienced priests are saddled with the responsibility of spiritual year formation. Secondly, the actual programme during this period serves as an introduction to the study of philosophy. As such, many of these wrong motives continue unchecked among young seminarians after going through the spiritual year programme and these manifest in future priestly ministry.

The Philosophical Stage of Seminary Formation

According to findings, the primary objective of the philosophical stage in the course of seminary formation was to expose seminarians to critical thinking, independent mind and reflection, in preparation for theological studies. While this objective to some extent is achieved, it was reported that some Professors of philosophy at this stage in the life of seminarians do not help matters, because they usually threaten seminarians that their philosophical studies would sniff out the little faith they have in God. Hence during and at the end of their philosophical studies, some seminarians are left more confused not knowing whether they are in the right place or not.

The Theological Stage of Seminary Formation

As for the theological stage of seminary formation, findings underscored that it has the aim of configuring seminarians to the person of Christ as ‘other Christ’, so that like Christ the good shepherd, they will be able to offer themselves completely to the church for service even to the point of death. This configuration, the participants acknowledged, is never fully achieved because efforts are made to cover up the requirements of the theological curriculum, with emphasis laid on theory at the expense of the practical application.

Pastoral Formation Stage

Data from the focus group discussion reveals that there are three kinds of pastoral formation seminarians receive in the course of their seminary formation. These consist of the one full year pastoral experience at the end of philosophical studies, the yearly two months apostolic work experience during the long vacation and the weekly apostolic work carried out in some parishes within the city in which the seminary is located.

During the weekly apostolic work, seminarians are involved in teaching catechism, and, accompanying pious societies and sodalities in their apostolates. The pastoral year and the two months apostolic work experience take place in the dioceses of the respective seminarians outside the seminary walls. Reports from the group discussions reveal that across dioceses, depending on the initiative of individual priests seminarians work with, a programme of pastoral formation were designed for seminarian, while this may not be so in other cases. Priests with the initiative have

specific tasks for the seminarian such as working with catechists and teaching catechism, overseeing and guiding altar servers, conducting non-Eucharistic service where need arises, and, accompanying pious societies and sodalities in their apostolates. Seminarians who work with priests involved in private ministries and adoration centers find themselves involved in such as much as the priest wishes to involve them and their interests.

Seminarians who found themselves working with priests who have no programme of pastoral formation for them end up becoming cooks, drivers, gardeners and errand boys of the priests concerned. However, seminarians during the pastoral year and two monthly apostolic work experiences found themselves involved in counselling and giving spiritual direction. For people come to them for such services regardless of whether they had the prerequisite training or not.

Data from the various groups acknowledges also the nature of the pastoral stage of which usually should happen after leaving the seminary beginning with priestly ordination. The objective of this stage of formation is to mentor the young priest into the life and priestly ministry within the parish set up and in the context of the diocese. It is the first time the young priest is experiencing being a priest, as such, the importance of this stage in the life of a young priest cannot be overemphasised. The formation at this stage is in form of apprenticeship and mentorship.

Even though this stage of formation takes place outside the seminary space, it is the consensus of the participants that the objective of this stage is never realised. They raised the issue of the bad lifestyle of some older priests which is never exemplary, as well as societal pressure and influence which wear the young priest. There is also the issue of lack of collaboration between seminary authorities and some dioceses, whereby if seminary authorities step down a candidate or ask for the delay in the priestly ordination of a candidate, some diocesan authorities overrule. In some dioceses the period needed for the apprenticeship and mentorship is never observed. There are situations and instances whereby young priests with no pastoral experience whatsoever were saddled with sensitive responsibilities. Here, they begin their priestly ministry in such positions,

make mistakes; and with no one to guide them, continue in the mistakes believing they were right all through their priestly life.

6. Discussion of Findings and the Search for Synergy in the Light of the 2016 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*

Having presented data, as a way of finding the needed synergy between seminary formation and priestly pastoral ministry, the findings generated are further examined and discussed using qualitative research method of content and comparative analysis in relation to the 2016 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* and other documentary sources.

The 2016 *Ratio*

The Dicastery for the Clergy, responsible for promoting priestly formation in the Catholic Church, authored the 2016 *Ratio*, also known as ‘The Gift of the Priestly Vocation.’ It is a document that outlines the fundamental principles for priestly formation in the Catholic Church beginning with seminary formation.

The document builds upon previous documents on seminary and priestly formation. It was at its 23rd session that the council of Trent decreed for the first time that dioceses should establish seminaries for the formation of candidates in view of priestly ordination and pastoral ministry in the church.²⁴ To further build on the achievements of Trent, the Second Vatican Council gave the direction for the formal formation of seminarians in its decree, *Optatam Totius* of October 1965, on the training of priests which was put into norms in the 1970 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. This too, in 1985, was updated in the light of the revised 1983 Code of Canon Law.²⁵ With the publication of the Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of 1992, Benedict XVI’s *Ministorum Institutio*, other numerous documents on the subject matter of seminary formation issued by some Dicasteries of the Roman Curia and many other

²⁴ Schroeder, *The Canons and Decrees* 177.

²⁵ Congregation for the Clergy, ‘The Gift of the Priestly Vocations, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*’ 8 December 2016, (Vatican: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 1.

formation programmes, the 1985 *Ratio* was further revised until the current and up to date edition of the 2016 *Ratio*.²⁶

The document, that is the 2016 *Ratio*, which henceforth will simply be referred to as *the Ratio* except otherwise, is structurally made up of an introduction, eight chapters and a conclusion. It aims to provide a comprehensive framework for the entire priestly formation, carried out in two principal moments of ‘initial formation in the seminary and ongoing formation in priestly life’ understood as one unbroken missionary journey of discipleship.²⁷ Initial formation corresponds to the time from when the candidate offers himself to the church for formation, leading up to priestly ordination.²⁸ Initial formation in the seminary is carried out in four basic stages of the propaedeutic stage, the stage of philosophical studies or discipleship, the stage of theological studies or configuration stage, and the pastoral stage or stage of vocational synthesis.²⁹ As for ongoing formation, it begins after priestly ordination and continues throughout the life of the priest.

Formation of candidates to the priesthood, whether initial or ongoing is characterised by a number of objectives, or obtainable goals/outcomes of priestly formation, which the ratio describes as dimensions. ‘There are four dimensions that interact simultaneously in the *iter* of formation and in the life of ordained ministers’,³⁰ namely the human, the spiritual, the intellectual and the pastoral dimension. ‘Each of the dimensions of formation is aimed at transforming or assimilating the heart in the image of the heart of Christ’.³¹ In other words, the resultant effect of formation, whether initial or ongoing is holistically becoming sound humanly, spiritually, intellectually and pastorally. That is to say, the objective of the entire formation process is a journey which targets at the configuration of the seminarian and later, the priest to Christ, Head and Shepherd, Servant and Spouse of the Church.³² It is a life long journey ‘which draws one close

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

³² *Ibid.*, 55.

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to Christ and allows one to be ever more conformed to Him. Therefore, it has no end, for priests never stop being disciples of Jesus, they never stop following Him'³³ The *Ratio* underscores that these dimensions or objectives are a constant feature in the entire formation journey of ordained ministers, 'but some receive greater attention at particular stages over the course of formation, albeit never to the neglect of the others'.³⁴

Summary of the Findings

By way of a recap, four research objectives were designed and set for this investigation, namely: To explore the conceptual understanding of disconnect between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria. To establish the reality/truthfulness of the disconnect in priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria with supporting indexes. To find out the possible root causes of the disconnect, especially their link with seminary formation. And, lastly, to explore the needed synergy between Seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice in the light of the *Ratio*.

In summary, the findings revealed that participants understood the conceptual meaning of disconnect between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice as alluding to the fact that seminary formation is responsible for anomaly in priestly pastoral practice. There are supporting indexes in this regard. As for the root causes of the disconnect, they are numerous. Nevertheless, seminary formation contributes greatly.

Discussion of Findings

a) There is a Significant Relationship between Seminary Formation and Disconnect in Priestly Pastoral Practice

The findings generated revealed that there is a significant relationship between seminary formation and disconnect in priestly pastoral practice. In the first place, the entire objective of formation is to attain the configuration of seminarians totally to the person of Christ. Since the findings revealed with indexes of the disconnect among some priests in ministry, it only implies that formation never fully achieved its objectives.

³³ Ibid., Cf. Footnote 91.

³⁴ Ibid., 57.

This is further attested to by data from various stages of seminary formation.

Propaedeutic or spiritual year stage: At the propaedeutic or spiritual year stage of formation, the wrong motives with which some young men offer themselves for formation never really get purified or purged of, which is the objective of the spiritual year stage of formation (Cf. 5.2.4.1). This aligns with the *Ratio* which recognises the stage as an indispensable phase which has as its principal objective the provision of ‘a solid basis for the spiritual life and to nurture a greater self awareness for personal growth’.³⁵ This provision of solid basis for spiritual life could be in reference to the purifying and purging of the wrong motives that the findings pointed at. This understanding is further taught by the *Ratio* thus: ‘For this reason, it is necessary to be vigilant, lest overly simplistic or erroneous visions of the priesthood should find their way into the *iter* of formation... Such an attitude would not help their integral growth but rather would make them accustomed, more or less unconsciously, to a purely servile and self-serving obedience’.³⁶

To achieve this purification and solid basis of spiritual life according to the *Ratio*, seminarians are drawn into prayer, sacramental life, the liturgy of the hours, familiarity with the Word of God and Christian doctrine, mental prayers, silence, spiritual reading and many other spiritual exercises. If this objective is genuinely achieved, at the end of the propaedeutic stage, the candidate is in a better position to decide whether to proceed with priestly formation or to follow a different path in life.³⁷

Unfortunately, this purging and solid basis of spiritual life, the findings reveal, is never really achieved due to a number of factors such as the quality of those responsible for Spiritual year formation and the operational programme of their formation (cf. Findings, 5.2.4.1). Thus, many of these wrong motives continue unchecked among young seminarians even after going through the spiritual year programme, and throughout seminary formation. These unchecked misconceptions and wrong motives manifest

³⁵ Congregation for the Clergy, the Gift of the Priestly Vocations, 59.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

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in later priestly life and pastoral practices as disconnections (Findings, 5.2.4.1).

Similarly, the philosophical stage of formation has become a threat to the faith of some seminarians (Cf. 5.2.4.2). More so, no mention is made from the findings about the place and importance of human dimension of formation which according to the *Ratio*, is specifically for this stage. This implies that human dimension of formation is never implemented in the course of seminary formation.

The Philosophical Stage: According to findings, the primary objective of the philosophical stage in the course of seminary formation was to expose seminarians to critical thinking, independent mind and reflection, in preparation for theological studies (cf. 5.2.4.2). While this objective is acknowledged by the *Ratio*,³⁸ and to some extent is achieved in the course of seminary formation, unfortunately, some professors of philosophy at this stage in the life of seminarians do not help matters, the findings revealed. The study of philosophy becomes a threat to seminarians. Hence during and at the end of their philosophical studies, seminarians are left confused not knowing whether they are in the right place or not (cf, 5.2.4.2). This confusion could no doubt manifest in later priestly ministry.

The *Ratio* also speaks of the philosophical stage as discipleship. Inspired by the teaching of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the concept of discipleship is associated with the invitation or call of the Lord Jesus to come and stay with him, to follow him, and to become the missionary of the Gospel.³⁹ The *Ratio* further explains that each day a disciple learns how to enter into the mysteries of the kingdom of God, and into a deep relationship with Jesus. Thus, ‘staying with Christ becomes a pedagogical-spiritual journey,⁴⁰ ... in the *sequela Christi*, listening to his word, keeping it in his heart and putting it into practice’.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 66.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis. Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation I will Give you Shepherds* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992), 42.

⁴⁰ Congregation for the Clergy, *the Gift of the Priestly Vocations*, 62.

⁴¹ Ibid., 62.

Furthermore, the *Ratio* emphasises the importance of human formation in the process of discipleship. It underscored that it is the human person, capable of following, that receives the invitation or the call to be with Christ. ‘The divine call engages and involves the concrete human person’.⁴² As such, one of the principal objectives of the philosophical stage is human formation. According to the *Ratio*, ‘Special attention is given to the human dimension, in harmony with spiritual growth, so as to help the seminarian mature in his definitive decision to follow the Lord in ministerial priesthood’.⁴³ In other words, human formation forms the basis of priestly life and ministry as the *Ratio* insists: ‘For priestly formation the importance of human formation cannot be sufficiently emphasised. Indeed, the holiness of a priest is built upon it and depends, in large part upon the authenticity and maturity of his humanity’.⁴⁴

Even at this, completely out of the radar of findings generated from focus group discussion is the conspicuous absence of the place of formation in discipleship and human formation which according to the *Ratio*, is the foundation of all priestly formation, that ‘promotes the integral growth of the person and allows the integration of all its dimensions’.⁴⁵

When one considers indexes of the disconnect as provided in 5.2.2 above, one would immediately observe that all the indexes are indeed associated with some deformed human formation in character, solid physical, psycho-affective and social maturity required of pastors.⁴⁶ Thus the disconnect in priestly pastoral practices is to a large extent rooted in deformed human formation and discipleship.

The Theological Stage: As for the theological stage of formation, data from focus group discussion underscores that it has the aim of configuring seminarians to the person of Christ as ‘other Christ’, so that like Christ the good shepherd, they will be able to offer themselves completely to the church for service even to the point of death. This understanding tallies

⁴² Ibid., 93.

⁴³ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 94.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 63.

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with what the *Ratio* says about the theological stage. Explaining the concept of configuration, the *Ratio* emphasises being completely united with the person of Christ, shepherd and servant,⁴⁷ in such a way that the ‘Gradual configuration to Christ becomes an experience which causes the sentiments and attitudes of the Son of God to arise in the life of the disciple’ (69). It is this configuration which resonates with Christ’s teaching that cut off from me you can do nothing (John 15:5). When this process of configuration is thus attained at the theological stage of formation, the sacrament of ordination confers it. The Directory on the ministry and life of priests attests to this thus: ‘Through the sacramental ordination conferred by the imposition of hands and the consecratory prayer of the bishop, a specific ontological bond which unites the priest to Christ, High Priest and Good Shepherd is established’.⁴⁸ This required bonding is not achieved primarily through abstract intellectual teaching, but through a shared way of life, marked by prayer, listening to the word, fraternal communion and gradual conversion of the heart.⁴⁹ It is this bond that makes the priest function in the person of Christ in his church.

This configuration is never fully achieved as findings show. Experience has shown that at this stage, efforts are doubled by seminary community to meet up with the academic requirements of the theological curriculum. Thus, the configuration is never fully attained in the process because emphasis is laid on the theoretical at the expense of the practical application which has the ability of bringing out this configuration (cf. Findings, 5.2.4.3). More so, that there exists anomaly in priestly ministry is an indication that the required bonding with Christ was never fully achieved in the first place. This contributes greatly to priests pursuing their own business rather than the business of Christ (cf. Findings 5.2.2). Thus the disconnect in priestly pastoral practices which is contrary to acting in *Persona Christi* is the logical outcome of lack of configuration to Christ.

Pastoral Formation: Data from the focus group discussion reported three kinds of pastoral formation seminarians receive in the course of their seminary training. These consist of the one full year pastoral experience at

⁴⁷ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁴⁹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 42.

the end of philosophical studies, the yearly two months apostolic work experience during the long vacation, and, the weekly apostolic work carried out in some parishes within the city in which the seminary is located (cf. Findings, 5.2.4.4).

Drawing from the teaching of *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, the parish is the best setting where such formation of seminarians could be guaranteed. 'For it is a living cell of local and specialised pastoral work in which they will find themselves faced with the kind of problems they will meet in their future ministry'.⁵⁰ As a follow up, the directory on priestly life and ministry reiterated thus: 'Consequently, it is recommended that the pastor (*parochus*), or whichever person is responsible for the pastoral setting that receives the seminarian, should be aware of the formative task entrusted to him, and should accompany him in his gradual entry to pastoral ministry'.⁵¹

Findings however, from the study, reported that across dioceses provisions are sometimes made in parishes regarding this formation, while in other parishes, such provisions are lacking, all depending on the initiative or lack of initiative of the parish priests respectively (cf. Findings, 5.2.4.4). As a result of this failure on the part of priests without a pastoral programme of formation, seminarians sent to them end up becoming cooks, drivers, gardeners and errand boys of the priests concerned during the period of their pastoral formation (cf. Findings, 5.2.4.4). This experience too, impacts greatly on the young seminarian and could filter in future pastoral ministry.

Furthermore, Data from the various groups acknowledges also the importance of collaboration between the seminary and diocesan authorities regarding seminarians; and mentoring by way of apprenticeship during the pastoral stage of formation. Unfortunately, the anticipated collaboration is sometimes lacking. Likewise, the needed mentoring may never fully be realised because of the bad lifestyle of some older priests mentors; as well as societal pressure and influence which wear the young priest. (cf. Findings 5.2.4.4). Lack of this collaboration between seminary authorities

⁵⁰ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 58.

⁵¹ Congregation for the Clergy, Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 75.

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and some diocese, as well as lack of mentorship are serious contributing factors in questionable priestly life and ministry.

b) Integrating Teaching of Pastoral Theology in the course of Seminary Formation

In addition, and on a more serious note, it was observed at plenary that the study of pastoral theology is not given the greater attention it deserves in the course of seminary formation. Even where in some seminaries this is done, it is usually limited to the study of catechetics, homiletics and pastoral liturgy. This is because the study of pastoral theology, alongside pastoral formation are delayed until after leaving the seminary. According to the *Ratio*, 'pastoral stage, or vocational synthesis, is the time from leaving the Seminary until the subsequent priestly ordination, which obviously is brought about by conferral of the diaconate'.⁵²

As a theological discipline, which in its own right 'receives from the faith the principles and criteria for the pastoral action of the church in history',⁵³ and through which seminarians study and learn how to develop a systematic doctrinal, pastoral theological theories, principles, methods and practical up to date guidelines for the exercise of pastoral ministry,⁵⁴ the study of pastoral theology needs to be given greater priority it deserves in seminary study curriculum. For 'A sound pastoral formation demands not only engaging in apostolic activities, but also the study of pastoral theology'.⁵⁵ To delay this aspect of the pastoral formation of candidates to the priesthood until after leaving the seminary doesn't augur well in the overall pastoral formation of seminarians. The study of pastoral theology certainly cannot be done properly outside seminary walls. The delay in the study of pastoral theology in the process of formation could be a major factor responsible for the disconnect between seminary formation and priestly pastoral practice.

⁵² Ibid., 74.

⁵³ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 57.

⁵⁴ Heinz Schuster, Pastoral Theology, ed. Encyclopædia of Theology a Concise *Sacramentum Mundi*. (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2004), 1178. Cf. Also *Pastores Dabo Vobis* 57.

⁵⁵ Congregation for the Clergy, Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 122.

7. Recommendations for Synergy

This study investigated the relationship between seminary formation and disconnect in contemporary priestly practice in Nigeria, seeking synergy. Findings revealed a connection between formation and priestly misconduct in ministry. Notably too, the study of pastoral theology, though crucial for priestly ministry, is often overlooked in seminary formation due to delayed implementation as stipulated by the *Ratio*.⁵⁶ In view of finding a synergy, these recommendations are put forward:

Spiritual Year Formators: Appoint experienced, exemplary elderly priests as formators. Their life experience enables fatherly guidance, counselling, and spiritual direction, helping purify seminarians' motives, and establish the importance of spiritual life from onset.

Diocesan Evaluation Team: Include seminary formators in diocesan evaluation teams or consult them during seminarian assessments.

Adherence to Ratio Fundamentalis: Strictly follow the *Ratio's* intellectual content and objectives for holistic formation (human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral).

Pastoral Theology Study: Integrate pastoral theology into seminary formation for practical ministry preparation.

Philosophical Stage: Focus on philosophy's purpose: understanding life in relation to God. Ensure Catholic teachers/professors lead philosophy courses.

Formator Qualities: Appoint sound, morally upright formators with formation training. Prioritize their welfare.

Formator-Seminarian Relationship: Foster cordial, conducive relationships. Conduct seminars and counselling sessions.

⁵⁶ Congregation for the Clergy, the Gift of the Priestly Vocations, 74.

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Mentorship: Encourage formators to mentor seminarians, transmitting values and personalities.

Formator Availability: Ensure formators are accessible to seminarians throughout formation stages.

8. Conclusion

The disconnect between seminary formation and contemporary priestly pastoral practice in Nigeria is a pressing concern. This study revealed a significant relationship between seminary formation and disconnect in priestly life and pastoral ministry, emphasizing the need for synergy. It is the position of this paper that by implementing the content and the directives of the 2016 *Ratio* recommendations and integrating the study of pastoral theology in the course of seminary formation, the Church can cultivate priests equipped for effective ministry. As Pope Leo XIV noted that a comprehensive formation candidate to the priesthood ensures personal growth and spiritual maturity which are vital for priestly service.⁵⁷ By addressing these disconnects through such a formation, Nigeria's vibrant priestly vocations can thrive, serving the global Church with fidelity and excellence.

⁵⁷ Pope Leo XIV, 'A Fidelity that Generates the Future' 10.