

THE NEW *RATIO FUNDAMENTALIS* IN THE FORMATION OF PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS IN AFRICA

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Introduction

The process of building or preparing priests and religious for the service of God and humanity is called priestly or religious formation. The Church through the Congregation for Clergy finds it fitting that priestly formation be taken seriously, revamped, renewed and restored according to historical, socio-cultural and ecclesiastical conditions. The opening line of the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (*RFIS*) reads: “The gift of the priestly vocation, placed by God in the hearts of some men, obliges the Church to propose to them a serious journey of formation.”¹ The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* in other words, “The Gift of Priestly Vocation” was promulgated January 6, 1970 to provide guidelines for the formation of priests and religious. It was amended March 19, 1985 by the Congregation for Catholic Education in the light of the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law (25 January 1983). The new *RFIS* prepared by the congregation for Clergy was published on December 8, 2016 considering the ecclesiastical and socio-cultural changes

In preparing the new *RFIS*, inspiration was drawn from Pope Francis’ teachings in the area of spirituality touching on temptations connected to money, the authoritarian use of power, rigid legalism and vainglory. The new *RFIS* has a lot to offer in the field of building pastors and evangelisers for the Church. There is the ever-increasing need for the Church in Africa to adequately prepare her priests and religious in response to the emerging challenges of evangelisation today. Formation in Africa must be integrally grounded in community and missionary spirit.² In this paper, we shall review the new *RFIS* and its implication in the formation of Priests and Religious in Africa.

¹ *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (*RFIS*), Introduction, 1.

² *RFIS*, Introduction, 3.

The new *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*

The *RFIS* finds its origin in the first article of the conciliar decree *Optatam Totius*. It establishes general norms that will subsequently be applied to different cultural contexts, according to the reality of each country. The focus is on the dialogue between the universal view of the Holy See and the specific perspective of the conferences of Bishops. The *raison d'être* for this dialogue lies in the conciliar determination that envisages priestly formation with a pastoral objective. The document is intended to set forth those fundamental principles, the implementation of which would be determined by respective Episcopal Conferences. The *RFIS* is spread into eight parts. After the introductory section, the part one provides the general norms in the organisation of formation³. The part two of the document deals with priestly vocations through the minor seminaries and other forms of accompaniment for adolescents. The third part of the *RFIS* treats priestly identity as the basis and purpose of formation and the configuration to Christ as its end. The part four touches on the aspects of initial and ongoing formation. The fifth part of the document discusses the human, the spiritual, the intellectual and the pastoral dimensions of formation. The part six outlines the agents of formation. The seventh part sets out an organisational structure of studies. The eighth and last part of the *RFIS* talks about criteria and norms of admission and dismissal from the seminary. This part also touches on seminarians coming from other seminaries or institutes of formation, discourages the admission of people with homosexual tendencies and encourages the protection of minors and the accompaniment of abuse victims.

The Agents of Formation

The major agent of formation is the Most Holy Trinity. The diocesan community where the bishop is the head shares in the responsibility of the formation of the candidate. The presbyterate, the seminary formators who give spiritual and pedagogical formation, the professors who provide the intellectual succour and guarantee integral formation, the administrative workers, the specialists and professionals are all invited by the *RFIS* not to forget their very important roles in nurturing vocations and formation.⁴ The *RFIS* therefore encourages the bishop to maintain frequent personal contact with the seminary formators, support them

³ These general norms address the need for the *Ratio Nationalis*, pointing out the right and duty of the conference of bishops to prepare their *Ratio Nationalis* in accordance with the *RFIS*. The *Ratio Nationalis* is to be reviewed from time to time based on changing times and accumulated experiences.

⁴ *RFIS* 127.

and ensure that the spirit of full harmony is fostered among them. Unity among the formators and a life of example are necessary since the mission of priestly formation is a delicate one. The formator is one that “offers a coherent and eloquent witness to the values that belong to priestly ministry.”⁵ Each formator should be possessed of human, spiritual, pastoral and professional abilities and resources, so as to provide the right kind of accompaniment that is balanced and respectful of the freedom and the conscience of the other person, and that will help him in his human and spiritual growth.⁶ Formators in fact need to be attentive to their duty.

Initial Formation

The document of the Bishops’ conference of Nigeria, *Called to Love* acknowledges that: “Seminaries and houses of formation are of great importance for the initial formation of seminarians and religious in the chaste, celibate living.”⁷ Formation generally has the initial and ongoing aspects. Initial formation comprises of four stages:

The Propaedeutic Stage

One of the remarkable innovations of the new *RFIS* is the propaedeutic period of not less than one year and not more than two years, meant to validate the vocation of the candidate. The propaedeutic stage undertaken within community life is the first part of the initial formation and is important as a time of vocational discernment which leads to a careful selection of candidates for the senior seminary.

The Stage of Philosophical Studies

The stage of philosophical studies, otherwise known as the stage of discipleship as the *RFIS* says, “is intended to educate the person in the truth of his being, in freedom and in self-control. It is meant to overcome all kinds of individuality, and to foster the sincere gift, opening him to generous dedication to others.”⁸ Philosophical studies aids the candidate to be able to develop rational perspectives to issues. The seminarian is to be familiar with training his character and learn virtues such as “sincerity of mind, a constant concern for justice, fidelity to one’s promises,

⁵ *RFIS* 132.

⁶ *RFIS* 49.

⁷ CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Called to Love: Ethical Standards for Clergy and Seminarians*, 15.

⁸ *RFIS* 63.

refinement in manners, modesty in speech coupled with charity.⁹ These are very important and indispensable virtues in the life of the priest and religious.

The Stage of Theological Studies

The theological studies or configuration is a period during which formation focuses on the configuration of seminarian to Christ so that united with Him, he can present his life as a self-gift to others. “This stage leads to making the relationship of the seminarian with Christ more intimate and personal and, also leads to awareness as well as an assumption of priestly identity.”¹⁰

The Pastoral Stage

The pastoral stage which is the stage of vocational synthesis is the time that the seminarian leaves the seminary until his subsequent priestly ordination. The stage is twofold as it involves pastoral assignment and also a period of preparation with the help of a particular accompaniment for priestly ordination.¹¹ Before we go to the aspect of ongoing formation, let us look at the four dimensions of formation.

The Four Dimensions of Formation

The four dimensions of formation are made up of the following: *human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation and the pastoral formation.*

- The human formation aims at helping the candidate to develop a mature personality by following the example of Christ in order to handle the difficult challenges of pastoral care. Humility, courage, common sense, magnanimity, right judgement and discretion, tolerance and transparency are important qualities in the pastoral ministry. According to the Bishops of Nigeria, the human formation helps the candidates to know themselves thoroughly – their physical, moral, religious, and emotional dispositions¹². As the foundation of all priestly formation,¹³ the human formation aims at the promotion of the integral growth of the candidate. We need more efforts in the area of human formation for the African priests and religious in order to produce responsible men and women for God’s mission.

⁹ *Optatam Totius*, n.11: AAS 58 (1966) 720.

¹⁰ *RFIS* 68.

¹¹ *RFIS* 74.

¹² CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Called to Love: Ethical Standards for Clergy and Seminarians*, 15.

¹³ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n.43: AAS 84 (1992) 731-732.

- The spiritual dimension is concerned with personal union with Christ born and nourished by prayer and communion with God. Spiritual formation is directed at the nourishment and sustenance of communion with God and fellow humans.
- The intellectual dimension of formation is aimed at giving the seminarian a solid competence in philosophy and theology, together with a broad educational preparation that is enough to enable him to proclaim the gospel to people of our time in a way that is credible and can be understood. This helps to open the seminarian up to a fruitful dialogue with contemporary society to enable him to uphold the faith using the light of reason.¹⁴
- The pastoral dimension permeates the priestly life with the pastoral spirit as it prepares the seminarian to be a shepherd in the image of Christ. Pope Francis tells pastors to smell like the sheep, an invitation to pastors to remain close to their people and not to abandon God's flock.

Ongoing Formation

The entire life of a priest from the beginning of his calling is that of continuous formation. "Ongoing formation is intended to ensure fidelity to the priestly ministry in a continuing journey of conversion, in order to rekindle the gift received at ordination."¹⁵ After some years of pastoral experience, "new challenges for the ministry and life of the priest can easily emerge."¹⁶ There are certain conflicts that may remain in the personality of the priest that can emerge over time that should be addressed. The priest should not be allowed to become isolated but should be supported and accompanied through spiritual or psychological means. The aspect of ongoing formation is very important in the life of the priest and religious.

The Church in Africa should always have designated places for ongoing formation and to give priests opportunities to spiritually and physically renew themselves from time to time. The priest can easily develop a feeling of being just a community worker or a dispenser of sacred things devoid of the heart of a shepherd and this feeling can make him only a functionary priest. There are many priests who since after ordination have never attended a renewal program. There are also some priests that have become aggressive, angry and bitter due to stress and strain. This has led some to take refuge in other ways of life like keeping unhealthy relationships that unfortunately constitute distractions to their ministry. Others have become simple social workers who just gather people for social displays devoid

¹⁴ *RFIS* 166.

¹⁵ *RFIS* 81.

¹⁶ *RFIS* 84.

of spiritual depth. Some priests and religious are frustrated as to take solace in alcoholism just to keep their heads off the consciousness of their anxieties and challenges. Due to the absence of regular renewal programmes, some priests and religious have become so disorganised that the management of their responsibilities and assignments have become heavy burdens to them. The priest after a long period of pastoral work can develop careerism, desire for wealth, allure of power, attachment to position and obsession with marking out comfort zones exclusively for oneself resulting from outright lack of openness to the will of God.¹⁷ After some time, the priest can encounter challenges in his celibacy, develop tiredness, physical weakness, frail health and burden of routine, that dampen his apostolic zeal and openness to self-giving to the pastoral ministry. It is not a surprise that there are also some cases of priests and religious who have rejected their posting because of rural geographical location of some parishes. These are all signs that ongoing formation needs to be provided for such priests and religious in order to renew their missionary energies. Fraternal meetings, spiritual directions, retreats, and priestly associations are possible avenues for rejuvenation of priests and religious. In fact, ongoing formation is important for all agents of formation. It can be gained “through interpersonal relationships, moments of exchange and discussion.”¹⁸ *Pastores Dabo Vobis* encourages that those who have been seminary formators and have acquired particular sensitivity and a rich experience could be able to help later in the ongoing formation of the clergy.¹⁹

The African Experience: Challenges and Recommendations

The growth of the Church in Africa is evident with the growth in the number of indigenous priests, religious, seminarians and candidates for institutes of consecrated life. There are also tremendous achievements in the areas of education, health, inculturation, ecumenical and Interreligious Dialogue. We can see several missionary institutes founded in Africa that have grown and begun to supply missionaries not only for Africa but also for other parts of the world as *fidei donum*. These are tangible manifestations of the maturity which the Church in Africa has attained.²⁰ This growth however, has not come without challenges of poverty, mismanagement of resources, political instability and social disorientation. In the face of these realities, how do we find the new *RFIS* useful for the formation of future priests and religious for the Church in Africa.

¹⁷ *RFIS* 84c.

¹⁸ *RIFS* 50.

¹⁹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 66: AAS 84 (1992) 772-774.

²⁰ *Ecclesia in Africa*, 30.

The formation of priests and religious in Africa is producing fruits but certain areas still need to be improved. The area of community life seems to be neglected. Community life needs more attention in the formation of priests and religious in Africa. Many priests and religious cannot stay with others without disagreements, quarrels and complains and this is quite alien to the communal character of the African people. Insensitivity to the cultures and feelings of others in the communities of priests and religious are serious issues to be addressed. There are challenges of extended family relations that put serious financial burdens on priests and religious in Africa. Priests and religious need to know that they cannot respond to every family need. Sectionalism and tribalism sometimes can be visible among priests and religious of Africa and formation has to discourage this anomaly and emphasize the unity of Christ. Some of our formation houses in Africa need more teaching and learning facilities such as libraries stocked with relevant and current books, good internet services for e-materials, good lecture halls, projectors etc. We have shortage of formators or professors in some of the fields of formation in Africa and that needs to be addressed. The bishops and religious superiors of Africa need to be open to preparing formators for our houses of formation. Some priests and religious feel discouraged accepting the responsibility of being formators because of the poor welfare arrangements for those working in formation houses. As much as we encourage sacrifice and obedience on the part of the priests and religious appointed formators, we also encourage proprietors of houses of formation to look into the welfare provisions for formators and improve where necessary.

We have shortage of formators and professors in some of the fields of formation in Africa and that needs to be improved upon. There are cases where you find a dogmatic theologian having to teach liturgy in the seminary because there is no one trained and available in the area of liturgy. There are some formators who after being trained, refuse to accept the responsibility or the assignment to work as formators. This has been frustrating the efforts to establish and sustain continuity in the chain of professionals for formation. The question of sex and child abuse is more prevalent in the western world, but Africa needs to watch out to prevent repeat of the American and European experience. February 21-24, 2019, Pope Francis organised a 'Child Abuse Summit' and that explains how the issue of being attentive to admitting candidates free of such tendencies is serious. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria in their document titled, *Called to Love*, says: "Our bodies are sacred. Hence, all forms of sexual pervasions defile the sacredness of our bodies."²¹ Those in charge of admissions into the seminaries and those granting assent to application

²¹ CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Called to Love: Ethical Standards for Clergy and Seminarians in Nigeria*, 4.

to holy orders are requested to watch out that they do not take in those involved in criminal behaviours. The document therefore draws attention to the need for good protection of minors and vulnerable adults. This is relevant in these turbulent times where the effects of sex abuses have left scars on the image and integrity of many Church ministers. The seminarian in formation should be trained to accept all people as one humanity under one God. There is bound to arise situations where the priest feels duty bound to respond to all the financial needs of family members. The *RFIS* cautions against such tendencies but does not speak against genuine charity. Seminarians should be formed more than before to model their lives after Christ the simple good shepherd so that they can be shining beacons in a world very saturated with the culture of consumerism and what Pope Francis calls the throw-away culture. We need attention in our houses of formation on the areas of Interreligious Dialogue in order to resolve the present crisis of religious intolerance and hatred along religious lines across Africa and beyond.

Conclusion

We have looked at the new *RFIS* surveying its fundamental principles. We have tried to draw out the picture of the African continent where the relevance of this document is applied. It will be important to note that the new *RFIS* is roughly three years and it is not yet ripe to consider its fruits in Africa, thanks to the Ratio *Nationalis* that takes consideration into the evolving socio-cultural and ecclesiastical circumstances. One of the remarkable innovations which the Nigerian Church has already adopted is the propaedeutic period of not less than one year and not more than two years, meant to validate the vocation of the candidate. The *RFIS* promotes integral formation, by uniting in an encompassing manner, the human, the spiritual, the intellectual and the pastoral aspects of formation, by means of a gradual, personalised, instructional programme. The Church in Africa needs an authentic formation of her priests and religious. In fact, formation is said to be authentic if it focuses on preparing candidates for lives of sacrifice in obedience, chastity and poverty.