

The Relevance and Challenges of Classical Languages in Priestly Formation

Kenneth A. Adesina, Ph.D
Department of Theology
SS. Peter and Paul Catholic Major Seminary
Bodija, Ibadan

Abstract

More than mere tools for verbal communication, languages preserve the impressions, affections and culture of those who speak them. Thus, the closest we can ever get to the reality somebody has expressed is by seeking an understanding of his language. This paper examines the relevance of classical and biblical languages in priestly formation, showing how a good knowledge of Latin, Greek and Hebrew gives a direct and undiluted access to the depth of grace, spirituality and culture offered in the scripture and in the Church Fathers. How can future priests gain an undiluted access to the Church's sources and experiences of faith? This paper is an attempt not only to justify and attract attention to these languages, but more importantly a presentation of some challenges encountered in learning them and some solutions that can mitigate such challenges.

Keywords: Biblical Languages, Catholic Priesthood, Classical Languages, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Priestly Formation.

1. Introduction

The perplexity that goes with the question of 'man' is so enormous that it is accepted, with minimum level of error, that man is a puzzle with an open-ended conclusion – a reality that can be considered from different angles.¹ However, from whichever angle

¹ St. Augustine once affirmed: *modus quo corporibus adhaerent spiritus... omnino mirus est, nec comprehendi ab homine potest; et hoc ipse homo est.* ("The manner in which our spirits are united with our bodies in order to make us living beings is

man is considered or his projects are explained, there is the need for some form of communication, which is expressed in form of thoughts and opinions. These thoughts and opinions are expressed in words, either written or spoken. On this, Aristotle opines that,

words spoken are symbols or signs [σύμβολα] of affections or impressions [παθήματα] of the soul [psyche]; written words are the signs of words spoken. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections themselves, of which these words are primarily signs [σημεία], are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects [pragmata] of which those affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies [homoiomata].²

Consequently, a system of interpretation that is capable of unveiling thoughts and impressions must do more than an analysis of the signs (σύμβολα). It must be able to recreate the impressions (παθήματα). If we must understand Christianity from the earliest impression created about it in the scriptures, if we must understand the impression and experiences of our Christian forebears on the priesthood and its ideals, and if we must stand the chance of maintaining all these and adapt them to our contemporary experience without any loss of value or dignity, then there is the need to find a way to understand their original impressions or experiences as represented in their languages or signs (σύμβολα).

As if the complexity that is associated with man on the general platform is not enough, the priesthood becomes another vocation within a general vocation; one that does not only confer a unique identity and requires specific challenges, but one that also has as active player in its formative stage, a seminarian who is “a mystery

extraordinarily mysterious and incomprehensible to us, even though we are just such a union”). Augustine, *De Civitate Dei*, XXI, 10, in H. Dressler, ed., *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* 24 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 367.

² Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 1,16^a, 4 – 9, in P. Harold, ed., *Aristotle: The Categories and On Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962), 115.

even to himself.”³ If man has been described as a riddle, how do we solve this riddle or reduce the mystery surrounding man to the barest minimum in the priesthood? Hence, the pathway to having a more effective formative programme for the priesthood entails an acquisition of proper impression and conception of the priesthood right from its inception; and if there were developments or adaptations of the concept, the impressions that such communicate in the contemporary society must be understood.

2. The Catholic Priesthood: Identity, Dignity, and Formation

We cannot but trace the identity and dignity of the Catholic priesthood to the action of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Even though priests are chosen among men, the identity and dignity that sacred ordination bestows on them is such that St. Ignatius of Antioch affirms, “the apex of dignities is the priesthood”. The exaltation of the priestly office is such that St. Augustine exclaims “O venerable sanctity of the hands! O happy function of the priest! He that created [if I may say so] gave me the power to create Him; and He that created me without me is Himself created by me!”⁴ St. Jerome affirms: “As the Word of God created Heaven and earth, so, the words of the priest create Jesus Christ;”⁵ and St. Alphonsus Liguori corroborates these by saying that “The dignity of the priest is so great, that he even blesses Jesus Christ on the altar as a victim to be offered to the eternal Father.”⁶ By a singular act of love and trust, Christ himself instituted the priesthood and, at ordination, he raises a mere mortal to act *in persona Christi*.

Even though the sublime power and dignity of the priesthood belong to Christ himself, his generosity and trust to share these with men require a formative programme, which will enable the

³ Congregation for the Clergy, *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), n. 28.

⁴ A. Liguori, *Dignity and Duties of the Priest* (New York: St. Athanasius Press, 1889), 28.

⁵ Liguori, *Dignity and Duties of the Priest*, 28.

⁶ Liguori, *Dignity and Duties of the Priest*, 28.

recipients of such divine dignity to recognize and acknowledge such sublime dignity, to make themselves ready for the in-dwelling of such sublime grace, and have a clue of what a sublime responsibility priestly ordination bestows on them. If nothing else other than the sublimity of standing and functioning in the person of Christ is considered in the formation of future priests, the formative programme and the seminarians under formation must ensure proper understanding of the person and of the priesthood of Christ. These, in themselves, will take us through three historical epochs.

The first epoch whose symbols (σύμβολα) and impressions (παθήματα) to be understood was the period before the incarnation of Christ, the High Priest of our faith. This period was predominantly espoused in the Old Testament, and within a context that is predominantly Hebraic in its categories, expressions, impressions and culture. The second is not completely dissimilar to the first, the nuances only shifted from messianic expectation to the recognition and acceptance of the Messiah. Though the outlook was Hebraic, the communication and commitment of its σύμβολα and παθήματα to posterity were Greek in their outlook. In faithfulness to Christ's *missio ad gentes*, the third epoch of the successors of the apostles or Church Fathers could not but pass the preceding σύμβολα and παθήματα through the universal crucible of Latin.

Following from the above, it is clear that the exercises in effective priestly formation, and even the entire edifice of Christian theology and spirituality cannot be totally accessed, domesticated and disseminated without getting to their real elements, which have variously been expressed, processed and handed-on within the cultural ambits of Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Thus, accessing the hidden treasures committed to posterity by our forebears would require a tool.

3. Nature of Language

Language is popularly described as a “system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a particular country or

area.”⁷ A full understanding of what a language is, would however require more elaborate treatment of the contents of communication or an expansion of its description to accommodate various roles that language plays in the life and experience of its users. Consequently, more than being just a system of communication, it entails and demonstrates a whole lot of attributes that identify its users. Some of the attributes of a language will be highlighted in order to show its centrality in defining a people’s anthropological world-view and way of life.

If culture is simply defined as people’s way of life, then an adaptation of Aristotle’s view as expressed above would reveal that their culture and values are expressed or communicated as expressions in signs known as words in a language. This becomes more meaningful if we realize, as opined by Linda Crawford-Lange, that “without a cultural context, a word has no meaning..., language and culture are essentially inseparable, linguistic characteristics should be viewed as cultural elements and that culture learning requires the vehicle of language.”⁸ The import of this is seen, not only in the development of the Integrative Language/Culture Learning Process, but also in the practice of using linguistic expression to arrive at cultural understanding of a people.⁹ In addition to being a tank that safe-guards and markets culture, language serves as a veritable tool for human bonding, creates an encounter that facilitates human interaction and inter-connectivity through the continuous use of words that express the same meaning, and thus builds a community of people that agrees on the use of common categories and meanings. The inference of the above is that language carries with it the tradition and experiences of the people.

Among the numerous meanings of ‘classics’ is its description as the study of ancient Greek and Roman culture; this study includes

⁷ A. Hornby, ed., “Language,” in *Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 875.

⁸ L. Crawford-Lange and D. Dale, “Integrating Language and Culture: How to do it,” in *Theory into Practice* 26, no. 4 (Autumn, 1987), 258.

⁹ For instance, a study of the Yoruba language and many of our local Nigerian languages will give us a cultural understanding of the idea of the family if we realize that the language has no word either for an ‘uncle’ or for a ‘cousin’.

their languages, literature, civilisation, history, world-view, perception and culture. When one talks of classical languages, the primary referents are Greek and Latin; and in the study of Classics or Classical Studies, everything that affected, interacted with, or was affected by the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations falls under the study. Classical studies will be better described not just as the mere study of the Greek and Latin languages, but their use in unlocking and searching the various aspects of the ancient world in order to have a first-hand encounter with them, understand their motives and domesticate their wisdom.

Biblical languages are the languages used for the expression of impressions and messages in the Bible; and like the classical languages, are necessary to unlock the real meaning of not only the biblical world-view, but also the significance of the biblical messages. Thus, the biblical languages include (but not limited to) those languages used in the composition of the books of the Bible – Hebrew and Greek.

To adequately serve their purposes, these languages are to be studied and understood in the various areas of phonetics (speech processes – production, perception and analysis of sounds), phonology (sound system), morphology (form, structure and modification of words), syntax (grammatical arrangement of words and the use of speech in communication), semantics (combination of words to create meaningful discourse, relationship between signs and symbols and what they represent, and in logic, the determination of truth-value of language formulas) and pragmatics (the actual use of speech in communication and how context aids the transmission of meaning in utterances).

4. Classical and Biblical Languages in the Church

From what has been established, it is a truism that language is not just meant for verbal communication. It could be a tool to converse with and enter into the world of all those who have ever spoken or engaged in the use of that particular language. A logical inference of this is that even if we moot the idea of referring to any language as dead, it will not be applicable to any of the languages we are considering in this paper. In ecclesial parlance, Hebrew, Greek and

Latin are ancient languages and they are alive because they are much in use. But the question is: what is the connection, if there is, among these three languages? How do they define the experiences and movements of the Church? What effect do they have on and for priestly formation?

Martin Luther once posited, “the Hebrews drink from the spring, the Greek from the stream that flows from it, and the Latins from a downstream pool.”¹⁰ This is an attempt to illustrate the incarnation of divine message into these three languages, with Hebrew as the source, Greek as a passage and Latin serving as a rich deposit for this divine encounter. It means, therefore, that a proper understanding of the faith, which necessarily comes as a basis for its active practice in union with the divine action of the Holy Spirit, must be aided by a proper understanding of the Sacred Scriptures and Sacred Tradition that these three languages represent. If priestly formation seeks to put seminarians in good position to “give reason for hope,” (1Pet. 3:15) to allow Divine Revelation to become known, and to bring all peoples to the obedience of faith,¹¹ then it must approach with great enthusiasm and energy, the thorough study of the contents of the faith – Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition.

This is the reason why the *Ratio Fundamentalis* establishes, “as well as Biblical Hebrew and Greek, seminarians should be introduced to the study of Latin from the start of the course of formation, since it provides an access to the sources of the Magisterium and the history of the Church.”¹² It is then clear, that talking of the relevance of Hebrew, Greek and Latin languages in the formation of priests is synonymous to making a discourse on the importance of Scripture and Tradition in the Church. Thus, the following section shall treat the importance and relevance of these languages, not only to the mission and relevance of the entire Church, but their indispensability in the formation of priests, who, by divine calling, are chosen by God himself to champion the

¹⁰ M. Luther, “Table Talk”, in *Hebrew in the Church*, ed. P. Lapidé (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), x.

¹¹ Cf. Rm 16:26; *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*, n. 116.

¹² *Ratio Fundamentalis*, 138.

establishment of the divine truth therein present in the Scripture in the hearts of men.

Among all the languages spoken on earth, it is in Hebrew that the words of God were first expressed in human language and were made in human discourse.¹³ The importance of Hebrew language in opening the treasure of salvation is so enormous that St. Therese of Lisieux exclaimed: “In heaven only shall we be in possession of the clear truth. On earth, even in matters of Holy Scripture, our vision is dim. It distresses me to see the differences in its translations, and had I been a Priest, I would have learned Hebrew, so as to read the Word of God as He deigned to utter it in human speech.”¹⁴

According to Andre Villeneuve, Hebrew “is the principal language of divine inspiration and revelation”¹⁵. In fact, “approximately two thirds of the Catholic Bible was originally revealed and written in Hebrew (including a few chapters written in its close Semitic cousin, Aramaic)”.¹⁶ The importance of the study of Hebrew is actually not limited to the books of the Old Testament, because

the sayings of Jesus as recorded in the Greek Gospel and the New Testament are, for the most part, not his actual words but a translation: even though Jesus would likely have been conversant in Greek, in all possibility he read and quoted the Scriptures in their original Hebrew and preached and explained them in Aramaic, the commonly spoken language of the Jews in Galilee and Judea at the time.”¹⁷

¹³ *Dei Verbum*, n. 13.

¹⁴ Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul*, (London: Burns and Oates, 1912), 249.

¹⁵ A. Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew in Catholic Seminaries and Academic Institutions*, in *Researchgate*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315835729_On_the_Importance_of_Biblical_Hebrew_in_Catholic_Seminaries_and_Academic_Institutions?enrichId=rgreq-7b4d84bbdb33ff0a38994f3e4416a0ed-XXX&enrichSource=Y292ZXJQYWdlOzMxNTgzNTcyOTtBUzo0ODE0NDM3MTAyNzk2ODBAMTQ5MTc5NjUzMzE5NA%3D%3D&el=1_x_2&_esc=publicationCove rPdf (Accessed on 28/09/2018), 4.

¹⁶ Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 4.

¹⁷ Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 4.

Greek was the language of a new and potent civilization that the faith tried to evangelise and use for propagating the Good News. Its importance was obvious not only because of the global outreach of Hellenisation, but more importantly because at a point in history, Greek became a dominant language in almost all parts of the ancient world. It was a tool for economics, education, government, and so it easily became also, a tool for evangelisation. When the mantle of universal proclamation of the Gospel was passed to the Church Fathers, many of the Church Fathers were polyglots and they wrote, preached and ministered both in Latin and Greek.

While Greek cuts across both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition, Latin is characteristic of the Church's mode of reception of the revealed Word of God. More than Latin's liturgical roles in the Church, "it provides an access to the sources of the Magisterium and the history of the Church."¹⁸ In addition to its fundamental place in Catholic culture, Latin has embedded in it, the Church's patrimony and tradition of spirituality, theology, philosophy, canon law and history. It should be stated that the translations of the original Latin texts of these patrimony have proven to be far from being perfect. Thus, as it is in international diplomacy, the Church needs and must maintain her *lingua franca*, such that in matters of administration and teachings, ambiguity will be reduced to the barest minimum; and in matters of discussion and intellectual engagement, there will be mutual comprehension with no undue advantage given to some by the use of their language.

Like every society, the Church needs a common language that aids not only communication among her numerous children, but also preserves and commits her culture to posterity. A good look at societies where numerous languages are spoken (Nigeria for instance) will reveal that within a larger culture of uncommon languages, there exists a stronger bond among folks who have a common language and by extension a common culture. Thus, within the universal society that is laden with a threatening multiplicity of tongues, the Church cannot afford to lose her

¹⁸ *Ratio Fundamentalis*, n.183.

identity and culture. The fading glory of Latin tradition is already being noticed in the somewhat ethnic-laden sensitivity of some local Churches. If we do not extol and promote the general and common Latin identity and annex the richness of the diversity that other cultures offer, we run the risk of subjugating our rich heritage to the negative impact of nepotism.

By not reading the Church Fathers, an integral part of our heritage is being neglected. As expressed by the congregation for Catholic Education, if we fail to make use of the necessary language tool to access the fathers, we may be missing the opportunity to learn from the “true witnesses and guarantors of an authentic Catholic tradition ... [whose] authority in theological questions has been very great and always remain so.”¹⁹ In preparing future priests for the task ahead, the Church cannot afford to shy away from ensuring they are no strangers to the Commentators of Sacred Scripture;²⁰ initiators of rational procedure applied to the data of revelation, enlightened promoters of that *intellectus fidei* that belongs to the essence of every authentic theology,²¹ and examples of a rich encounter between faith and culture, faith and reason.²² Consequent upon these, for seminarians with sincere intention, “following the fathers in their theological itinerary means, therefore, grasping more easily the essential nucleus of our faith and the *specificum* of our Christian identity.”²³

The best of translations would not only be an opinion of the translator of the original, no matter how meticulous the interpreter may be; the possibility of a loss of meaning or paradigm shift cannot be completely avoided. Evidence of this can be seen in the

¹⁹ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, in <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/priesthood/priestly-formation/upload/fathers.pdf> (Accessed on 15/09/2020), 554.

²⁰ “*Divinorum librorum tractatores*” in the words of St. Augustine

²¹ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, 556.

²² *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, 557.

²³ *Instruction on the Study of the Fathers of the Church in the Formation of Priests*, 555.

Bible itself when the Greek translator of the Book of Ecclesiasticus (Sirach) affirms:

You are therefore asked to read this book with good will and attention, and to show indulgence in those places where, notwithstanding our efforts at interpretation, we may seem to have failed to give an equivalent for things originally written in Hebrew when it is a question of translating them into another language; what is more, the law itself, the prophets and the other books differ considerably in translation from what appears in the original text.²⁴

According to the Sacred Scripture itself, we can deduce that reading translated material does not guarantee a full grasp of scriptural sense and message, because even the translation of the Law itself ‘differs considerably from the original text.’ What better tool do we need to unlock the original sense and message of the text, if not the original language of the writer? Going by the saying of the Jewish poet, Haim Nachman Bialik, “reading the Bible in translation is kissing your bride through a veil”,²⁵ should we be contented with “listening to God through an interpreter rather than hearing [Him] directly”?²⁶

Getting to know precisely what the inspired author or a Church father meant when he made an expression may require one to go beyond modern translation. In many cases, translation into a language like English may bring ambiguity into the original intent of the ancient writers. In the opinion of Villeneuve, “whereas modern English has only one second person pronoun (you), Hebrew has four: אתה (atah, masculine singular), את (at, feminine singular), אתם (atem, masculine plural), אתן (aten, feminine plural).”²⁷ The difficulty that this causes to proper understanding will be appreciated if one is reading texts that have a lot of dialogue, for instance, the English translation of the Song of Songs.

²⁴ Prologue of Ecclesiasticus 15-26. The prologue comes before the first chapter of the book in most text.

²⁵ D. Parker, *Using Biblical Hebrew in Ministry: A Practical Guide for Pastors, Seminarians and Bible Students*, (Lanham: University Press of America, 1995), 4.

²⁶ D. Green, “Why Study Biblical Hebrew,” *Foundations* 57 (Springs 2007), 23.

²⁷ Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 8.

Reading biblical texts like Song of Songs that contain a lot of dialogue is technical; the ambiguity of the English pronoun “you” makes it virtually impossible for an English reader to know exactly who is speaking to whom. This is why some translations add superscriptions throughout the text (“HE” and “SHE”) in order to identify the speaker.²⁸

5. Language: Mentality and World-View

Underneath the combination of words in a language is a whole mentality and world-view, which must be understood before any translation can make meaning and convey the idea of the original writer. For example, in translating texts from Hebrew to English, the translator or the English reader who has no idea of the Hebrew world-view, would never understand that:

“look” is “lift up the eyes” (Gen. 22:4); “be angry” is “burn in one’s nostrils” (Exod. 4:14); “disclose something to another” or “reveal” is “unstop someone’s ears” (Ruth 4:4); “have no compassion” is “hard-heartedness” (1 Sam. 6:6); “stubborn” is “stiff-necked” (2 Chr. 30:8; cf. Acts 7:51); “get ready” or “brace oneself” is “gird up the loins” (Jer. 1:17); and “to be determined to go” is “set one’s face to go” (Jer. 42:15, 17; cf. Luke 9:51)²⁹

Translations have often created paradigm shift, emphasised unnoted nuances of a word or even completely changed the meaning of the original word. A typical example is the translation of the Hebrew word *Torah*; while we famously translate as “law,” “pious Jews rarely refer to the “Torah” as law; they simply say Torah, because the term has a meaning that is not accurately conveyed by law (which has the connotation of an undesirable burden of legal obligations).³⁰

The word *Torah* is derived from the Hebrew root *yarah* which means to cast, or to shoot (an arrow) and hit the mark; this is also the root of the word teacher *moreh* so Torah really means

²⁸ Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 8.

²⁹ M. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137.

³⁰ Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 9.

instruction or teaching more than law.³¹ This conveys a very different relationship between mankind and God. Men are not delinquents, but pupils striving to realise His goal for them, and He is not a law enforcer, but a tutor providing instruction on how to get there. Thus, the *Torah* is something like an instruction manual that helps man to “hit the mark” and reach the purpose for which he was made, in contrast to “sin,” which is to “miss the mark” of men’s vocation as children of God, created in His image and likeness.

It is not uncommon for biblical writers to employ figures of speech in their expressions, which would certainly be captured by those who understand the original languages. Two examples come to mind under this category. First, God created man (*adam*) from sand (*adamah*). In a similar manner, the English speaker may not be able to draw any direct connection between the words Joshua, Hosea, Elisha, Isaiah and Jesus, but for whoever understands the Hebrew language, “it is immediately evident that these names are closely related, being based on the same root for *salvation* (*yesha* or *yeshuah*).”³²

At this juncture, it should be stated that the three languages under consideration are inter-connected in their importance in the ecclesia context and none of them should be accorded less importance than the other in the Church. In fact, we have chosen to give more emphasis to Hebrew because, it is wrongly presumed to be the most difficult and less important than others. Some would say that it is the language of the Old Testament, and now we have the New Testament, which deserves greater attention. This reductionist view should be changed not only because Jesus himself affirms that he has not come to abolish the law or the prophet (expressed in Hebrew), but also because the “knowledge of Hebrew makes one feel at home in the Greek New Testament.”³³ As a matter of fact, the New Testament is not just a Greek translation of Hebrew expressions ‘written’ under inspiration by

³¹ E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 264.

³² Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 9.

³³ A. Leslie, *Why not learn Hebrew?* *TSF Bulletin* (Summer 1961), 4.

predominantly Hebrew writers, the literary translation of Hebrew expressions and idioms in the New Testament can only be understood with a background knowledge of Hebrew. An illustration of this is Jesus' assertion in Mt. 23:39 that "You shall not see me again, until you say, 'blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" The Hebrew idiom *baruch ha-ba* (blessed is he that comes) means "welcome", and the import of Jesus' statement, as deduced from his Hebrew background is that "He will not return, until Jerusalem welcomes him as their Messiah."³⁴

6. Present Situation of the Languages

The stand of the Church on the centrality of the classical and biblical languages in priestly formation has not changed, as they are meant to be studied as a necessary condition for the ministry. The experience, however, is that many, who passed through seminaries are not *bene calleant* (well versed") in these languages as required by the Canon law that "students are not only taught their native language accurately, but are also well versed in latin, and have a suitable knowledge of other languages which would appear to be necessary or useful for their formation or for the exercise of their pastoral ministry."³⁵ In most cases, the study of these languages are restricted to a single year and not in a very intense way. This level of language cannot be employed for serious academic studies, and in most students, it hardly suffices for correct pronunciation and sufficient grasp of vocabulary and grammar.

A good number of seminarians might not have attended the minor seminary, and so they never had the opportunity of studying Latin before. They often approach Latin, Greek and Hebrew with fear, based on misinformation from others. While one cannot not agree with a proposition that the challenges we have with classical languages arise because seminarians are not as academically strong as their counterparts in decades past, it could be said that the lack of interest in serious studies (as a general attitude) and, too much

³⁴ D. Botkin, *The Importance of Studying Hebrew*, in <http://robt.shepherd.tripod.com/ivrit.html> (Accessed on 30/09/2020).

³⁵ Code of Canon Law, no. 249.

emphasis on passing examinations and acquisition of certificates, are all contributing to the falling standard in academic formation, and growth of 'minimalism attitude' in formation.

There is a scarcity of qualified teachers, especially in the case of Latin. While the teachers of Hebrew and Greek languages come from the many Scripture scholars, who have had deep studies in the biblical languages, a great number of those who teach Latin in Nigeria, are either not trained formally to teach the language or have no connection with the institutions inaugurated for training of such teachers by the papal encyclical *Veterum sapientia*. If we want a head-way, Church authority must ensure that future teachers of the languages are rightly and adequately trained. We need to acquaint ourselves with the basic requirements of teaching such languages and understand the nuances of the different aspects of the formation of teachers in the areas of Church History, Patristic, Patrology and Scripture.

The method of teaching is also paramount in the acquisition of necessary skills to access the resources offered by these languages. The contemporary age is that of 'made-easy-students,' majority of whom will really not mind studying Hebrew, but only if the teacher could package everything into portable flash of "Latin without Tear," "Greek without Sweat," or "Hebrew without Blubbering." The use of memory is integral to language learning, but nobody can succeed in acquiring the necessary proficiency simply by cramming declensions, conjugations or grammatical principles. Teachers must resist the simple but dangerous practice of reducing the study of languages to mere cramming for examinations; they must make it easy but not water it down; and ensure that whatever is studied is utilised because usage is a better means of remembering than cramming in raw form.

From personal experiences of different languages, there are three basic requirements for learning any language – most especially the Classical and Biblical languages. The first is average intelligence, which is already included as a pre-requisite for seminary formation; such that whoever genuinely passed through the secondary school already has this. The second is interest, as learning a language depends so much on a personal conviction on the importance and relevance of the language. This is actually the

clog in the wheel for many students of classical languages. The level of interest is so low that one cannot but wonder if they understand the centrality of the languages to the life they are aspiring to embrace. As a follow up from interest, the third is time, which simply entails the challenge of setting apart some moment for studying the language. To effectively master a language, especially the ones under consideration, one will achieve more by devoting fifteen minutes to it everyday other than two hours once in a week or twenty-four hours once in a month. The import of this is that acquiring a language needs some form of regularity, and the lack of this, accounts for reasons many have forgotten the languages studied and passed with '*Summa cum laude*.'

More time should be given to the teaching and study of these languages if the kind of proficiency required to access the riches they offer is to be attained. A way out of the present dilemma may require that those who are charged with the responsibility of ensuring that seminarians acquire all the necessary skills and knowledge for their ministry ensure that this is done. In addition to the enforcement of the rule that requires a good knowledge of the languages for the award of a degree in Theology, lack of interest in them is an indication of something more paramount in the candidate's aspiration to the priesthood.

7. Conclusion

The aspiration of future priests should be reflective of the description of a holy priest by St. John Eudes that:

A holy priest is a saviour and another Christ, taking the Master's place on earth, representing Him, clothed with His authority, acting in His name, adorned with His qualifications, exercising His judgment on earth in the tribunal of penance. He is consecrated to exercise the highest functions Christ ever performed on earth, and to continue the work of salvation. In imitation of His Redeemer he gives himself, mind, heart, affections, strength, time, all for God. He is ever ready to

sacrifice his very blood and even life itself to procure the salvation of souls, particularly those of his own flock.³⁶

Getting himself prepared for these challenges will depend on the divine grace and personal disposition of a candidate to receive grace. This disposition is dependent not just on the available knowledge, but also on the interest to make a journey into the depth of divine revelation and experience, access to which these languages offer. Perhaps, it will not be out of place to posit that *ab initio*, the willingness of a candidate to co-operate with the Holy Spirit in the process of his priestly formation can and should be tested by his willingness to engage his 'little knowledge', his interest and his time in learning the languages that will put him in good stead to know and appreciate the depth of real theology, and process this for a productive pastoral engagement with the people of God.

This article is concluded with the story of a young Lithuanian Jew by the name of Eliezer Ben-Yehuda (1858-1922).³⁷ The Hebrew language suffered a great decline as a spoken language towards the end of the Roman period (around 200 CE); and during the Middle Ages, it survived as a liturgical and literary language spoken by a few, but no longer spoken as a mother tongue in any territory. After many centuries, Ben-Yehuda felt motivated to do something about his nation. In 1881, he returned to Palestine, where he met some other Jews who returned from different parts of the world, he then took it upon himself to form a Hebrew Language Council, which collected Hebrew words from different sources, coined new words, standardized pronunciation of words and was teaching his people how to speak the Hebrew language.³⁸ Sooner than his expectation, his 'recreation' of the language recreated the nation – Israel, and the rest of the story is known to all of us.

³⁶Society of Ignatians, <https://societyofignatians.com/who-we-are/we-are-priests-sealed-by-identity/the-priest-alter-christus/> (Accessed on 26/09/2018).

³⁷ Villeneuve, *On the Importance of Biblical Hebrew*, 21.

³⁸ Cf. A. Saenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

In the contemporary experience of the Church, more Ben-Yehudas will be needed to recreate the culture and values that filled the Church of the fathers with vigour and spiritual vitality. If priests in training have any doubt about the potentiality of reviving their interest in the Church's language and culture, then they should be reminded that, as Pope John Paul II rightly avers, "the Church still lives today by the life received from her fathers; and on the foundation erected by her first constructors, she is still being built today in the joy and sorrow of her journeying and daily toil".³⁹

The present generation of seminarians and priests cannot afford to fail the Mother Church, they must follow her call to have a sip of the divine wisdom with the fathers, and uphold their legacy. In this period of 'deep cultural and theological changes,' keeping alive the linguistic tradition of the Church does not in any way mean 'living in the past,' rather it means "adhering to the line of faith with an enthusiastic sense of security and freedom, while maintaining a constant fidelity toward that which is foundational."⁴⁰ So, must keep the Church real and active as they continue to embrace and sustain the truth entrusted to them.

³⁹ JohnPaul II, *Patres Ecclesiae, Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 72 (1980), 5.

⁴⁰ M. Confoy, *Religious Life and Priesthood: Perfectae Caritatis, Optatam Totius and Presbyterorum Ordinis*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 129.