From Vocational Disappointment to Ecclesial Antagonism: An African Philosophical Critique of Victimhood, Blame and Personal Accountability among Former Clerics and Religious

Jude I. Onebunne, PhD

Abstract
This paper examines the transition from vocational disappointment to ecclesial antagonism among former clerics and religious, focusing on the African philosophical implications of victimhood, blame, and personal accountability within the Catholic Church. It proceeds from the recognition that vocational separation, whether voluntary or imposed by ecclesiastical authority, can generate profound psychological, spiritual, social and existential challenges. While acknowledging the Church's human fallibility and the possibility of unjust dismissal, defective formation processes, administrative failures and abuses of authority, the paper questions the tendency to interpret vocational disappointment exclusively through institutional blame while neglecting individual agency and responsibility. Employing critical analysis, the study interrogates the ethics of grievance, the psychology of victimhood, the nature of institutional accountability, and the moral obligations of individuals navigating vocational transitions and vocational crisis. It distinguishes legitimate criticism and demands for justice from indiscriminate ecclesial antagonism, arguing that the experience of injustice, real or perceived, should not automatically become a justification for persistent hostility towards the Church. The paper further contends that leaving the seminary, religious life or priesthood does not constitute the termination of personal dignity, spiritual identity, or meaningful human existence. Rather, vocational separation can provide an opportunity for self-examination, personal growth, reconciliation, and the discovery of alternative paths to human flourishing. The study advocates a model of reciprocal accountability in which ecclesiastical institutions acknowledge their failures while former members undertake honest assessments of their actions, expectations and contributions to their vocational experiences. It concludes that responsible engagement with vocational disappointment requires justice without vindictiveness, criticism without indiscriminate hostility and accountability without self-exemption.

Keywords
Vocational disappointment, ecclesial antagonism, victimhood, personal accountability, former clerics, religious life, institutional fallibility, Catholic Church.

Introduction

The Catholic priesthood and religious life represent distinctive forms of Christian vocation grounded in spiritual discernment, ecclesial commitment, service and the pursuit of holiness. Within Catholic theology, vocation involves both a personal response to God's call and an ecclesial process of discernment, formation, and evaluation (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992). Nevertheless, vocational journeys do not always culminate in ordination, perpetual profession, or lifelong ministry. Some candidates voluntarily discontinue formation, some discern that they are unsuited to the vocation, while others are dismissed or separated from their respective institutions following disciplinary, doctrinal, psychological, interpersonal, or administrative difficulties. Such experiences can generate disappointment, feelings of rejection, identity crises, and questions concerning personal worth and spiritual belonging. The philosophical problem emerges when vocational disappointment becomes a persistent disposition of resentment against the Church, accompanied by an interpretation of one's departure that attributes responsibility exclusively to ecclesiastical authorities while excluding meaningful self-examination.

The theme, *From Vocational Disappointment to Ecclesial Antagonism: A Philosophical Critique of Victimhood, Blame, and Personal Accountability* among former Clerics and

Religious, investigates this problem through the interrelated perspectives of moral philosophy, philosophy of religion and the ethics of personal responsibility. Its central concern is not to delegitimise the grievances of former seminarians, priests and religious but to interrogate the circumstances under which legitimate grievances may develop into sustained hostility towards the ecclesiastical institution. This distinction is important because the Church, notwithstanding its spiritual mission and religious authority, operates through human agents who are susceptible to errors of judgment, prejudice, administrative incompetence and abuses of power. The possibility of institutional wrongdoing, therefore, requires serious attention to justice, accountability and appropriate procedures. The Second Vatican Council (1965), in its reflection on the Church's relationship with the modern world, recognises the Church's responsibility to interpret contemporary human experiences critically and respond to the challenges confronting humanity. Recognising institutional fallibility, however, does not necessarily justify the complete externalisation of personal responsibility. Human conduct must be examined in relation to agency, circumstances, intentions, and consequences. In The Sources of Normativity, Korsgaard (1996) explores the foundations of moral obligation and the relationship between practical identity and responsible agency. Applied cautiously to vocational separation, this perspective suggests that individuals should not be understood merely as passive products of institutional decisions; they remain moral agents capable of reflection, judgement and responsible action. An individual may experience unfair treatment while also having contributed, in some measure, to the circumstances surrounding a vocational crisis. Conversely, acknowledging personal shortcomings does not absolve ecclesiastical authorities of responsibility for misconduct or unjust decisions. A balanced philosophical inquiry must, therefore, resist two extremes: institutional defensiveness, which treats ecclesiastical decisions as automatically legitimate, and individual self-exemption, which interprets every adverse vocational outcome as evidence of persecution.

The concept of victimhood also requires careful philosophical and psychological examination. Goffman (1963) demonstrates how social identities can be shaped by stigma and the ways individuals negotiate identities that others perceive negatively. Although vocational separation is not inherently a stigma, the loss of an established religious identity may influence how former members understand themselves and how they believe others perceive them. The challenge arises when an experience of injury becomes the dominant framework through which one's past and present are interpreted. Nevertheless, the expression of victimhood should not automatically be equated with dishonesty or manipulation. Some individuals have genuinely suffered institutional injustice and require opportunities to speak, seek justice, and rebuild their lives. The critical question is whether narratives of injury encourage truth, responsibility and healing or become a permanent justification for indiscriminate antagonism. Furthermore, vocational separation should not be understood as the end of human flourishing. Leaving the seminary, priesthood, or religious life does not necessarily extinguish Christian faith, personal dignity, intellectual potential, or the capacity for meaningful service. The Second Vatican Council (1965) emphasises the Church's solidarity with humanity and its responsibility to engage human experiences, including suffering and anxiety, with seriousness and compassion. This perspective provides a basis for approaching former members neither as enemies nor as individuals whose grievances must automatically be accepted, but as persons deserving justice, dignity, and opportunities for constructive engagement.

Against this background, the paper argues for reciprocal accountability, responsible criticism, and constructive engagement with vocational disappointment. It examines the relationship between vocational separation, victimhood consciousness, ecclesial antagonism and personal responsibility while acknowledging the Church's obligation to confront its failures. Ultimately, it maintains that justice must not be sacrificed for institutional loyalty, just as personal accountability must not be abandoned in the pursuit of vindication. A mature response to vocational disappointment requires truth without concealment, criticism without indiscriminate hostility, and self-examination without self-condemnation. Such an approach

creates the possibility of moving beyond resentment towards reconciliation, personal growth, and meaningful life after vocational separation.

Vocational Disappointment and the Existential Crisis of Ecclesiastical Separation

Vocation to the Catholic priesthood and religious life involves spiritual discernment, personal commitment, ecclesiastical formation and readiness to dedicate one's life to the service of God and humanity. Within Catholic teaching, vocation is understood as a divine gift that requires responsible human freedom and ecclesial discernment. The Congregation for Catholic Education (2008) emphasises that vocational discernment must consider both the good of the Church's mission and the well-being of individual candidates. Consequently, entering a seminary or religious institute does not automatically guarantee ordination, perpetual profession, or lifelong membership. Rather, formation involves an ongoing assessment of a candidate's human, spiritual, intellectual, moral and pastoral suitability. Vocational disappointment arises when an individual's expectations of priesthood or religious life are disrupted by voluntary withdrawal, dismissal, or a gradual realisation that the vocation is no longer appropriate. Such experiences can be especially painful when a person has invested years in formation, relinquished alternative opportunities, developed a strong religious identity, and anticipated a future of ecclesiastical service. The disappointment may extend beyond the loss of a desired vocation to include questions about personal identity, the meaning of previous sacrifices, and the future direction of one's life. The Synod of Bishops (2018) underscores the importance of personal history, affective maturity, community integration, and careful discernment in vocational formation. These considerations demonstrate that vocational journeys involve complex human processes rather than an uninterrupted progression towards ordination or religious profession.

The existential dimension of vocational separation becomes apparent when individuals interpret their departure as a rejection of their personhood rather than a change in their vocational circumstances. For someone whose identity has become closely associated with clerical or religious status, leaving may produce feelings of shame, uncertainty, exclusion, or failure. Nevertheless, the termination of a particular vocational journey does not establish that the individual's entire life has failed. The Catechism of the Catholic Church presents human dignity as grounded in the human person's creation in the image of God, rather than in professional status or institutional recognition (Catholic Church, 1992). Accordingly, former seminarians, priests, and religious retain their human dignity and capacity for meaningful contribution beyond ecclesiastical office. An important distinction must therefore be made between vocational separation and personal failure. The Church's own canonical structure that recognises that admission to priestly formation requires careful consideration of a candidate's human, moral, spiritual and intellectual qualities (Catholic Church, 1983, can. 241). Similarly, the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* stresses that decisions to dismiss a seminarian should be communicated with an adequately clear explanation of the circumstances and the discernment informing the decision (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). These provisions establish that vocational separation should be approached through responsible discernment and appropriate procedures, rather than arbitrary judgement or humiliation. Where these standards are violated, legitimate grievances and demands for accountability arise.

Nevertheless, the existence of a painful or unjust vocational experience does not require an individual to remain permanently defined by it. Personal agency includes the capacity to reinterpret past experiences, reassess one's aspirations and pursue alternative forms of service. The philosophical challenge is to acknowledge genuine suffering without transforming it into an enduring identity of resentment. Former clerics and religious may continue to contribute to education, family life, scholarship, pastoral activities and wider society, whether or not they maintain the same relationship with the Church and any of her authorities. Consequently, vocational disappointment should be understood as a significant life transition requiring truth, compassion, discernment, response-able self-worth and responsible self-reflection.

Ecclesiastical authorities must acknowledge their fallibility, while individuals must be encouraged to recognise that departure from a vocation does not extinguish their dignity or absolve them of the responsibility and response-ability to rebuild their lives constructively. This understanding provides the foundation for examining how unresolved disappointment may develop into victimhood narratives, externalised blame, and ecclesial antagonism.

Victimhood Consciousness, Externalised Blame and the Psychology of Ecclesial Antagonism

Vocational separation from the Catholic priesthood or religious life can become a psychologically and morally complex experience when disappointment develops into persistent resentment against the ecclesiastical institution. Although some former priests and religious may have legitimate grievances arising from unjust dismissal, mistreatment, or failures in formation, the philosophical problem emerges when personal suffering is interpreted exclusively through the structure of institutional blame. Victimhood consciousness, in this context, refers not simply to acknowledging that one has suffered an injustice but to adopting a persistent interpretative position in which personal injury dominates one's identity and responsibility is continually attributed to external actors. This distinction is essential because recognising genuine victimisation must not be confused with encouraging a permanent identity organised around grievance. Goffman (1963), in his analysis of stigma, explains how socially discredited identities can affect self-perception and interpersonal relationships. Although departure from religious life does not necessarily constitute stigma, former members may experience embarrassment, exclusion, or perceived social judgement, particularly when their former vocation formed a central part of their public identity. Such experiences may influence how they interpret their separation and their subsequent relationship with the Church. When disappointment becomes inseparable from one's self-understanding, institutional decisions may be remembered exclusively as acts of rejection, while personal conduct and the complexity of vocational discernment receive insufficient attention.

Externalised blame further complicates this experience. Rotter's (1966) work on *locus* of control distinguishes between orientations that emphasise external forces and those that emphasise the relationship between personal actions and outcomes. Although this theory does not establish that individuals who blame ecclesiastical authorities are necessarily mistaken, it provides a useful framework for examining how people explain adverse experiences. A former priest’s may attribute departure entirely to an ecclesiastical authority's prejudice, for instance, without considering personal conduct, disagreements, disciplinary concerns, or other circumstances. Conversely, ecclesiastical authorities may wrongly blame a candidate while concealing institutional failures. A balanced analysis must therefore investigate the evidence rather than presume either institutional innocence or individual culpability. Resentment may become more visible when personal grievances are repeatedly expressed in public forums, particularly through social media. Papacharissi (2015) explains how networked communication facilitates the formation of affective publics in which emotions, narratives, and collective interpretations circulate and shape public engagement. In the context of vocational separation, online platforms can provide legitimate opportunities for former members to report misconduct, seek support, and challenge institutional injustice. However, they may also encourage one-sided narratives, public shaming, and the circulation of accusations without adequate contextual examination. The philosophical distinction is therefore not between silence and criticism, but between responsible public accountability and the indiscriminate condemnation of an institution.

Ecclesial antagonism emerges when criticism ceases to focus on particular decisions or identifiable misconduct and becomes a generalised hostility towards the Church itself. Such hostility may manifest in the repeated presentation of ecclesiastical authority as inherently oppressive, the rejection of every institutional explanation, or the interpretation of all subsequent Church activities through the lens of personal grievance. Nevertheless, these

patterns must be established through careful examination rather than presumed from an individual's decision to speak publicly. Genuine whistleblowing and persistent criticism may be necessary where injustice remains unresolved. Ultimately, the philosophical challenge is to distinguish the acknowledgement of suffering from the absolutisation of victimhood. Rotter's (1966) framework encourages attention to how individuals understand their agency, while Goffman's (1963) analysis illuminates the relationship between social identity and perceived rejection. Neither framework proves that former clerics or religious are responsible for their separation; rather, both offer conceptual resources for examining how people interpret adverse experiences. A constructive response requires ecclesiastical authorities to address legitimate grievances and former members to undertake honest self-examination where appropriate. In this way, personal suffering can become an occasion for accountability, learning, and growth rather than a permanent justification for hostility.

Institutional Fallibility, Ecclesiastical Justice and Personal Accountability

The relationship between ecclesiastical authority and personal responsibility constitutes the central ethical problem in examining vocational separation within the Church. Although the Church understands itself as a divinely instituted community with a spiritual mission, its administration depends on human agents whose decisions may be affected by prejudice, inadequate judgement, personal conflicts, or failures of governance. Consequently, ecclesiastical decisions concerning admission, formation, discipline and dismissal should not be presumed infallible merely because they are made by religious superiors. At the same time, the possibility of institutional error does not establish that every former priest or religious was unjustly treated. A balanced philosophical analysis must, therefore, recognise institutional fallibility without automatically presuming individual innocence or guilt. The Church's own canonical framework acknowledges the importance of discernment and appropriate procedures. Canon 241 of the Code of Canon Law requires bishops to consider candidates' human, moral, spiritual and intellectual qualities, alongside their physical and psychological health and intentions, when admitting them to major seminaries (Code of Canon Law, 1983). This requirement demonstrates that vocational suitability involves several dimensions of personal development and cannot be reduced to academic performance or a candidate's desire for ordination. Similarly, the canonical provisions governing the dismissal of religious members identify relevant grounds and procedures, including the collection of evidence, communication of accusations, opportunities for defence, and the right of recourse in applicable cases (Code of Canon Law, 1983, cann. 695–700).

These provisions establish an important ethical principle: ecclesiastical authority must be exercised responsibly and decisions affecting a person's vocation must be open to appropriate scrutiny. Where dismissal results from arbitrary judgement, personal vendetta, discrimination, or defective procedures, institutional accountability becomes necessary. Pope Francis's 2023 modification of the time limit for recourse against certain dismissal decrees affecting religious members further illustrates the importance of protecting the rights of persons facing vocational separation (Francis, 2023). Institutional loyalty cannot ethically require the concealment of injustice, nor should respect for religious authority eliminate the individual's right to seek redress. Nevertheless, institutional accountability must be distinguished from the automatic exoneration of individuals. Personal responsibility requires the willingness to examine one's decisions, behaviour, attitudes and contribution to conflicts. Aristotle's (2009) account of moral responsibility in the *Nicomachean Ethics* connects ethical character with voluntary action, choice and habituation. Applied to vocational separation, this perspective encourages former members to consider whether their conduct, decisions, or responses contributed to the circumstances of their departure. Such reflection does not imply that every dismissal was justified or that candidates must accept accusations uncritically. Rather, it recognises that moral maturity involves examining one's own agency alongside the actions of others.

The principle of reciprocal accountability, therefore, provides a suitable ethical model. Ecclesiastical superiors must be willing to acknowledge mistakes, correct unjust decisions where possible and protect the dignity of those under their authority. Former members, in turn, should be willing to distinguish legitimate grievances from generalised hostility and to acknowledge personal shortcomings where evidence warrants such acknowledgement. Neither institutional authority nor personal disappointment should function as a shield against moral scrutiny. Furthermore, accountability should not be confused with vindictiveness. Seeking justice through appropriate ecclesiastical or civil channels is different from condemning the entire Church because of a particular experience. Likewise, remaining silent about genuine injustice is not a necessary demonstration of faithfulness. The ethical objective is to establish truth, protect human dignity and encourage responsible conduct on all sides. Ultimately, institutional fallibility and personal accountability are complementary rather than competing principles. The Church must acknowledge that its human representatives can make serious mistakes, while former clerics and religious must retain their capacity for honest self-examination. This reciprocal approach challenges both institutional defensiveness and the externalisation of all responsibility. It provides a foundation for addressing vocational disappointment constructively, making room for justice, reconciliation and meaningful life beyond clerical or religious status.

African Philosophical Critique of Victimhood, Blame and Personal Accountability among Former Clerics and Religious

An African philosophical critique of *From Vocational Disappointment to Ecclesial Antagonism: An African Philosophical Critique of Victimhood, Blame and Personal Accountability among Former Clerics and Religious* begins with the African understanding of the human person as fundamentally relational, communal and morally responsible. An African person is identified with a cobweb of interconnectivity or interconnectedness. In African philosophical tradition, personhood is not understood merely as an isolated individual's possession but as something nurtured and expressed through relationships, moral conduct, mutual recognition and participation in communal life. This perspective provides a useful model for examining the experiences of former priests and religious who, following dismissal or departure from ecclesiastical formation, develop persistent hostility towards the Church, its authorities or religious institutions. From the standpoint of African communalism and Afromodalism; particularly, the African philosophy of Afromodals[1] and human existence is constituted through relationships and connectedness. The individual does not exist independently of the community but participates in a network of reciprocal obligations and responsibilities. Mbiti's (1969) well-known formulation, *I am because we are,* and the Afromodals capture this relational understanding of existence. Consequently, vocational disappointment should not automatically become a justification for rejecting the community within which one's identity, formation and aspirations were nurtured. Even when a former initiate feels wounded by ecclesiastical decisions, the African relational worldview

[1] Jude I. Onebunne's afromodal is a neologism used in describing the African communal and metaphysical modality of *to be;* that is, the existential modalities of being within the boundaries of African orientation. Afromodal is an African concept that encapsulates all the conceptual framework upholding the genesis of the core of African communal philosophies and critical modalities such *igwebuike, ubuntu, egbebereugobere, onyeaghananwanneya, birikambiri, kwetuism, njikoka, consciencism, ibuanyidanda* and several others which share common philosophical threads and dealings within the African roots. Continuing Onebunne (2025) insists that Afromodals reflect the African sense of having shared walks, solidarity, cooperation, interdependence and mutual responsibility. These ideas describe subtly distinct facets of a shared conviction that human life is fundamentally relational, not individual. Afromodal, while not yet firmly established in scholarly literature, is a conceptual position or philosophical modality developed from African worldviews and epistemologies. It captures the interplay of African cultural principles, especially those that emphasize community, shared humanity and moral responsibility. Afromodal was first published: Onebunne, J. I. (2025). "An Exposition of the Afromodal: Exploring a New framework of Connectedness". In *Nnadiebube Journal of Philosophy, Vol. 8, N0.3, 2025.* https://www.acjol.org/index.php/NJP/article/view/6818/6605

encourages dialogue, reconciliation and the restoration of damaged relationships rather than permanent antagonism.

However, this communal orientation must not be misinterpreted as an unconditional defence of ecclesiastical authority. African philosophy does not necessarily require individuals to surrender their moral agency or tolerate injustice in the name of communal harmony. Gyekye (1997), in his moderate communitarian position, maintains that individuals possess autonomy and moral responsibility even while belonging to a community. Therefore, former clerics and religious men and women retain the right to question unjust treatment, challenge arbitrary decisions and seek appropriate redress. Equally, ecclesiastical authorities must accept responsibility for their actions, particularly where negligence, discrimination, manipulation, arrogance or abuse of authority may have contributed to a candidate's dismissal or psychological injury. The central African philosophical criticism, therefore, is directed against the absolutisation of victimhood. While genuine experiences of rejection, humiliation and institutional injustice deserve recognition, individuals must not allow their painful experiences to become permanent identities through which every ecclesiastical decision is interpreted as persecution. Such an attitude can weaken personal accountability and transform legitimate grievances into indiscriminate hostility. Menkiti's (1984) account of personhood, which emphasises the moral and communal dimensions of becoming a person, offers a further basis for insisting that maturity involves responsibility, ethical conduct and constructive participation in communal life.

Furthermore, the African ethical principle expressed in *onye aghana nwanne ya,*let no one abandon another, can encourage a reciprocal approach to vocational disappointment. The Church should not abandon former candidates through humiliation, neglect or exclusion, while former initiates should not respond to disappointment by abandoning every value, relationship or responsibility associated with their former religious community. Both parties must recognise their obligations to truth, justice and human dignity. In sum, this critique does not seek to silence former clerics and religious or protect ecclesiastical institutions from legitimate criticism. Rather, it challenges both institutional irresponsibility and individual vindictiveness. It argues that vocational disappointment should become an opportunity for self-examination, renewed purpose and responsible transition rather than an enduring justification for blame. In African philosophical terms, the dignity of the individual and the wellbeing of the community are mutually reinforcing. The former initiate must, therefore, recognise that leaving the seminary, religious congregation or priestly ministry does not terminate one's moral obligations, Christian identity or capacity for meaningful service. The failure of a particular vocational journey should not become the failure of personhood, just as the failure of ecclesiastical authority should not become an excuse for abandoning personal accountability.

Beyond Ecclesial Antagonism: Reconciliation, Personal Flourishing and Life after Vocational Separation

Vocational separation from the Catholic priesthood or religious life should not be interpreted as the termination of personal dignity, spiritual identity, or the possibility of a meaningful future. Although departure from a vocation may involve disappointment, rejection and unresolved grievances, it can also become an opportunity for personal reassessment, renewed purpose, and the discovery of alternative forms of service. The central philosophical argument of this section is that the end of a particular vocation does not constitute the end of a person's capacity for human flourishing. Consequently, former priests and religious should be encouraged to move beyond defining their lives exclusively through the circumstances of their departure, within the bounds of their presumed vocation, without being required to deny genuine injustice or abandon legitimate demands for accountability. The Church understanding of human dignity provides an important foundation for this argument. The Catechism of the Catholic Church identifies human dignity as rooted in the person's creation in the image of God, thereby establishing a value that transcends professional position,

institutional membership, or social recognition (CCC, 1992, paras. 1700–1706). Accordingly, a person's worth does not depend exclusively on becoming a priest, remaining in religious life, or receiving ecclesiastical approval. Former members retain their dignity, intellectual abilities, relationships and capacity to contribute to society. This perspective challenges the assumption that vocational separation necessarily signifies personal failure and encourages a broader understanding of human identity beyond clerical or religious status.

The Aristotelian conception of *eudaimonia,* commonly understood as flourishing through virtuous activity, offers a complementary philosophical perspective. Aristotle (2009) argues that the good human life involves the exercise of reason and the cultivation of virtue over time. Applied to post-vocational life, this understanding suggests that personal fulfilment may be pursued through education, family responsibilities, professional service, scholarship, community development and other worthwhile activities. Leaving the clerical state or religious institute does not eliminate the possibility of living responsibly or contributing meaningfully to the common good. Rather, vocational transition can require the reconstruction of personal goals and the reorientation of one's abilities towards new circumstances. Nevertheless, moving beyond ecclesial antagonism must not be confused with suppressing legitimate grievances. Where former members have experienced unjust dismissal, abuse of authority, discrimination, or procedural violations, justice requires appropriate acknowledgement and redress. The Second Vatican Council (1965), in *Gaudium et spes,* emphasises the dignity of the human person and the moral responsibility of social institutions towards humanity. This principle supports an approach in which the Church addresses substantiated grievances honestly, while former members are encouraged to pursue justice through responsible and proportionate means. Reconciliation cannot be demanded as a substitute for accountability, nor should institutional loyalty require silence about wrongdoing.

Reconciliation also requires distinguishing forgiveness from the abandonment of justice. Forgiveness may help individuals relinquish destructive resentment, but it cannot ethically be imposed upon those who have experienced serious wrongdoing. Enright and Fitzgibbons (2015) explain forgiveness as a process involving the transformation of resentment without denying the harm suffered. Applied to ecclesial relationships, this suggests that reconciliation becomes more meaningful when accompanied by truth, acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and appropriate efforts to repair harm. Former members should not be pressured into silence, while legitimate grievances should not automatically become grounds for permanent hostility towards every ecclesiastical authority or member of the Church. In sum, moving beyond ecclesial antagonism requires a commitment to reciprocal accountability, personal reconstruction and human flourishing. The Church must remain open to correction, while former clerics and religious must be encouraged to discover meaningful identities beyond their former vocational positions. The objective is neither to silence criticism nor to excuse institutional misconduct, but to prevent vocational disappointment from becoming a permanent obstacle to personal growth and constructive relationships. Such an approach affirms that justice and reconciliation can coexist, and that a painful vocational ending can become the beginning of a different but meaningful life.

Ecclesial Identity, Institutional Trust and the Ethics of Legitimate Criticism

Ecclesial identity and institutional trust are central to understanding the relationship between former clerics and religious and the Church following vocational separation. The termination of a person's priestly or religious journey does not automatically determine that person's continuing relationship with the Church, Christian faith or ecclesial community. However, vocational disappointment may complicate this relationship, particularly when individuals associate their experiences of rejection or injustice with the entire ecclesiastical institution. A philosophical examination must, therefore, distinguish the Church's spiritual identity from the actions of its human representatives, while recognising that institutional conduct significantly influences the credibility of its religious mission. The Second Vatican Council (1965), in *Gaudium et spes,* acknowledges the Church's close relationship with humanity and

emphasises that the joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties of people are also concerns of the Christian community. The distinction between the Church and its human representatives does not imply that institutional failures are insignificant. Rather, it establishes that particular ecclesiastical decisions must be assessed on their merits without automatically condemning or vindicating the entire institution. A formator's misconduct, a superior's unjust decision, or a bishop's administrative error may warrant criticism, investigation and redress. Nevertheless, such failures do not necessarily invalidate every aspect of the Church's spiritual mission. Conversely, appeals to the Church's sacred character must not be used to shield its representatives from accountability. Institutional trust is sustained not merely by claims to moral authority but also by conduct that demonstrates justice, transparency, compassion and respect for human dignity.

The Church's own canonical provisions recognise the right of the faithful to express their concerns. Canon 212 §3 affirms that, according to their knowledge, competence, and standing, the faithful have the right and, at times, the duty to express their views on matters affecting the good of the Church. It also requires that such expression respect faith and morals, reverence for pastors, the common good, and the dignity of persons (Code of Canon Law, 1983). This provision establishes that legitimate criticism is not inherently opposed to ecclesial communion. Indeed, responsible criticism may serve the Church by exposing weaknesses, correcting abuses, and encouraging institutional reform. This principle is reinforced by canon 221, which recognises the right of the faithful to vindicate and defend their rights through competent ecclesiastical procedures, and canon 220, which protects legitimate reputation and privacy (Code of Canon Law, 1983). These provisions establish a twofold ethical obligation: individuals should be able to report wrongdoing and pursue justice, while also respecting the rights of others. Therefore, neither ecclesiastical authority nor former membership in the Church should be used to silence legitimate complaints. Equally, the right to criticise does not remove the responsibility to distinguish substantiated facts from assumptions, avoid unjustified generalisations, and consider the consequences of public allegations.

Institutional trust is also relational rather than unconditional. Mayer et al. (1995) conceptualise trust as involving a willingness to accept vulnerability based on expectations concerning another party's ability, benevolence and integrity. Although their framework was developed in organisational research rather than ecclesiology, it offers a useful analytical perspective on relationships between former members and religious institutions. Where ecclesiastical authorities demonstrate fairness, acknowledge mistakes and respond transparently to grievances, the possibility of rebuilding trust may increase. Conversely, dismissing legitimate complaints, concealing misconduct, or treating criticism as disloyalty can deepen distrust and alienation. Former clerics and religious, for their part, may contribute to constructive engagement by distinguishing specific institutional failures from broader judgement about the Church's entire mission. The ethics of criticism becomes particularly important when grievances are communicated publicly. Public testimony can be necessary when internal channels fail, particularly where serious misconduct requires wider scrutiny. Nevertheless, responsible public criticism demands accuracy, proportionality, and respect for the dignity of all concerned. Habermas (1996) emphasises the importance of public reasoning and the justification of claims through communicative engagement. Applied cautiously to ecclesial disputes, this perspective encourages arguments supported by evidence rather than accusations driven solely by anger or a desire for retaliation. It does not require silence in the face of injustice; rather, it supports truthful criticism directed towards accountability and reform.

In sum, ecclesial identity should not be reduced either to unquestioning institutional loyalty or to permanent opposition arising from personal disappointment. Former clerics and religious may retain Christian faith, criticise ecclesiastical misconduct, seek justice and pursue meaningful lives outside ordained ministry or religious profession. The Church,

correspondingly, must recognise that genuine communion requires listening, fairness and a willingness to correct wrongdoing. Legitimate criticism becomes constructive when it seeks truth and justice without denying human dignity, while institutional trust becomes credible when authority remains accountable. This reciprocal ethical framework offers a path beyond indiscriminate antagonism towards a relationship grounded in truth, responsible dialogue, and the possibility of reconciliation.

Conclusion

This paper has critically examined the transition from vocational disappointment to ecclesial antagonism among former clerics and religious, focusing on the critical and African philosophical implications of victimhood, externalised blame, institutional fallibility and personal accountability. It has established that separation from the Catholic priesthood or religious life can generate profound psychological, spiritual password and existential challenges, particularly when individuals experience dismissal, rejection, or perceived injustice. However, vocational separation should not automatically be interpreted as personal failure, institutional persecution, or the termination of a meaningful life. Rather, it constitutes a complex human experience requiring critical reflection, justice and responsible engagement. The discussion has demonstrated that the Church, despite its spiritual mission, operates through fallible human representatives whose decisions may require scrutiny, correction and accountability. Consequently, legitimate grievances against ecclesiastical authorities must not be dismissed merely to preserve institutional reputation or demand unquestioning loyalty.

Equally, the recognition of institutional wrongdoing should not become an automatic justification for externalising every responsibility, cultivating permanent resentment, or condemning the entire Church because of particular experiences. A balanced ethical position requires reciprocal accountability, in which ecclesiastical authorities acknowledge their failures while former members honestly examine their own conduct, decisions, and responses to vocational disappointment. Furthermore, the paper has argued that legitimate criticism differs fundamentally from indiscriminate ecclesial antagonism. Truthful testimony, responsible public criticism, and the pursuit of justice can contribute to institutional reform, whereas generalised hostility may obstruct reconciliation and personal growth. Former clerics and religious retain their dignity, agency and capacity for meaningful service beyond their former vocational identities. Their departure from ecclesiastical ministry need not signify the abandonment of Christian faith, personal purpose, or human flourishing.

In sum, moving beyond vocational disappointment requires neither institutional defensiveness nor individual self-exemption. An African philosophical approach requires a double accountability: the Church must be accountable for the manner in which it discerns, forms and dismisses candidates, while former candidates must be accountable for how they interpret, respond to and move beyond vocational disappointment. Neither institutional authority nor personal victimhood should be exempt from moral scrutiny. It demands truth without concealment, accountability without prejudice, criticism without vindictiveness and reconciliation without suppressing justice. The central philosophical conclusion is that neither the Church's human fallibility nor an individual's vocational disappointment should become an excuse for abandoning personal responsibility, human dignity, or the possibility of constructive transformation. Through reciprocal accountability and responsible engagement, vocational separation can become a point of departure for renewed purpose rather than a permanent source of ecclesial antagonism.

***Jude I. Onebunne, PhD**
Department of Philosophy
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
juno.anyi@gmail.com
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-89956097

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