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A Critical Assessment of Ministerial Formation in Roman Catholic Seminaries in Nigeria in the Light of the Pastores Dabo Vobis: A Case Study of Claretian Institute, Owerri

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ABSTRACT

Since the last few decades, spiritual formation has been receiving attention in theological education literature. An increasing number of theological educators have observed how easily this important objective of ministerial formation gets crowded out by the academic and ministry emphases. Others have called attention to the problem of fragmentation pointing to the need for integration in the work theological institutions do. Thus, it has become common to hear institutions boast of how integrated their programmes are and how much emphasis they place on spiritual formation. It is, however, not that common to see studies dedicated to finding out how these claims are actually realized in practice. The purpose of this paper is to assess to what extent Roman Catholic Seminaries in Nigeria comply with the emphasis in the Pastores Dabo Vobis (PDV) on spiritual formation. The PDV is the dominant Roman Catholic document on ministerial formation since Vatican II. The PDV has been influential in highlighting the importance of spiritual formation in theological education globally. The paper gives a brief overview of the PDV's portrayal of ministerial formation and then examines one Roman Catholic Seminary in Nigeria (the Claretian Institute, Nekede, Owerri) to see to what extent spiritual formation is carried out amongst other objectives. The paper concludes with salient lessons other theological institutions can learn from Claretian Institute's effort at provision of holistic and relevant theological preparation for ministers.

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1.0 Introduction

What will make a Protestant theological educator interested in studying a Roman Catholic document such as the *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (hereafter referred to as the PDV) and a Catholic Seminary such as Claretian Institute, Owerri? My interest in undertaking the writing of this paper arose from a discovery of the rich tradition and emphasis on spiritual formation in Catholic literature such as the Second Vatican Council documents (Flannery, 1987), the PDV (1992), and the writings of Henri Nouwen (1997). I therefore decided to look closely at one Catholic Seminary to see how these principles operate in practice.

Since the last few decades, spiritual formation has continued to receive attention in theological education literature. The reason for this has been the important observation that theological institutions have, consciously or unconsciously, paid more attention to academic matters to the neglect of spiritual development issues. Consequently, calls have come from various quarters for the rectification of this imbalance (Amirtham, 1987, 2). Along with this concern for spiritual formation in theological education has arisen criticism about the lack of integration in theological education programmes today. Words that have been used to describe the situation include 'fragmentation' (Ott, 2011) and 'dichotomy' (Throup, 2011, 3). What are the relationships between the core objectives of theological education namely the academic, the spiritual and the practical?

Whereas many theological institutions lay claim to strong emphasis on spiritual formation or proper integration of objectives, there are not many studies that attempt to evaluate how much of these that happen on the ground. This study therefore examines the Claretian Institute, Nekede, Owerri, with a view to achieving three objectives: first, to see how the *Pastores Dabo Vobis* is contextualized in a concrete situation; second, to see how spiritual formation is carried out in the midst of other objectives contained in the *Pastores Dabo Vobis*; and third, to see what may be learned regarding the task of spiritual formation in the preparation of ministers in Nigeria today.

This paper utilizes a qualitative research approach. Sonia Ospina distinguishes between qualitative and quantitative research approaches describing qualitative research as that which seeks to study phenomena from "inside" while the quantitative researcher seeks to study it from "outside" (Ospina, 2004). Ospina further describes an aspect of qualitative research as involving "case studies using participant observation, semi-structured interviewing and document analysis" (Ospina, 2004). In this essay, the qualitative approach is utilized since the aim was to investigate the thoughts and feelings of people. I recognize that the work does not reflect a full programme of qualitative research because the number of participants is small. My aim was to gain some understanding of what is going on at the Institute by interviewing someone from the administration and a student, by using the College's official documents and by triangulating all this with personal observations. The interviewees were asked the same set of questions: 1. how do you contextualize the principles expressed in the PDV with a view to achieving the four stated objectives of human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation and pastoral formation? 2. How do you try to integrate these four objectives of priestly formation?

My findings reveal concerted efforts being made to comply with the PDV in the theological education that is offered by the Claretian Institute. Spiritual formation is being emphasized and commendable work is going on to integrate spirituality with other objectives of theological education. However, there are areas that need improvement and few of these are also highlighted.

By studying the work of Claretian Institute as is done here, this paper provides an example of the efforts theological institutions are making to attend to the challenge of integration in their work. The paper also portrays how a document such as the PDV is being contextualized on the ground in a

Nigerian setting and by this provides a peek into the kind of theological education that is available in Nigeria.

The rest of this paper is divided into four parts. The first presents a portrayal of ministerial formation as found in the PDV, followed by a description of the theological education being offered at Claretian Institute, Nekede, Owerri. The third section assesses the extent to which the educational programmes of the Claretian Institute comply with the PDV. The conclusion rounds up the paper.

2.0 Ministerial formation as portrayed in the *Pastores Dabo Vobis*

The PDV follows the rich tradition of reflection and engagement by the Catholic Church on the subject of ministerial formation. According to John Paul II himself, the 1990 synod, which produced it, was intended to be a reflection on and implementation of the Second Vatican Council's views on formation for the priesthood 25 years after (PDV, 1992, 6). The synod shifted attention "from the question of the priest's identity to that connected with the process of formation for the priesthood and the quality of priestly life" (PDV, 1992, 8).

The synod and later the PDV moved away from the threefold objectives of Vatican II (Cheesman, 2012, 11) to a fourfold objective for ministerial formation namely human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation and pastoral formation. This notwithstanding, the overriding concern of the bishops at the synod was the development of a programme of formation that will help intending priests "come to know and follow Jesus..." (PDV, 1992, 9) in other words, to resemble Christ.

The fourfold objective for ministerial formation according to the PDV begins with human formation. Human formation is presented as the bedrock of all priestly formation (PDV, 1992, 16). Since the priest is called upon to be an image of Christ, he is expected to seek to reflect the human perfection which Christ manifested. Proper formation in the area of personality will help the priest to be a credible representative of Christ and thus to be a bridge and not an obstacle to others in their meeting of Christ (PDV, 1992, 117). Two areas of human development are important for the priest namely understanding of people and affective maturity (PDV, 1992, 120-121). These are important because of the brokenness in human and family relationships.

The second objective of priestly formation is spiritual formation. The PDV actually places a great emphasis on spiritual formation. The bishops at the synod aligned themselves with Vatican II's decree on priestly formation in its declaration that spiritual formation should aim at helping the priest live in close union with God and friendship with Christ (PDV, 1992, 124). This union with God and friendship with Christ is to be sought through faithful meditation on the word, prayer and participation in the Eucharist (PDV, 1992, 127, 130, 131). Proper formation in this way is intended not just for the priest's benefit but also for the benefit of those he will minister to.

Thirdly, intellectual formation is "a fundamental demand of man's intelligence by which he 'participates in the light of God's mind' and seeks to acquire a wisdom which in turn opens to and is directed towards knowing and adhering to God" (PDV, 1992, 140). Intellectual formation is made more critical in the contemporary world because of the challenges posed by pluralism, relativism and scientific and technological discoveries (PDV, 1992, 140). To be able to present the unchanging Gospel in a changing world and to help the believers become competent spokespersons for the gospel, the priest requires "a high level of intellectual formation" (PDV, 1992, 140). Two important aspects of intellectual formation according to the PDV are the studies of philosophy and theology.

The fourth objective of priestly formation, according to the PDV, is pastoral formation. Citing the Vatican II document *Optatam Totius*, the PDV affirms Pastoral formation as intended to help the student become a "true shepherd of souls after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ" (PDV, 1992, 153). However, pastoral formation is not intended to simply help the student learn pastoral techniques, but to "initiate the candidate into the sensitivity of being a shepherd, in the conscious and mature

assumption of his responsibilities, in the interior habit of evaluating problems and establishing priorities and looking for solutions on the basis of honest motivations of faith and according to the theological demands inherent in pastoral work” (PDV, 1992, 156). The PDV recommends for the candidate to the priesthood to be exposed to the pastoral situations in which he will later minister through participation in parish work, visitation to the sick, caring for immigrants, refugees and nomads; and other social contexts (PDV, 1992, 157).

Three other things need to be stressed regarding the vision of theological education contained in the PDV. These are the issues of integration, community and contextualization. It is important to observe the efforts made in the PDV to encourage integration in the task of ministerial formation. At crucial points the PDV speaks of the “many-sided and unifying scope of ... theological study” (PDV, 1992, 141); and of the need for “coordination of the different aspects of human, spiritual, and intellectual formation” (PDV, 1992, 154). Indeed, pastoral formation is discussed last and presented as the unifying element in ministerial formation.

The PDV also affirms the importance of community in the preparation of priests. In fact the PDV refers to the seminary as a “house of formation” (PDV, 1992, 152), a “formation community” (PDV, 1992, 160), “ecclesial community” (PDV, 1992, 162), a “community of disciples of the Lord” (PDV, 1992, 162), and an “educational community” (PDV, 1992, 161). Thirdly, the PDV also emphasizes the issue of contextualization. The subtitle “*The Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day*” makes this certain (PDV, 1992, 12).

3.0 The practice of ministerial formation at Claretian Institute, Owerri

The Claretian Institute of Philosophy, Owerri, Nigeria, started in 1976 (Academic Handbook, 2009, 16). Its programmes are validated by the Pontifical Urban University, Rome and the Imo State University, Owerri. The students of Claretian Institute are drawn mainly from Nigeria but they also have students from other African countries such as Cameroon, Ghana, Kenya and Uganda (Academic Handbook, 2009, 19).

Claretian Institute was founded by the Claretian congregation of the Catholic Church. The Claretians are a missionary order founded by Saint Anthony Mary Claret in 1840 (General Plan of Formation, 1995, 13). Of the two groups of priests in the Catholic Church, diocesan and religious, the Claretians, as a missionary order, belong to the religious order. At the Institute, however, there are candidates of both diocesan and Claretian congregations. The Claretian missionaries have worked out a handbook of formation otherwise known as the General Plan of Formation (G.P.F.). The handbook is consistent with and built on other extant documents on priestly formation such as *Optatam Totius* (1967) and the PDV (1992). The aim of the General Plan of Formation is to help in preparation of priests who will serve in missionary contexts in keeping with the overall objective of the Claretian congregation.

In the course of the research, I was able to interview the academic dean, Dr. Nicholas Mbogu and a student, Kizito, a Cameroonian. I asked them the same set of questions namely “How do you contextualize the principles expressed in the PDV with a view to achieving the four stated objectives of human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation and pastoral formation?” I also asked how they try to integrate these four objectives of priestly formation.

According to Dr. Mbogu, human formation is important for the four years of philosophy studies. The main idea of the candidate undergoing a study in philosophy before beginning theological studies is for the student to gain some maturity as a person in understanding himself, and in understanding other people and their cultures. In the catalogue there are courses in cultural anthropology, psychology, sociology as well as philosophical courses. The goal of this is for the student to imbibe the cherished attitudes of “tolerance, accommodation, desire for learning and ability to present the gospel in a relevant way” (Mbogu, Interview). According to him, “it is important that the student, as a future

priest, comes to a point where he can take a risk to stand for a particular thing” (Mbogu, Interview). Also, students carry out daily duties such as cleaning of compound, classrooms, toilets and mowing of grass. In this way, they learn humility, hard-work and commitment to duty. Indeed, the first day I went to the school, I found students mowing the fields, although the school was officially on holiday. Joseph Shao seems to suggest that the practice of community members working to meet the daily needs of their community is one way of enacting community in theological schools (Shao, 2009, 2). Shao’s comment seems to be true here. There is also a daily routine the students are expected to follow. According to this routine, they are required to rise at 5.00 a.m. every day to begin their daily activities. It was also discovered that students are not allowed to have personal telephones but an official telephone is provided for those who wish to communicate with their families and friends.

Spiritual formation is critical to everything that is done at Claretian Institute, according to Dr Mbogu. It permeates all aspects of their programmes. The daily schedule of activities at the Institute reveals that daily masses are held at 6 am, mid-day prayers at 12.40 pm, in addition to private prayers and meditation. This corresponds to *Bonhoeffer’s* assertion that communal worship and prayer are necessary for the building of community consciousness. Kizito corroborated the importance of spiritual formation at the Institute. According to him, the students are made fully aware of this goal and the environment is created for the development of spiritual consciousness at the school. He also emphasized the sense of community that is created at the Institute. The community lives together, works together and studies together (Kizito, Interview). Even during holidays, the students were seen around working, praying and living as a group. Only the diocesan candidates among them are given six weeks of pastoral assignment at parishes across the country, the missionary candidates among them were seen at the Institute during the holidays. The Claretian missionary candidates are allowed to travel only in December to see their kith and kin. But even the diocesan candidates who travelled for holiday placement returned to the community September 5th when I went there although school will not resume until October.

Academic formation is crucial for the work the institute does. According to the Academic Handbook, the programme offered at the institute is a four-year degree course in philosophy fully validated by the Imo State University and the Pontifical Urban University. The curriculum comprises 146 units of courses with additional 13 courses advertised as CIP (i.e. Claretian Institute of Philosophy) courses. The curriculum has 6 language courses namely English, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and Latin. As it should be expected, the bulk of the courses are in philosophy but it also has courses in sociology, anthropology, ethics, citizenship, jurisprudence and multimedia (*Academic Handbook, 2009, 28-31*). At the end of the second year, students are required to write a 30 page essay and at the end of the third year they begin writing their Bachelor of Arts essay (Mbogu, interview). Claretian Institute also has a robust academic staff with all eighteen teaching staff members (100%) holding terminal degrees in their different fields, quite a feat by Nigerian standards.

Also, Dr. Mbogu affirms that theological contextualization is important for the work the Institute does. According to him, that consciousness guides the actual teaching that goes on in the school. The emphasis on contextualization is in keeping with the stress placed on the importance of context for theological relevance (*Schreiter, 1999, 1; Bevans, 2003, 3*); an emphasis that has been applied to theological education by different authorities (*Fernandez, 2014, 348*).

On pastoral formation, Dr. Mbogu indicated that a number of policies are in place to help students’ development. During their training, students are given assignments at local parishes to help in leading masses. For six weeks during the long holidays students are sent on apostolic work to various parishes across the country, although discussions with student Kizito revealed that only the diocesan candidates among them go on this holiday placement.

Asked about how the various objectives are integrated, Dr. Mbogu made the useful comment that the Institute understands formation basically as ‘influencing persons in a particular direction and not merely

about teaching' (Mbogu, interview). Thus, effort is made to carry out every aspect of their work with that in mind. He also stated that they see the goal of everything they do as preparing candidates for the pastoral ministry. Every other thing is merely a means to this end.

4.0 A critical assessment of ministerial formation at Claretian Institute, Owerri

Claretian Institute does seem to organize its work according to the principles ironed out in the PDV, as would be expected of a Catholic Seminary. Effort is made to attend to the four core objectives of human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral formation.

The Institute takes human formation seriously. The philosophy degree course it runs is precisely aimed at helping the student become formed as a person. This is in line with the well known Catholic practice of making theological studies a second degree course. My observations and interactions with members of the Institute, both staff and students, reveal a high level of maturity and understanding. The openness I received was unusual and disarming, given the common fear of strangers in Nigeria today due to security concerns. This reminds me of what Dr. Mbogu had said about human formation having to do with a person being mature enough to take a risk for what he believes in.

Spiritual formation is properly emphasized. This was one of the reasons I decided to undertake this study in view of the high emphasis placed on spiritual formation in the extant Roman Catholic literature. The emphasis at Claretian Institute on spiritual formation occurring within a philosophy programme is similar to what other institutions are doing with non-theology training programmes. An example is what Wheaton College is doing with its psychology programme (Flanagan, et al, 2013). Such an emphasis is highly commendable. One thing I could not do because of the holidays was to see how spiritual formation is reflected in actual class teaching. It would have been interesting to see how spirituality and academics are integrated in practice at this Institute.

Academic formation is important to the Institute. With all eighteen academic staff members holding terminal degrees from various universities in Nigeria, Rome, Germany, France, United States, etc, and the quality of the programmes they run, one would say academics is getting adequate emphasis at the Institute. What McGrath (2003, 14) writes about the opportunities available for theological educators in global tertiary education is true at Claretian Institute as some of its faculty are also adjuncts at the local university. The Institute also recently passed accreditation of the National Universities Commission (NUC) conducted for theological institutions that have affiliation with Nigerian Universities. However, the library needs some upgrading. The books are few and old; the library halls were largely unkempt and dusty. Although the Catalogue states that the library has 35,000 holdings in all (Academic Handbook, 2009, 20); that could not be verified. Some of the books I checked were not available, including classic Catholic materials like Vatican II documents.

Pastoral formation also receives emphasis. I found a correlation between the PDV and what was on ground at the Institute in terms of vocational orientation. As earlier highlighted, the PDV treats pastoral formation as the organizing principle of ministerial formation (PDV, 1992, 154). Discussions with Dr. Mbogu revealed a similar orientation. This aligns with the Berlin pole in David Kelsey's categorization of approaches to theological education (Kelsey, 1993, 24) and the vocational model in Robert Banks's analysis (Banks, 1999, 35). The vocational orientation means that in the PDV and at the Claretian Institute, theological education is seen primarily as intended to prepare people for ministry.

Finally, there is a strong community emphasis at Claretian Institute. Members of the community live together, worship together, learn together and work together. Students participate in the maintenance of the compound. I saw a student mowing the lawns. This seems to be in tandem with what many have come to see as the proper understanding of spiritual formation, that is, embodied virtue. Virtue is embodied when the sensations, perceptions, feelings, and thoughts that constitute virtue are practically demonstrated (Edwards, 2015, 230). Thus, spiritual formation, properly understood, does not

refer to out of body experiences but growth in virtuous living demonstrated in action. Understood this way, one therefore sees why community is the proper context for spiritual formation to take place. Shelley Trebesch could even be emphatic: “Our brains are designed for transformation in the context of community” (2013, 38). The Claretian Institute seems to realize this clearly. One finds at the Institute the importance of community in the spiritual formation of students. The Institute appears to believe the Celtic adage that “Christianity is more caught than taught” (Yung, 2009, 10). There is a sense of the PDV’s description of a seminary as a “house of formation” or “educational community” (PDV, 1992, 161).

While one finds the emphasis on community commendable, the atmosphere at the Institute gives one the impression of a commune, a missionary boot camp akin to the old Bible schools or perhaps more appropriately, the monasteries. Students are not allowed to keep mobile phones or personal phones; life at the Institute is highly regulated. Dr Graham Cheesman has rightly critiqued this and observed that the kind of community that is relevant today is not one ‘where rules are imposed by those who know best, nor one where unthinking commitment is asked for, but rather a community based on their [i.e. students’] own profit or loss in the situation’ (Cheesman, 2012, 3). What I understand Dr Cheesman to say here is that a College community requires some freedom for students to be themselves. It is in this kind of community, rather than one in which students are over-protected from challenges of normal life, that moral maturity can actually take place. This point is made more critical because the kinds of environments people experience will likely be the kind they will replicate (Trebesch, 2013, 38).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has tried to summarize the description of ministerial formation found in the PDV, attempted to present the ministerial formation being carried out at Claretian Institute, Owerri and provided some assessment. One can say that the formation carried out at Claretian Institute correlates well with the views expressed in the PDV. The four core areas highlighted in the PDV are well emphasized and some effort is made to integrate the objectives. One is impressed with the importance attached to spiritual formation in the implementation of a University approved philosophy programme. The strong sense of community found at the Institute is also commendable. But it has also been highlighted that the relaxing of the sense of regimentation will help the institute achieve more its desire for human and spiritual development among the students. There is indeed a lot to learn from the work going on at the Claretian Institute, Owerri.

Theological institutions have a lot to learn from the work of the Claretian Institute. Emphasizing spirituality and integration are inescapable for theological institutions today. The achievement of such lofty goals require concerted efforts in the building of intentional community. However, the elements and circumstances of such community should resemble, as much as possible, the one in which the students are expected to live and serve after graduation.

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