

# THE IMPLICATIONS OF POSTMODERNISM TO SEMINARY FORMATION

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## Introduction

This study aims to draw the implications of postmodern moments to the seminary formation. It is confronted with the difficult question of harmonizing the very idea of postmodernism with seminary formation. What troubles this research is the fact that postmodernism is understood as the period characterized by openness to meanings and understanding, an openness that extends to aspects of life such as culture and authority. It is characterized by subjectivism, individual legitimation, self-regulation, freedom and absence of authority, and one particular system. The principle of postmodernism is that it is not governed by pre-established rules, and cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, seminary formation is a systematic program, characterized by strict observance, authority, and discipline and geared towards training the candidates for priesthood and religious life. It is result-oriented.

This research which has some elements of theology considers the very situation and finds the rigidity of the authority of seminary formation at stake with postmodernism. How can the notion of postmodernism and seminary formation which is unconventional be reconciled? Can the formation program succeed without the cooperation of the candidates? Can someone's will and character be mastered or dominated by another person?

## The Notion of Postmodernism

For a better understanding of this research, it is necessary to explain the meaning of postmodernism,

1 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans., Geoff Bennigton and Brian Mussumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 81.

and hence trace the individuals who are concerned with its historical development.

One of the figures of postmodernism is Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), who put the term ‘postmodernism’ in a more general philosophical sense. He defines postmodernism as “incredulity towards metanarratives,” arguing that recent times have seen the collapse of the “grand narrative” or universal theory. Hence, “there is no longer one ‘metanarrative’ that can supply objective meaning, but many small narratives.”<sup>2</sup> He is however accused of relativism. Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), maintains that “there is nothing outside the text.” Hence, not only as anti-realists argue, but all theories or viewpoints can be ‘deconstructed’ in terms of their context to reveal inner contradictions. Jean Baudrillard (1920-2007) introduced the idea of “hyperreality,” where what one thinks as reality is merely a constructed simulation. Others, such as Michel Foucault (1819-1868) and Roland Barthes (1915-1980), without being postmodernists, have contributed to it. Postmodernism therefore contains many strands, but postmodernists share, to different extents and for different reasons, a general skepticism regarding the ability to achieve objective knowledge, and therefore also a distrust of science.<sup>3</sup> Postmodernism in its fluidity may be beneficial and enriching to the seminary formation system. But how can this be?

### Scope and Meaning of Seminary Formation

In what seems to coincide with the postmodern idea, formation is defined as the process of growth in the perception and implementation of one’s vocation. This process engages and primarily involves the individual. Education in religious life means helping a person called to find their way towards God.<sup>4</sup> It is above all a training in virtue; “a personal accompaniment in the process of growth.”<sup>5</sup> In this process of formation,

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, xxiv.

3 Jean Francois Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* popularizes the term ‘postmodernism.’ Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* claims that all viewpoints reveal inner contradiction. Baudrillard’s *Simulacra* and *Simulation* says we live in a socially constructed hyperreality. Michel Foucault’s *History of Madness* suggests that madness is a socially constructed phenomenon. Roland Barthes’s *The Death of the Author* denies that authorial intent fixes textual meaning. In Dupré, Ben, *50 Philosophy of Science Ideas* (Southwell: Gareth, 2013), 164-167.

4 The O.A.D Formation Plan: *Ratio Institutionis Fundamental*, O.A.D., n.1.

5 Pope Francis, *Gaudium Evangelium*, n.69.

the candidates become their interior formators and they are to personally interiorize the teaching. Formation should be from within, with a personal disposition than being enforced from without.

The Church is aware that true education is simply self-education. But often the result is not the case. Foucault was right when he pointed out that people are not free as they claim, for man is enslaved by so many things, in new dimensions. The modern educational project aims to liberate man from this slavery. As was pointed out by St. Thomas Aquinas, “anyone can have grace and charity, and yet falter in the exercise of the virtues because of persistent ‘contrary inclinations.’”<sup>6</sup> As a result of this, there is a need for authority. Hence, formation is polarized between personal appropriation on one hand and some pedagogy, rules, disciplines, and guidance on the other. But how can these be realized in the absence of meta-narratives and authority?

The Church sees authority in formation as inevitable. It is from the understanding that in the process of formation, the candidate as the subject of formation is a ‘mystery to himself’ because two opposing aspects of his humanity are integrated and intertwined: his talents and gifts, and his limitations and frailty.<sup>7</sup> The formation period aims at helping candidates to integrate these aspects of their lives and to create the conditions to arrive at a conscious and responsible choice for their future. As a synthesis between strength and weakness, this educational endeavor is a “journey of faith and gradual harmonious maturity, avoiding fragmentation, polarization, excesses, superficiality or partiality.”<sup>8</sup>

Another issue worthy of attention is the idea of all-male seminary formation without an integration of the opposite sex of the same age within the system. The Church proposes that seminarians are to find freedom within the four walls of the seminary and freely embrace their vocation. She is aware that eventually, the Priest will encounter people of different sexes and ages in his ministry. So, for their growth, the candidates have vacations in which they should stay with their family and share life with their parents and relatives.

There are four dimensions of formation: the human dimension-the necessary and foundational

6 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 1-11, q.65, a.3, ad 2: “*Proper Aliquas Dispositiones Contrarias.*”

7 *Ratio Institutionis Fundamentaliss Sacerdotalis*, n. 28.

8 Ibid.

dimension, the spiritual dimension-shapes the quality of the life and ministry of the priest or religious, the intellectual dimension-provides the rational tools needed to understand the values that belong to being a pastor and to transmit the faith appropriately, the pastoral dimension-makes possible a responsible and fruitful ecclesial service.<sup>9</sup>

The Church pays special attention to educating candidates and presbyters and is full of instructions, norms, and advice. This is based on constant growth, adaptation, and updating due to the changing situations. The “vitality of the Religious Institutes depends above all on the formation of their members” which include: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formations.<sup>10</sup> “The spiritual, doctrinal, cultural and apostolic formation to which the candidates for the priesthood are called must be completed, for the religious, with the teachings to harmonize the ministry with the characteristics of the charism of its institute and the right needs of the community.”<sup>11</sup> Each Religious Community has a specific charism and mission, and the diocesan lifestyle is intended for pastoral mission. Thus, formation programs are modeled toward these goals.

*The Decree on Priestly Formation* emphasizes the need for teaching which takes cognizance of modern trends in philosophy, especially “of those which are most influential in the homeland of the candidates.” It is recommended that philosophy be taught in a manner that leads the students to a gradual solid and consistent knowledge of man, the world, and God. This is accomplished by paying attention to the “philosophical patrimony” valid at all times.<sup>12</sup> It acknowledges that seminary discipline is to be maintained in such a way that ‘students acquire an internal attitude which enables them to accept authority from a personal conviction. The norms of discipline are to be applied according to the age of the students so that they may learn self-mastery and work with others out of their freedom.’<sup>13</sup>

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9 Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.43-59.

10 *Constitutions*, Order of the Discalced Augustinians, n.74, 2.

11 The O.A.D Formation Plan: *Ratio Institutionis Fundamental* O.A.D., 35.

12 *Decree on Priestly Formation (Optatam Totius)*, n. 15.

13 *Ibid.*, n.11.

The Church is concerned with authentic human development; thus, the Church has a role in the progress and development of education. This in essence is true education, which has as its aim, “the formation of the human person given his end and the good of that society to which he belongs and in the duties of which he will, as an adult, have a share.”<sup>14</sup> The formation of the human person begins in the family since the family is the domestic church and the nuclear society, the principal school of the social virtues that are necessary to every society.<sup>15</sup>

According to the Church’s formation plan stipulated in the *Canon Law*, the students are to undertake philosophical and theological formations. Philosophical formation is based on a valid philosophical heritage, taking cognizance of philosophical investigations over time. It is given in such a way that it furthers the human formation of the candidates, sharpens their mental edge, and makes them suited to theological studies. The theological formation is given in the light of faith and under the guidance of the magisterium, in which they learn the whole of Catholic teaching, based on divine Revelation.<sup>16</sup>

The candidates are formed to harmonize, for a profitable exercise of their apostolate. The first apostolate and witness that society and the Church ask of them is consistent with the evangelical style that they have publicly professed to follow. Style of life concretized in the practice of the vows and the concord of fraternity in community and which anticipates, even if imperfectly, the future condition of the kingdom of heaven.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Implications of Postmodernism to Seminary Formation**

In the context of this research, it is appropriate to see the variance between seminary formation and postmodern moment. The seminary formation is born with the modern educational system: experimental and calculative, result-oriented, and often rigid in the sense of disciplinary measures. In the seminaries, everything is programed, and seminarians should follow the programs judiciously. There is time for every program: sleeping, rising, studying, prayer, meals. Eating outside at meal-time is disallowed. The formators watch out for

14 *Gravissimum Educationis*, n.1.

15 *Ibid.*, n. 3.

16 The Code of Canon Law (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1983), n. 250-252.

17 The O.A.D Formation Plan: *Ratio Institutionis Fundamental* O.A.D., n. 110.

failures in fulfilling the programs. For some candidates, the routine offers them no joy. All these put seminary formation in parlance with the modern educational system. Everything is calculated with surveillance.

Postmodernism challenges the seminary formation embedded with rigidity. This rigid and strict program is meant to enforce the discipline and character of the priesthood to the candidates. Apart from being enforced by the authority, seminary formation becomes fruitful when the candidates enforce and challenge themselves, to imbibe the discipline. The candidates are expected to be successful, hence the outcome of the formation program. Often as well, due to this strict discipline during the formation years, some candidates hide inside their cocoons and show their true color after ordination. By this time, they have been freed from observations and evaluations from the formators.

The major challenge of seminary formation can be seen with the insight of Robin and Richard: “The discourse of the university highlights the position of learners in a formal education environment...in this discourse, learners are in the position of receivers of a system or body of knowledge which is both dominating and totalized.”<sup>18</sup> Seminary formation fits into this description. Postmodernism aims at liberating man from the shackles of this totalizing education, hence its character of fluidity. Who can control and dominate another person? Who has the power to force another to “weave himself into the system” without himself being the master of himself? As the saying goes, you can bring an elephant to the river, but cannot force an elephant to drink.

Education was once described by Freud as a ‘bad joke’ in which he highlighted the impossibility of teaching.<sup>19</sup> In the notion of psychoanalysis, he critiqued education especially its traditional pedagogy in which seminary formation belongs. An important question is; how far can we go with anti-pedagogy? One thing is clear, and it is “the act of thinking anew the question of knowledge and its transmission through its foregrounding of the place of unconscious.”<sup>20</sup> The seminary formation must take note of this unconscious dimension.

18 Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education: Different Voices, Different Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 76.

19 Ibid., 75.

20 Ibid.



Another implication of postmodernism to the seminary formation is the notion of policing formation or babysitting kind of observing formandees. Using Foucault's idea of the panopticon, can it be suggested that formators become like policemen to monitor the candidates? "For those within the cells, the possibility of being observed is sufficient for them to tailor their behavior to what they believe is expected."<sup>21</sup> Panopticon breeds pretense. It produces good results as much as CCTV cameras do, for those under surveillance learn to pretend. But if a candidate trusts in God and submits himself to the Holy Spirit the Principal Formator, and conscientiously observes his formation program, he is bound to succeed.

To abolish "remote control" in formation, a Nigerian Major seminary adopted an auto-formation. In the auto-formation, there are no bells: rising, meals, and work times are based on a personal regulation. The candidates are expected to have reached a certain level of maturity and should regulate themselves, by the use of their alarm clocks. They no longer depend on any external force to follow the formation program. Everything is based on their scrutiny. What is required here is a 'critical self-scrutiny' on the part of the candidates.

Another idea to be considered in this research is the sad reality of dormitory style of accommodation, prevalent in some formation houses and seminaries. This research proposes that major seminarians be given an individual room, or at least not a dormitory. Their training helps them to learn how to comport themselves, based on the life they will live. Dormitory style does not give room for maturity in formation; hence it stifles personal growth, self-appropriation and silence. It is like leaving in a crowd, which affects most seminarians, as they seem not to have been matured enough to take their personal decisions.

This research suggests the banning of dormitory style for senior seminarians. Dorm should be exclusive for minor seminarians and perhaps up to third year college. The Canon Law recommends that the age of the candidates under formation should be considered. "Men of mature years who believe they are called to the sacred ministries are prudently assisted by word and deed and are duly prepared."<sup>22</sup> This also implies taking cognizance of the candidates age such are professionals, college graduates and high school candidates.

21 Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education*, 101-102

22 Canon Law, n.233, 2.

Another aspect is the maturity of the candidates. Because of the crowd mentality, some seminarians decide to quit the seminary formation, because their best friend decided to quit or is expelled. On the other hand, they stay because their friend is staying. Some of those who stay till the end their formative years apply for the ministries, just because their friend or group is applying. It is not their personal decision. It is like a group thing. Such vocations seem inauthentic.

Catholic education pays attention to the formation of the whole person, so that all may attain their eternal destiny and at the same time promote the common good of society. This holistic education is to enable the physical, moral and intellectual talents to develop in a harmonious manner, so that they are formed to take an active part in social life.<sup>23</sup> Here, the aim of formation which is for mission is realized.

The formation program should take cognizance of the sub-conscious aspect which is the intention of the candidates. What motivates the candidate to enter seminary? Is the seminary an avenue to escape from poverty or family problems? Is it a means to boost the family ego and status, or boost the political ambition of the family? Is it from the right intention to serve God and His Church? Due to the complex nature of man, there is the possibility for a mix-up of motivations. However, wrong intentions can be purified along the way. The formation process demands greater responsibility and openness from the candidate. No formation will be successful if the candidate is an impervious rock, a submarine. No formation can penetrate without the candidate's inner disposition. This disposition is by way of personal accountability.

Wrong intentions can be traceable through psychoanalysis. So far with my experience, I have encountered many candidates who left the seminary just a few days before and after graduation with a bachelor's degree. They entered the seminary to get a degree in philosophy. Now, these unconscious elements should be discerned within the process of formation. The better to be discerned, the better one is helped to make the right choices, which is actually the basis for a happy priesthood or religious life and which determines a lot of factors.

The need for constant attentiveness to the "Spirit" in formation accompaniment and the discernment process is highlighted by Chinyeaka Ezeani, who equally explores "the possible reasons for persuading

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23 Canon Law, n.795.



candidates to leave the formation program and continue elsewhere.” She writes that “a significant part of priestly and religious formation work is discernment.”<sup>24</sup> “Does the formation environment stifle the individual and prevent them from living authentically as the person deems right? Discontinuation from the formation program may be a better option for a candidate who passes through “inner struggle” and “resistance to some necessary change.”<sup>25</sup> She suggests that “individuals are unique and so it is not easy to prescribe a uniform strategy to suit the needs and temperaments. Nevertheless, since human nature is universal, there are certain values which have wide appeal irrespective of personality or context.”<sup>26</sup> This justifies the importance of evaluating seminary formation using the perspective of postmodernism.

### Evaluation and Conclusion

At the end of this research, it is right to examine the connection between postmodernism and seminary formation. As was mentioned by Robin Usher and Richard, “a postmodern perspective can help us to better understand the conflict and the connection, and to examine the extent to which it is both a symptom of and a contributor to the socio-cultural condition of postmodernity.”<sup>27</sup> Education is an off-shoot of the Enlightenment, a modern practice. The seminary formation was modeled after this pattern. Modern education is understood by Foucault as a ‘disciplinary practice.’<sup>28</sup> The idea of resistance and power stipulates that “resistance is the product of power.”<sup>29</sup> In the postmodern sense, power is not absolute but decentered. “Subjugation produces the possibility of resistance.”<sup>30</sup>

Whereas in the medieval period, seminary formation was accomplished in an informal way, in which

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24 Sr. Chinyeaka Ezeani, M.S.H.R., “When You Leave the Religious Life, What Then? Accompanying Persons in the Process of Discontinuation from Religious Formation,” *Religious Life Review*, Vol. 55, Number 300, (September/October 2016): 2.

25 Ibid., 5.

26 Ibid., 8.

27 Robin Usher and Richard Edwards, *Postmodernism and Education*, 120.

28 Ibid., 113.

29 Ibid., 99.

30 Ibid., 100.

the candidates are entrusted to an elderly priest, who tutors him regarding the life of the priest. At this time monasteries were places of learning. There are equally influences of the postmodern attitude in some seminary formation in which the seminary disciplines have been relaxed leading to some lapses in the priestly discipline. The adverse effect is more dangerous.

To be ancient or medieval, modern or postmodern, flexible or rigid in seminary formation is not the matter, what is considered important is to make sure that the essential life of the seminary is not aborted. The candidates need to understand the deeper dimension of their program and it is balancing the subjective and objective elements. Greater responsibility is required from them, knowing that to whom much is given, much is expected. The Church must be more discerning regarding the scarcity of candidates.

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