Discerning Before Being Discerned? A Critical Reflection on Vocational Presumption, Seminary Dismissal and Antagonism Towards the Church

Jude I. Onebunne, PhD*

Abstract

Priestly and religious formation is a process of mutual discernment through which candidates examine their perceived vocation while the Church evaluates their suitability for ecclesiastical ministry or consecrated life. However, the dismissal of some seminarians and religious aspirants has sometimes generated profound disappointment, enduring resentment and antagonistic attitudes towards formators, ecclesiastical authorities and the Church. This paper critically examines the psychological, philosophical, theological and ecclesiological dimensions of such reactions, with particular attention to the assumption that admission into a seminary or religious formation house constitutes definitive confirmation of a divine calling. It argues that entering formation does not automatically establish vocational authenticity, just as dismissal does not necessarily signify personal failure, spiritual inadequacy, or divine rejection. Rather, dismissal may constitute an integral outcome of vocational discernment, although human prejudice, institutional shortcomings and procedural injustices must not be excluded from critical consideration. The paper further interrogates the paradox of vocational presumption in which candidates appear to have conclusively discerned themselves before submitting their perceived vocation to the Church's formative and evaluative processes. It maintains that while legitimate grievances deserve attentive consideration, vocational disappointment does not justify vindictiveness, personal attacks, or sustained ecclesial antagonism. Instead, a mature response requires self-reflection, emotional integration, spiritual resilience, accountability and openness to alternative expressions of Christian service. The paper concludes by advocating a more compassionate, transparent and accountable formation system that prepares candidates not only for possible acceptance into ministry but also for the possibility of dismissal. Such an approach would promote healthier vocational discernment, responsible institutional practices and reconciliation between former candidates and the ecclesial communities that once accompanied their vocational journeys.

Keywords

Vocational discernment, seminary formation, vocational dismissal, priestly vocation, religious life, vocational disappointment, ecclesial antagonism, psychological resilience, ecclesial accountability, Christian service.

Introduction

The vocation to the Catholic priesthood or consecrated religious life represents a profound commitment to God, the Church and the service of humanity. For many aspirants, the desire to become priests or religious emerges from a deep sense of spiritual attraction, personal conviction, religious experience, and the aspiration to participate more fully in the mission of Christ. Nevertheless, the intensity of a person's desire for priesthood or religious life does not, in itself, constitute conclusive evidence of a vocation. Within the Catholic tradition, vocation involves both an individual's response to a perceived divine invitation and the Church's responsibility to discern the authenticity and suitability of that response. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) situates vocation within the broader understanding of God's call to holiness and the diverse forms through which Christians participate in the life and mission of the Church. Consequently, the aspiration to become a priest or religious must be distinguished from the eventual ecclesial recognition of one's suitability for that particular state of life. This distinction provides the conceptual foundation for examining a troubling phenomenon in ecclesial life: the antagonism sometimes exhibited by former seminarians (ex-seminarians) and religious aspirants (ex-aspirants) following their dismissal from formation. For some individuals, discontinuation of formation becomes an occasion for profound disappointment, wounded identity, resentment, and persistent hostility towards the formators, religious

communities, dioceses, or ecclesiastical authorities associated with their experiences. Although such reactions may have different psychological, interpersonal, institutional and spiritual origins, they raise important questions about the meaning of vocational discernment, the interpretation of dismissal, the management of disappointment and the ethical responsibilities of individuals and ecclesial institutions. The central problem is not whether dismissed candidates may experience pain or question the decisions made about them; such responses may be understandable and, in particular circumstances, justified. Rather, the problem concerns the transformation of vocational disappointment into enduring antagonism that may obstruct personal healing, distort the meaning of the formative experience and undermine constructive relationships with the Church.

The question *Discerning Before Being Discerned?,* therefore, identifies a fundamental tension between personal vocational conviction and ecclesial vocational judgment. A candidate may sincerely believe that God is calling him to priesthood or religious life, but sincerity alone cannot settle the question of suitability. The vocational drama in the call of Samuel suffices, (1Sam 3:1ff). Formation is not merely a process through which an aspirant prepares for an already guaranteed destination. It is also a period of examination, growth, evaluation and clarification during which the candidate's perceived vocation is tested in relation to the demands of ecclesiastical ministry or consecrated life. The Congregation for the Clergy (2016), in its *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, presents priestly formation as an integrated and ongoing process attending to human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions. Such a framework implies that admission into a seminary marks the beginning of a formative and discernment journey rather than the final confirmation of a candidate's vocation. The candidate enters formation not simply to acquire the qualifications required for ordination but also to discover, with the assistance of the Church, whether priesthood is genuinely an appropriate path. John Paul II (1992), in *Pastores Dabo Vobis,* reinforces this ecclesial dimension by explaining that priestly vocation is received through the Church and exists for the Church. The competent ecclesiastical authority is responsible not only for examining a candidate's suitability but also for recognising the vocation. The desire to become a priest, therefore, does not confer an entitlement to ordination. This principle is essential to the present argument: a candidate's conviction that he has been called must remain open to the possibility that the Church, through responsible discernment, may reach a different conclusion. Nevertheless, ecclesial discernment must not be confused with institutional infallibility. Formators are human beings whose decisions may be affected by inadequate information, prejudice, interpersonal conflicts, inconsistent standards, or other human limitations. A balanced account of vocational dismissal must consequently recognise both the legitimacy of discerning a candidate unsuitable and the possibility that a particular dismissal may be unjust.

The psychological dimension of this problem is equally significant. For some candidates, the seminary or religious house becomes more than a place of formation; it becomes the centre of their personal identity, future expectations, social belonging and understanding of God's purpose for their lives. Years of preparation, sacrifices made by families, public identification with a religious vocation and emotional investment in the anticipated future may intensify the experience of dismissal. When that future suddenly becomes uncertain, the candidate may experience grief, shame, anger, confusion, or a sense of personal rejection. Erikson's (1968) account of identity formation provides a useful theoretical lens for understanding how challenges to an individual's established sense of self may generate an identity crisis. Although Erikson's theory does not specifically address seminary dismissal, it helps explain why the loss of a highly valued vocational identity may be experienced as a disruption extending beyond one's professional or ecclesiastical aspirations. However, disappointment and antagonism are not synonymous. A dismissed candidate may grieve, seek clarification, challenge an unfair decision, report misconduct, or express disagreement without becoming consumed by hostility. The critical concern arises when disappointment becomes a permanent interpretative framework through which every former formator, religious community, or

ecclesiastical authority is viewed as an adversary. In such circumstances, the candidate's personal experience may become the basis for generalised accusations, persistent personal attacks, or efforts to discredit the Church. This paper does not presume that every former seminarian who criticises ecclesiastical authorities is bitter, nor does it suggest that criticism of the Church is inherently illegitimate. Rather, it distinguishes responsible criticism, which seeks truth and accountability, from retaliatory antagonism, which may be driven by unresolved resentment. The distinction is ethically important because it protects both the legitimate right to seek justice and the responsibility to avoid unjustified hostility.

Furthermore, the Church cannot address this problem adequately by placing the entire burden of responsibility on dismissed candidates. Formation authorities exercise considerable influence over candidates' spiritual development, personal relationships, vocational expectations, and understanding of themselves. The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* emphasises integral formation and the responsible accompaniment of candidates (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). These responsibilities imply that dismissal should be handled with prudence, clarity, fairness, and respect for personal dignity. Where possible, candidates should receive appropriate explanations, constructive feedback, and pastoral accompaniment that helps them understand the decision and consider their future. Such practices do not require formators to retain candidates who are unsuitable, nor do they eliminate the possibility of difficult decisions. Instead, they recognise that the manner in which a candidate is dismissed may influence how the experience is subsequently interpreted and integrated. The central philosophical problem can therefore be expressed through the question: Can a person accept the possibility that priesthood or religious life is not his vocation without interpreting that outcome as a rejection of his worth, his faith, or his relationship with God? The question challenges the assumption that a vocation has value only when it culminates in ordination or profession of religious vows. Christian identity and service extend beyond these particular states of life. The Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium* situates the universal call to holiness within the life of the Church, affirming that holiness is not the exclusive possession of ordained ministers or consecrated religious (Second Vatican Council, 1964). Consequently, the discontinuation of a particular vocational path does not eliminate the possibility of a meaningful Christian life. A former seminarian may continue to serve God and humanity through marriage, family life, professional work, education, charitable service, lay apostolates, or other legitimate forms of Christian commitment.

This paper, therefore, critically examines vocational presumption, understood here as the premature identification of personal desire with a conclusively established vocation, and the tendency to interpret dismissal as an injury that warrants enduring antagonism towards the Church. It argues that entering formation is an invitation to discernment, not a guarantee of ordination or religious profession; that dismissal may be a legitimate outcome of discernment but must remain open to scrutiny where injustice is alleged; and that vocational disappointment, however painful, does not automatically justify vindictiveness or indiscriminate ecclesial hostility. At the same time, the paper insists on the Church's responsibility to establish humane, transparent, and accountable formative processes. Accordingly, the paper proceeds through five interconnected areas: the conceptual and theoretical foundations of vocational discernment; seminary dismissal as a possible outcome of formation; the psychology and philosophy of vocational disappointment; the transformation of disappointment into ecclesial antagonism; and pathways towards mature discernment, reconciliation, and responsible Christian living. Its ultimate objective is neither to condemn former seminarians nor to defend every decision made by formators. Rather, it seeks to establish a balanced framework in which personal dignity, ecclesial accountability, vocational freedom, and Christian responsibility can be upheld together. The failure to enter priesthood or religious life need not become a failure of faith, character, or Christian belonging. When accompanied by honest reflection, appropriate pastoral support, and

institutional accountability, the end of one vocational journey can become the beginning of another.

Conceptual and Theoretical Foundations of Vocational Discernment

- **Vocation as Divine Calling and Ecclesial Discernment**

Vocation within the Catholic tradition is understood as a divine invitation that calls a person to a particular form of life and service within God's salvific plan. Although every Christian is called to holiness, priesthood and consecrated religious life entail distinctive commitments that require careful discernment. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) situates Christian vocation within the universal call to holiness and recognises the diversity of states of life through which believers respond to God. Consequently, the desire to become a priest or religious must be distinguished from the determination that one is genuinely suited to that vocation. Vocational discernment is not merely an individual's subjective conviction, emotional attraction, or interpretation of spiritual experiences. It involves prayer, self-examination, spiritual accompaniment, personal development, and ecclesial evaluation. John Paul II (1992), in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, emphasises that priestly vocation exists within and for the Church, which has the responsibility to accompany candidates and discern their suitability. Similarly, the Congregation for the Clergy (2016), in *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation,* presents formation as a serious, comprehensive journey requiring patience, careful evaluation, and respect for the candidate's conscience. These principles establish that vocational desire initiates discernment; it does not automatically conclude it.

- **Personal Conviction and Vocational Presumption**

A central problem addressed in this paper is the relationship between *personal vocational conviction* and *ecclesial judgment*. An aspirant may sincerely believe that God is calling him to priesthood or religious life, yet sincerity alone cannot establish suitability for that state of life. Admission into a seminary or religious institute signifies entry into a process of formation and evaluation, not an unconditional guarantee of ordination or religious profession. The candidate must therefore remain open to the possibility that discernment may lead to a conclusion different from the one initially anticipated. This paper describes as vocational presumption the tendency to treat personal desire as conclusive proof of a divine calling before submitting that conviction to sustained formation and ecclesial evaluation. Such presumption risks reversing the purpose of formation: instead of allowing the candidate's perceived vocation to be examined, it treats the eventual decision of formators as though it must conform to the candidate's prior conclusion. John Paul II (1992) explains that the candidate is called to receive and respond to vocation within the Church rather than impose personal conditions upon the ecclesial process. Authentic discernment consequently requires humility, freedom, self-knowledge, and willingness to reconsider one's vocational aspirations.

Formation, Human Judgment and the Possibility of Dismissal

Vocational formation is also a human process involving the exercise of judgment by formators and competent ecclesiastical authorities. Candidates are evaluated in relation to their human maturity, spiritual development, intellectual preparation, interpersonal relationships and pastoral suitability. The Congregation for the Clergy (2016) emphasises the integration of these dimensions in priestly formation. Dismissal may, therefore, represent a legitimate outcome when a candidate is judged unsuitable for ministry. Nevertheless, ecclesiastical authority does not render every decision infallible or immune to criticism. A balanced understanding must recognise two possibilities: a candidate may be dismissed for legitimate reasons, or a dismissal may be affected by prejudice, procedural deficiencies, personal conflicts, or other institutional failures. Neither the candidate's conviction nor the formator's decision should automatically be treated as beyond examination. Responsible discernment requires both the authority to make difficult decisions and the accountability necessary to ensure that those decisions respect justice and human dignity. In conclusion, vocational discernment is a continuing encounter between personal aspiration, spiritual growth, and ecclesial evaluation. Entering formation begins a journey whose outcome cannot

legitimately be presumed in advance. The possibility of dismissal must therefore be acknowledged without using it to excuse arbitrary or degrading treatment. The central principle is that a candidate must be willing to be discerned, not merely determined to become a priest or religious. This openness does not require unquestioning acceptance of every decision; it requires the maturity to accept legitimate evaluation while retaining the right to seek justice where necessary.

Seminary Dismissal as an Integral Dimension of Vocational Discernment

Seminary dismissal or disengagement from the convent is respectively among the most sensitive outcomes of priestly and religious formation because it involves not only institutional judgment but also the personal aspirations, spiritual convictions, and future expectations of the candidate. Nevertheless, dismissal should not automatically be interpreted as a contradiction of vocational discernment. If formation is genuinely a process of examining whether an aspirant possesses the qualities required for priesthood or consecrated life, then the conclusion that a candidate should discontinue formation may be a legitimate outcome of that process. The Congregation for the Clergy (2016), in *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, emphasises that formation requires careful and patient evaluation of the candidate's human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral development. Admission into a formation house, seminary or convent, therefore, signifies the commencement of discernment, not a guarantee of ordination or profession as the case may be.

- **The Grounds and Purpose of Dismissal**

The decision to discontinue a candidate's formation may arise from concerns about maturity, conduct, motivation, interpersonal relationships, intellectual preparation, spiritual development, or suitability for the demands of ministry. The Congregation for Catholic Education (2008) acknowledges that formators must evaluate candidates carefully and responsibly, considering their individual circumstances rather than relying on isolated incidents or superficial impressions. Its guidelines also recognise that a candidate may need to be dismissed when there are sufficient grounds to judge him unsuitable for priestly formation. Such decisions are intended to safeguard both the candidate's good and the Church's mission.

Dismissal, however, should not be reduced to punishment or public humiliation. Properly understood, it is a vocational judgment about suitability for a particular ecclesial state of life. A person may possess genuine faith, admirable qualities, and a sincere desire to serve God without necessarily being suited to priesthood or religious life. The distinction between personal worth and vocational suitability is therefore fundamental: a negative judgment concerning a particular vocation does not amount to a declaration that the individual lacks dignity or cannot live a meaningful Christian life.

- **Human Fallibility and Institutional Accountability**

Although ecclesiastical authorities have the responsibility to discern suitability, their decisions are made through human judgment and may, therefore, be affected by error. The Congregation for Catholic Education (2008) stresses the need for competent formators capable of understanding candidates' development, personal circumstances, strengths and limitations. This requirement cautions against dismissals based on prejudice, personal antagonism, inadequate assessment, or failure to distinguish temporary difficulties from persistent unsuitability. Formation authorities must exercise their responsibilities with prudence, fairness and respect for the candidate's reputation and privacy. The Church's authority to make vocational judgments must consequently be accompanied by a commitment to responsible procedures and pastoral sensitivity. A balanced examination must, therefore, reject two opposing assumptions: that every dismissed candidate was unjustly treated and that every dismissal necessarily represents an impeccable ecclesiastical decision. Neither conclusion can be established merely from the fact of dismissal. Where candidates have legitimate grievances, they should be able to seek clarification and appropriate review without being automatically branded rebellious or spiritually immature. Conversely, disagreement with a decision does not, by itself, demonstrate that the decision was unjust. The relevant

question is whether the decision was reached responsibly, on appropriate grounds, and with due regard for the dignity of the individual.

- **Dismissal, Personal Dignity and Vocational Reorientation**

An important implication of this discussion is that dismissal from formation must be distinguished from rejection by God. No human decision can conclusively determine the total meaning of an individual's relationship with God or eliminate the possibility of serving the Church in another capacity. The Second Vatican Council (1965), in *Optatam Totius,* emphasises the importance of sound discernment and appropriate preparation for priestly ministry. This principle reinforces the understanding that the Church must identify candidates who are suitably prepared for the responsibilities of priesthood or religious life rather than regard ordination or profession as the inevitable conclusion of every formation journey. For dismissed candidates, accepting the end of a particular vocational path may be painful, but it can also initiate a process of self-discovery and vocational reorientation. The experience invites reconsideration of personal motivations, strengths, limitations, and alternative possibilities for Christian service. It should not require the denial of legitimate grievances, but neither should it become the foundation of a permanent identity organised around rejection and resentment. In sum, seminary dismissal can be an integral and legitimate outcome of vocational discernment, provided it is exercised responsibly and fairly. Its significance lies in the determination of suitability for a specific vocation, not in a definitive judgment on the person's entire life or spiritual worth. The Church must be accountable in discerning candidates, just as candidates must remain open to being discerned. This reciprocal responsibility provides the foundation for examining the psychological and existential consequences of vocational disappointment in the next section.

The Psychology and Philosophy of Vocational Disappointment

Vocational disappointment following dismissal from a seminary or religious formation house can constitute a profound psychological and existential experience, particularly when priesthood or consecrated life has become central to an individual's identity, aspirations and understanding of divine purpose. For some candidates, formation represents years of sacrifice, spiritual investment, family expectations and preparation for an anticipated future. Dismissal may consequently be experienced not merely as the discontinuation of a particular vocational path but also as the collapse of an identity around which personal meaning has been organised. Erikson (1968), in his theory of psychosocial development, explains the significance of identity in providing continuity, direction, and a coherent sense of self. Although his theory does not specifically address seminary dismissal, it offers a useful framework for understanding why the loss of a deeply cherished vocational aspiration may generate confusion, insecurity, and a crisis of personal meaning. The psychological consequences of dismissal may include grief, shame, anger, disappointment, feelings of inadequacy, and a perceived loss of acceptance. These reactions should not automatically be interpreted as evidence of immaturity or hostility towards the Church. Rather, they may reflect the difficult process of adjusting to an unexpected change in life direction. Kübler-Ross and Kessler (2005) discuss the complex emotional experiences associated with loss, providing a useful, though non-prescriptive, perspective for understanding the distress that can accompany the abandonment of an anticipated future. Individuals respond differently to such experiences; therefore, no single sequence of emotional reactions should be imposed on every dismissed candidate. The Church's own guidelines recognise the importance of understanding candidates' psychological development, personal vulnerabilities, and need for appropriate accompaniment (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2008).

The philosophical difficulty emerges when vocational disappointment becomes inseparable from personal worth. A candidate may begin to interpret dismissal as evidence that he has failed in life, that his spiritual efforts were meaningless, or that the Church has rejected his entire person. Such conclusions confuse the discontinuation of a particular vocation with the negation of human dignity. Frankl (2006) argues that human beings can continue to discover

meaning even amid painful and unavoidable circumstances. Applied cautiously to vocational disappointment, this perspective suggests that the loss of one anticipated future need not eliminate the possibility of a meaningful life. A former seminarian may rediscover purpose through family life, professional commitments, charitable work, lay ministry, or other forms of Christian service. Nevertheless, unresolved disappointment can become destructive when an individual continually interprets the past through resentment and external blame. While some dismissals may involve genuine injustice requiring investigation, not every painful decision establishes wrongdoing. The distinction between legitimate grievance and retaliatory hostility is therefore essential. Emotional healing does not require denying past injuries; it requires confronting them honestly without allowing them to determine every subsequent relationship and judgment. Candidates may benefit from pastoral accompaniment, appropriate psychological support, honest self-examination, and opportunities to reconsider their vocational aspirations without humiliation.

In sum, vocational maturity involves recognising that personal identity is broader than ecclesiastical status. The end of seminary formation does not necessarily signify the end of Christian commitment, spiritual growth, or meaningful service. As Frankl (2006) suggests, meaning can be rediscovered even when previously cherished possibilities become unavailable. The challenge for dismissed candidates is therefore not simply to overcome disappointment but to integrate the experience into a renewed understanding of themselves, their faith, and their future. Vocational disappointment becomes especially destructive when the loss of a desired vocation is mistaken for the loss of one's entire worth and purpose.

From Vocational Disappointment to Ecclesial Antagonism: A Critical Appraisal

Vocational disappointment becomes an ecclesial concern when the painful experience of dismissal develops into persistent hostility towards formators, religious superiors, dioceses, religious institutes, or the Catholic Church itself. Currently, social media has given opportunities to some disgruntled ex-seminarians and ex-aspirants to vent their bottled and unsettled anger as a result of their vocational crisis and consequent past dismissal. Some of them have gone to the extent of exposing their past dirty dealings within the formation house, of course blaming the Church save themselves. While the emotional consequences of dismissal may be understandable, the ethical evaluation of subsequent reactions requires a distinction between legitimate grievance and destructive antagonism. A former seminarian may question a decision, expose misconduct, demand accountability, or seek canonical recourse without necessarily acting out of bitterness. The central problem arises when personal disappointment becomes the basis for indiscriminate accusations, sustained personal attacks, or the assumption that the Church is an adversary simply because it did not confirm the individual's vocational aspiration. The Catholic Church's own legal framework recognises the right of the faithful to express their needs and opinions and to defend their rights through competent ecclesiastical channels. Canon 212, subsection 2–3 recognises the freedom and in appropriate circumstances the duty, of the faithful to communicate their views to their pastors, while Canon 221 affirms their right to vindicate and defend their rights in the Church's competent forums (Code of the Canon Law, 1983).

Consequently, criticism of ecclesiastical authority cannot automatically be dismissed as rebellion, just as the exercise of ecclesiastical authority cannot automatically be presumed unjust. The relevant distinction concerns the grounds, manner, evidence and purpose of the criticism. A particularly important dimension of this problem is vocational presumption: the tendency to regard personal conviction as conclusive proof of a divine calling before the Church has completed its discernment. John Paul II (1992) explains that the priestly vocation exists within and for the Church and that the competent ecclesiastical authority has responsibility for examining and recognising the candidate's suitability. This principle challenges the assumption that admission into formation establishes an unconditional right to ordination. The candidate enters the formation house not merely to confirm an already settled conclusion but also to discover whether his perceived calling corresponds to the demands and

responsibilities of priesthood. When this distinction is ignored, dismissal may be interpreted not as a possible outcome of discernment but as an illegitimate obstruction of what the candidate considers an unquestionable divine mandate. Such an interpretation can intensify resentment, particularly when the individual is unwilling to reconsider his understanding of vocation. Nevertheless, the Church must exercise its authority responsibly. *The Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* provides that a decision to dismiss a seminarian or an aspirant should generally be communicated in writing, with a prudent and sufficiently clear explanation of the circumstances and discernment underlying the decision (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, no. 197).

This requirement underscores the importance of transparency, documentation and accountability. Where dismissal is influenced by prejudice, personal conflict, inadequate evaluation, or procedural injustice, affected candidates deserve appropriate avenues for clarification and redress. Furthermore, Canon 220 protects the legitimate reputation and privacy of individuals (Code of the Canon Law, 1983). This protection applies to dismissed candidates as well as formators: neither party should be subjected to unsupported allegations, humiliating disclosures, or retaliatory attacks. Ecclesial accountability and personal responsibility must, therefore, operate together. The philosophical and psychological challenge is to prevent a painful vocational outcome from becoming the organising principle of one's subsequent identity. A former aspirant who defines himself exclusively through the priesthood he did not attain may find it difficult to recognise alternative possibilities for personal fulfilment and Christian service. Frankl (2006) argues that human beings can discover meaning even when confronted with painful circumstances and the loss of cherished possibilities. Applied to vocational disappointment, this perspective encourages former candidates to acknowledge their wounds without allowing those wounds to determine every subsequent judgment about the Church. Such an approach does not require silence about injustice; rather, it distinguishes the pursuit of truth from the perpetuation of resentment.

In the final process, ecclesial antagonism must be addressed through a reciprocal ethic of responsibility. Former seminarians should be encouraged to pursue legitimate grievances through appropriate channels, reflect honestly on their formative experiences, and recognise that the end of one vocational path does not eliminate their dignity or capacity for service. Formators and ecclesiastical authorities, for their part, must ensure that decisions are fair, explanations are appropriate, and dismissed candidates are treated with compassion. The Church must not use obedience to suppress legitimate criticism, and former candidates must not use legitimate criticism to justify indiscriminate hostility. A mature response to vocational disappointment preserves the possibility of justice, reconciliation, and renewed Christian commitment without denying either institutional fallibility or personal responsibility.

Towards Mature Vocational Discernment, Reconciliation and Responsible Christian Living

Addressing the consequences of seminary dismissal requires a balanced approach that combines personal responsibility, compassionate accompaniment, institutional accountability, and renewed vocational openness. Mature discernment must prepare candidates not only for the possibility of ordination or religious profession but also for the possibility that their formation may conclude without these outcomes. Seminary formation should never be presented as an automatic passage to priesthood or consecrated life; rather, it is a journey of prayer, personal growth, evaluation, and clarification of one's perceived calling. The Congregation for the Clergy (2016), in *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation*, emphasises integral formation that attends to the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions of candidates. This model requires formation authorities to communicate expectations clearly, provide constructive feedback, and treat candidates with dignity throughout the discernment process. An essential element of mature discernment is the willingness to accept that personal desire, however sincere, may not correspond to one's eventual vocation. Former seminarians and religious aspirants should therefore be encouraged to distinguish the loss of a particular

vocational path from the loss of personal worth, Christian identity, or the capacity to serve God. Erikson's (1968) account of identity formation offers a useful perspective here: when a cherished identity is disrupted, individuals may need to reconstruct their understanding of themselves and their future. Consequently, vocational dismissal should become an opportunity for honest self-examination, emotional integration, and the discovery of alternative possibilities rather than a permanent definition of personal failure.

Nevertheless, encouraging acceptance must not become a means of silencing legitimate grievances. Ecclesiastical authorities remain accountable for the decisions they make and the manner in which those decisions are communicated. The Congregation for Catholic Education (2008) recognises the importance of appropriate psychological understanding in the admission and formation of candidates for priesthood. In practice, this calls for careful assessment, fair procedures, appropriate explanations, and pastoral sensitivity when a candidate is asked to discontinue formation. Where a dismissal appears to have been influenced by prejudice, personal conflict, or procedural injustice, the affected individual should have appropriate avenues to seek clarification and redress. Canon 221 of the Code of Canon Law affirms the right of the faithful to vindicate and defend their rights in the competent ecclesiastical forum (Catholic Church, 1983). Thus, accountability and reconciliation must be pursued together rather than treated as opposing objectives. At the same time, former candidates have a moral responsibility to respond constructively to disappointment. The right to question a decision does not justify every form of reaction to it. Criticism grounded in evidence, directed towards correcting injustice, and expressed with due regard for personal dignity differs fundamentally from vindictiveness, unsupported accusations, and indiscriminate hostility towards the Church. Frankl (2006) argues that human beings can discover meaning even amid suffering and the loss of cherished possibilities. Applied to vocational disappointment, this insight encourages former seminarians to confront their experiences honestly without allowing them to determine every subsequent relationship or judgement. Healing does not require pretending that no wrong occurred; rather, it involves addressing legitimate injuries while remaining open to renewed purpose and constructive relationships.

The Church must also recognise that a person's vocation to Christian holiness and service is not exhausted by the possibility of priesthood or religious life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1997) presents holiness as a universal Christian calling, while the Second Vatican Council's Lumen gentium affirms that the faithful participate in the Church's mission according to their diverse states and circumstances (Second Vatican Council, 1964). A former seminarian may therefore find meaningful fulfilment in marriage, family life, professional service, education, charitable work, lay apostolates, or other legitimate expressions of Christian commitment. These alternatives should not be treated as consolation prizes for failed aspirations but as potentially meaningful paths of service and personal flourishing. Ultimately, mature vocational discernment requires reciprocal responsibility. Candidates must remain open to the possibility that priesthood or religious life is not their path, while formators must exercise authority with justice, transparency, and compassion. Both parties must resist the temptation to transform disappointment or institutional authority into instruments of hostility. The end of a vocational journey is not the end of a person's Christian vocation. When dismissal is accompanied by responsible institutional practice and met with honest self-reflection, appropriate support, and renewed openness to God's call, it can become a turning point towards personal growth, reconciliation, and fruitful Christian living rather than a lifelong source of ecclesial antagonism.

Conclusion

The examination of vocational discernment, seminary dismissal and ecclesial antagonism demonstrates that the journey towards priesthood or consecrated religious life requires more than personal desire, spiritual enthusiasm, or an enduring conviction of being called by God. It demands openness to formation, self-examination, and the willingness to submit one's

perceived vocation to ecclesial discernment. As John Paul II (1992) explains in Pastores Dabo Vobis, priestly vocation exists within and for the Church. Consequently, admission into a seminary or religious institute should be understood as the beginning of a discernment process rather than an unconditional guarantee of ordination or religious profession. This paper has argued that dismissal may constitute a legitimate outcome of vocational discernment, although it must never be presumed that every dismissal is necessarily just. Formators and ecclesiastical authorities remain accountable for their decisions, particularly where prejudice, inadequate evaluation, or procedural failures may have influenced the outcome. Equally, dismissed candidates must distinguish legitimate disappointment and the pursuit of justice from vindictiveness, unsupported accusations, and indiscriminate hostility towards the Church. The recognition of institutional fallibility does not eliminate personal responsibility, just as respect for ecclesiastical authority does not require silence in the face of injustice.

Furthermore, vocational disappointment should not become the defining identity of a former seminarian or religious aspirant. The discontinuation of one vocational path does not negate personal dignity, invalidate Christian commitment, or eliminate the possibility of meaningful service to God and humanity. The universal call to holiness articulated by the Second Vatican Council (1964) affirms that Christian flourishing extends beyond priesthood and consecrated religious life. In sum, the question *Discerning Before Being Discerned?* invites both candidates and formators to embrace humility, responsibility, and mutual accountability. The Church must discern with justice and compassion, while candidates must remain open to the possibility that their calling may lead elsewhere. Not being accepted for priesthood or religious life need not become a rejection of God, a failure of life, or a justification for ecclesial antagonism. Through honest reflection, appropriate redress, reconciliation and renewed vocational openness, dismissal can become a turning point towards maturity, healing, and fruitful Christian service.

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

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