

The Place of Spiritual Discernment of Private Revelations in the Current Formation Program of Redemptorists in the Vice-Province of Nigeria

¹**Henry Ifeanyichukwu Nwokoro**

&

²**Dr. Wambua Pius Muasa Ph.D**

^{1&2} *Tangaza University College,*

The Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

Corresponding Email: hncssr@gmail.com

Abstract

Priests and Religious minister to people with different spiritual concerns, including the spiritual discernment of private revelations (dreams, visions, apparitions, locutions, and prophetic messages). The initial formation of Priests and Religious is to prepare them to effectively deal with the pastoral concerns of the laity. This study sought to find out if spiritual discernment of private revelations has a place in the current formation program of Redemptorists in the Vice-Province of Nigeria. The study adopted exploratory research design. In-depth interview Guide was used for data collection. Using purposive method, 16 Redemptorist formators were selected for the study. By way of thematic analysis, data was transcribed, organized into themes, and coded. Findings reveal that through freedom of expression, development of reasoning capacity, the study of Biblical Theology and Exposure through pastoral work, candidates are being trained towards spiritual discernment of private revelations. However, this is not enough, considering the fact that issues concerning private revelations are met with rationalization and suspicion, which creates fear among candidates in terms of discussing private revelations. Based on the findings, the study recommends enhancing the formation program for spiritual discernment of private revelations.

Introduction

The current initial formation program is based on principles derived from the Vatican II “Decree on Priestly Training”¹ (*Optatam Totius*), issued in 1965, and the “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation”² (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*), issued on the 25th of March, 1992. *Optatam Totius* stated that it provides general principles for formation, which should be adapted to the needs of local Churches through the guidance of Episcopal Conferences. Based on *Optatam Totius*, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* also provides essential principles and a framework for initial formation. Fr. Thomas Cheruparambil refers to *Pastores Dabo Vobis* as “a synthesis of the magisterial teachings on priesthood and priestly formation.”³ It calls for a “New Look at the contents and methods of priestly formation”⁴ in response to contemporary issues.

From *Optatam Totius* and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* came the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, produced by the Congregation for the Clergy (now Dicastery for the Clergy), first issued in 1970 and updated in 2016. It presents the image of the Priest as one who, like Jesus the High Priest, is both close to God and close to the people. The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* repeats the idea of *Optatam Totius* number 1, which states that each Episcopal Conference should develop a program of priestly formation “adapted to the particular circumstances of the times and localities”⁵. Based on this principle, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, in 2005, issued *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* in response to Nigeria’s pastoral context.

In the preface to this *Ratio*, one of the pastoral concerns mentioned was the presence of healing ministries, both within and outside the Catholic Church, which “are supported by literal interpretation of the Bible and by

¹Pope Paul VI, *Decree on Priestly Training: Optatam Totius* (Rome, 1965).

²John Paul II, “Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation” (Rome, 1992), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html.

³Fr Thomas Cheruparambil, “Priestly Formation According to Pastores Dabo Vobis,” 1990, 307.

⁴John Paul II, “Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation,” sec. 2.

⁵Pope Paul VI, *Decree on Priestly Training: Optatam Totius*, sec. 1.

unauthenticated claims of private revelation”⁶. The *Ratio*, however, did not address the issue of private revelations further. It was only mentioned in relation to healing ministries. In explaining the theology of the priesthood, the *Ratio* stated that Priests are called to be like Christ, yet they are chosen from society, and so should not consider themselves “miracle-working superhuman beings.”⁷

In this *Ratio*, the CBCN presented human formation as a way of helping candidates understand their role as bridges leading people to God; spiritual formation as assisting candidates to be open to the transcendent; intellectual formation as helping the Nigerian clergy handle “the temptation to be superstitious, fanatical or fundamentalist”⁸; and pastoral formation as means of assisting candidates to become true shepherds to the people. Speaking on the need for competent formators, they proposed that “formators should be knowledgeable in fundamental principles of formation, learning from psychology and the Church’s tradition.”⁹

Because Redemptorists are a religious institute, the formation of Redemptorists is also guided by the “Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes”¹⁰ issued in 1990 by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (now Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life). This document states that formators should always ensure that candidates “are being effectively followed by a spiritual director.”¹¹ It also proposed that each institute should produce a manual of formation proper to their institute.

Following the foregoing, the Redemptorist General Secretariat of Formation issued the *Ratio Formationis Generalis*, first produced in 2003 and updated in 2020 to reflect the updated *Ratio Fundamentalis* of 2016. The *Ratio Generalis* stressed the need for psychological and emotional maturity in candidates. It also encourages candidates to develop the Alphonsian tradition of mental prayer by

⁶Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Abuja: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2005), xii.

⁷Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 4.

⁸Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 18.

⁹Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, 61.

¹⁰The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes* (Rome, 1990).

¹¹The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

meditating on the world of God and engaging in contemplation, adding that they are “to become leaders of prayer for the People of God and to value various forms of popular piety judiciously.”¹² It warns against the tendency of activism at the expense of contemplation. Furthermore, it encourages Redemptorists to acquire authentic learning rather than the acquisition of certificates. Formation should enable candidates to discern the signs of the times in ministering to people experiencing poverty, especially those deprived of spiritual help. It recommends that formators be people capable of listening with empathy and that candidates should have regular meetings with their spiritual directors. Even before joining the Congregation, the practice of spiritual direction is encouraged.

The Redemptorist Region of Nigeria (now Redemptorist Vice-Province of Nigeria) produced a *Ratio* of formation in 1997, as manual for the formation of Redemptorists in Nigeria. Concerning the human formation of candidates, it is proposed that due to the challenges of the ministry, a candidate should develop the ability to “handle his emotions maturely and constructively”¹³. On the dimension of spiritual life, it stipulates that candidates are to attend spiritual direction regularly, be faithful to personal and communal prayers, listen and meditate on the word of God.

Concerning Community life, it recalls the Redemptorist Constitutions and Statutes, number 21, which says, "Community does not truly exist when members merely live together, it requires as well genuine sharing on the human and spiritual level.”¹⁴ Regarding intellectual formation, it talks about philosophy as seeking “to engage the student as a thinker”¹⁵ while “theology seeks to engage him as a believer.”¹⁶ As for pastoral formation, it instructs that candidates develop counseling skills, and develop the ability to work with

¹²Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, *Redemptorist Formation: Ratio Formationis Generalis C.Ss.R.* (Rome: Redemptorist Publications, 2020), sec. 53.

¹³Redemptorist Region of Nigeria, *Student Ratio: Redemptorist Formation Programme* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Redemptorist Publications Nigeria, 1998).

¹⁴Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, *Constitutions and Statutes: Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer* (Rome: General Curia C.Ss.R., 2002), sec. 21.

¹⁵Redemptorist Region of Nigeria, *Student Ratio: Redemptorist Formation Programme*.

¹⁶Redemptorist Region of Nigeria.

others. It also highlights the need for a student on pastoral year to develop a balance between prayer, work, and rest.

The expectation of the Laity in terms of the guidance they receive from the clergy was the concern in a study conducted by Kane (2003) in the United States of America to ascertain the position of Priests on who should handle certain issues in counseling. Participants generally believed that moral issues should be handled by Priests, while emotional issues should be handled by Lay professionals. They also indicated that issues related to private revelations, such as hearing of voices and seeing visions were “within the competence of Priests, especially those with advanced clinical training.”¹⁷ If that is the case, then it remains to be seen if the formation program is consciously preparing candidates for spiritual discernment of private revelation.

Similarly, Nyandoro (2010) conducted a study in Zimbabwe and discovered a general lack of counseling skills among Priests in Masvingo Diocese. The study revealed that, among other counseling skills, Priests lack psychodynamic skills, which include dreams analysis.¹⁸ The current study examines the place of spiritual discernment of private revelations in the formation program of Redemptorists in the Vice-Province of Nigeria.

Review of Related Literature

Lewis, *et al.* (2020) conducted a study in the United Kingdom and revealed that voice-hearing can be biological, psychological or spiritual. They observed that those who hear voices often seek spiritual help before seeking any other kind of help. Also, those who are convinced that the voice they hear is from God would not like to be taken for psychological intervention, which they consider as ‘medicating God away.’¹⁹ Voice-hearers reported that though it was difficult for

¹⁷Michael N. Kane, “Perceptions of Catholic Priests Toward Help-Seeking Behavior of Parishioners,” *Social Thought* 22, no. 1 (2003): 159, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2003.9960332>.

¹⁸Rudolf Nyandoro, “Assessment of Counselling Skills among the Clergy: A Case Study of the Roman Catholic Priests in the Diocese of Masvingo in Zimbabwe” (University of South Africa, 2010), 10–13.

¹⁹Sophie Hannah Lewis *et al.*, “‘Maybe It’s Kind of Normal to Hear Voices’: The Role of Spirituality in Making Sense of Voice Hearing,” *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 22, no. 1 (2020): 54, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2018.1520183>.

them to explain what they experience, they needed to speak to someone who would understand them. Since spiritual help is often their first attempt at seeking help, then there is a need to have spiritual guides who are equipped with the tools for spiritual discernment of locutions.

Another study was carried out by Beaumont (2010) on attitudes and practices of Australian Christian Clergy regarding counseling in their pastoral care roles.²⁰ Results showed that participants had little confidence in dealing with different counseling situation. They reported that their major preparation for counseling was through personal experience and personal reading. Bible College/Seminary had the lowest score in their counseling preparation. Though the clergy reported high level of general educational achievement, they reported low level of counseling training.²¹ In spite of this, Priests and Religious are generally believed to be well trained in counseling.

Civish (2013) carried out research among candidates in the United States of America, on their personal spiritual experiences. The study revealed that some candidates had dreams and locutions in relation to their being called to the priesthood. In spite of this, they experienced fear in talking about such experiences. For many of them, the spiritual experiences they had before joining the seminary still had effects on them even as candidates.²² Their inability to discuss extraordinary spiritual experiences such as private revelations with their formators gives the impression that such topic is not tolerated within the formation system. Yet, this remains a constant spiritual concern for them.

Research was carried out in Canada by Wong, *et al.* (2019) among clergy in flourishing churches to ascertain if the current formation program is preparing candidates for the realities experienced in the ministry. The researchers felt it is important to listen to those in ministry in order to know how formation programs can better be shaped. They discovered that current formation program does not address some contemporary pastoral concerns. One of such issues is the issue

²⁰Stephen M. Beaumont, "Pastoral Counseling Down Under: A Survey of Australian Clergy," *Pastoral Psychol* 60 (2010): 117, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-010-0289-4>.

²¹Stephen M. Beaumont, 126.

²²Gayle Civish, "The Calling: A Study of Personal Spiritual Experiences of Seminary Students," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*, 15, no. 3 (2013): 186–214, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19349637.2013.776446>.

of clericalism. Participants suggested training candidates on how to empower the laity as collaborators of the clergy. They also suggested constant communication between formators and those already in ministry so as to understand how to enhance the formation program to meet contemporary pastoral needs.²³

Bangura (2022) in Sierra Leone revealed that, when the Temme Charismatic converts dream, they go to their ministers for interpretation and for solution to whatever danger the dream has revealed. In an attempt to inculturate the Temme dream culture, ministers have compromised the truth of Christian faith, by reverting to Temme tradition in order to get interpretation to dreams.²⁴ Due to the absence of spiritual discernment of private revelations in their formation system, Christian ministers among the Temme people become involved with syncretism which departs from biblical truth. Being a minister himself, Bangura recalls that when he began pastoral work at the National Pentecostal Mission, he struggled with the fact that he had not received adequate theological training concerning dream cultures, and so could not assist parishioners who were very much worried about their dreams.

Andrea (2023) carried out research among spiritual directors, formators and candidates at St. Peter's major seminary in Juba, South Sudan. The research was prompted by the fact that Priests who did not have training in spiritual direction were being appointed as spiritual directors for candidates. He therefore recommends that those who are appointed as spiritual directors for candidates should be adequately trained. One of the consequences of appointing untrained spiritual directors is that they were not be able to assist candidates in dealing with their spiritual concerns such as spiritual discernment of private revelations.

In a study conducted in 2017 among 547 seminarians by Adubale and Aluede, to examine the counseling needs of seminarian in Makurdi, Ibadan and Ekpoma,

²³Arch Chee Keen Wong, Bill McAlpine, Joel Thiessen, and Keith Walker. "Are You Listening? The Relevance of What Pastoral/ Denominational Leaders and Theological Educators Are Saying about Preparing Leaders for Ministry," *Practical Theology* 12, no. 4 (2019): 415–32, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2019.1609255>.

²⁴Joseph Bosco Bangura, "Temne Dream Culture and Charismatic Churches in Sierra Leone: Probing the Limits of Contextualization," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 46, no. 2 (2022): 111–12.

Nigeria, candidates identified academics, social life and finances as their biggest concerns, at the expense of their spiritual and emotional needs.²⁵ Arguably, this is due to an emphasis on academic excellence, making candidates to focus less on their personal emotional needs. If candidates suppress their emotional needs, then they may also suppress their spiritual needs.

Also, in 2018, study was carried out by Chukwuorji *et al.*, among minor seminarians in Nsukka, aimed at understanding how a sense of community can enhance their academic engagement in the seminary. Candidates indicated that part of the reasons why they do not share freely about themselves with others is because they are afraid of being expelled from the seminary. One of the reasons for a lack of a sense of Community is a sense of self-protection and self-preservation among Nigerian seminarians.²⁶ They are usually afraid of playing into the hands of someone who can use information about them against them.

Methodology

This qualitative study adopted exploratory research design. This is a research design “that has the overall purpose of exploration” and “usually refers to the study of an unknown area.”²⁷ Using purposive method, 16 Redemptorist formators from the Vice-Province of Nigeria were selected for the study. The study also utilized in-depth interview Guide by which data was collected from the participants. Data collection began by asking open-ended questions. In some cases, the researcher also asked further questions which are not on the questionnaire but related to answers given by participants for the sake of clarification. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour, led personally by the researcher, recorded, transcribed, and sent back to participants for confirmation. Thematic analysis was adopted for data analysis to organize

²⁵Andrew A. Adubale & Oyaziwo Aluede, “A Survey of Counselling Needs of Seminarians in Catholic Major Seminaries in Nigeria,” *Asia Pacific Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy* 8, no. 1 (2017): 29–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2014.886671>.

²⁶ JohnBosco Chika Chukwuorji, Chuka Mike Ifeagwazi, Sampson Kelechi Nwonyi, and Ikechukwu V.N. Ujoatuonu. “Sense of Community and Academic Engagement in the Seminary,” *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 27, no. 1 (2018): 31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10656219.2018.1447412>.

²⁷Corne Davis, “The Aims of Research,” in *Research Matters*, ed. and Rose-Marie Bezuidenhout Franzel du Plooy-Cilliers, Corne Davis (Cape Town: Juta and Company Ltd, 2014), 75.

the data along similar themes. After participants confirmed that the data given was the same as the data collected, data was analyzed along significant concepts and themes. Themes were coded, reviewed, and defined.²⁸ Responses with similar themes were grouped and presented, with participants' sample quotes.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents and discusses findings on the place of spiritual discernment of private revelations in the current formation program of Redemptorists in the Vice Province of Nigeria. Findings are presented as well as verbatim from participants.

Freedom of Expression

Some participants talked about the freedom which is given to candidates to express themselves. In the words of P03, "*We try to create an environment where candidates can talk freely about anything.*" Also, P13 has the following to say:

Basically, looking at our formation program, it opens the students up in order to express themselves without fear. It builds in them some level of confidence to be able to bring forth what their own personal experiences may be. The level of relationship between the formators and the students enables openness. There might be certain individuals who have personal fears but generally speaking, there is room for open sharing.

Talking more practically on this was P15 who said:

Through guidance and other aspects of human formation including the telling of their personal stories, by going into the self and trying to notice the presence and the signs of God's work in their own lives, indirectly, candidates are being prepared for spiritual discernment, but it is done in a rather covert way instead of an overt way.

Reasoning capacity

The study of philosophy and logic is partly aimed at helping candidates improve their reasoning capacity. Since spiritual discernment of private revelations require the use of reason, it can be said that improvement in reasoning capacity is also improvement in ability to discern private revelations. This was the

²⁸Uwe Flick, *Introducing Research Methodology: Thinking Your Way Through Your Research Project*, Third Edit (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, Inc., 2020), 272.

position of some participants. For example, P01 said: *“The study of philosophy and logic can help the candidates question the authenticity of any private revelation.”*

P02, who is also a lecturer, shared his own method of lecturing, which can also help candidates to reason much deeper.

I am a lecturer in the philosophy department. I do not do philosophy so much as an academic discipline, but more as a way of life. I have to see things from a broader view and from a wider horizon. Every once in a while, issues of private revelations come up in the class and they are addressed. I do not know what happens in other classes, especially in theology classes.

Biblical Theology

Most participants also stated that the study of biblical theology, which deals with public revelation is able to prepare candidates for spiritual discernment of private revelations, since private revelations are to be evaluated on the basis of public revelation. P01 said that *“The study of Biblical Theology can give them further insight into understanding private revelations.”* Also P03 said:

Through the study of sacred scriptures, they understand what is already revealed in public revelation. This will help them in discerning private revelations, because in spiritual discernment of private revelations, whatever is revealed must align with public revelation. A good understanding of public revelations and the teachings of the Church will enable them to also understand that whatever does not align with these teachings cannot be accepted.

An example of such courses is a course on inspiration. Talking about this, P06 said:

Inspiration is a course that deals with how the bible was written, how the Church came about, the different forms of revelation the Church had in the early church, leading to how God reveals Himself in our times. However, when it comes to divine revelation in our time, the topic of private revelations seems to be avoided. Mention is made of private revelations, but not in details and nothing is said about how to discern them.

Exposure

Some participants also observed that the formation program is organized in such a way that candidates would have pastoral experiences from time to time, thereby exposing them to the ministry and also making them aware of issues they will face in the future. According to P01 *“The weekly apostolic work,*

summer apostolic work and pastoral year experiences expose the candidates to possibility of the reality of private revelation amongst God's people. It will then help them to see the need to be able to discern those revelations properly."

Similarly, P12 also said:

Pastoral work such as weekend help-outs, annual apostolic work and pastoral year exposes them to situations where they can practice spiritual discernment of private revelations, but exposure does not necessarily mean they have the tools. The exposure clears the consciousness and the awareness of where there is lack of competence. This will prompt them to seek answers.

He makes it clear that exposing them to certain concerns does not necessarily give them the tools to deal with them. Linking pastoral formation to intellectual formation was P16, who said: *"Pastoral formation gives an opportunity to candidates to see the practical application of what they learn in school. It enables them to make a connection between theory and practice."*

Rationalization

In spite of the aforementioned themes, some participants noticed that within the formation system, the studies which create reasoning capacity have also led to rationalization rather than discernment. Rationalization means that they focus only on what appeals to reason and downplay every other thing. For P02, the concern is that *"Sometimes when private revelations are talked about, they are talked about as on the level of jokes or even mockery."* In a similar vein, P06 reported that *"We study philosophy and psychology in the seminary and we tend to use knowledge gained from philosophy and psychology to explain away spiritual realities, rather than look at their spiritual aspects."*

Elaborating more on this, using example from personal experience was P14 who said:

Even when you talk about a dream within the formation house, you will notice that those you are talking to are not seeing a spiritual dimension to it at all. While working at the Shrine of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in Enugu, I encountered many people who say that Our Lady is appearing to them and said certain things to them. They need to be properly guided in a way that they will not be discouraged. The fact that I am not receiving similar visions does not mean it cannot be true. In the formation house, generally, the encouragement is to use one's reason rather than focus on private revelations.

If, according to P14, this is a regular pastoral concern, then making fun of it, or explaining it away does not help those who look up to their Priests and Religious for spiritual guidance. One of the side effects of developing one's reasoning capacity is the idealization of reason, to the point of looking down on any idea that does not seem to measure up with one's reasoning. Lamenting this reality, P15 explains:

I would like to start from what we are doing wrong. Part of what we are doing wrong is in the study of philosophy. I don't think it is something that is taught but it is definitely a culture and an unspoken type of atmosphere around the study of philosophy, that philosophy builds you to be a clear thinker, and therefore a clear thinker does not believe in things that are beyond the realm of empirical experience, of empirical data. Even the study of metaphysics does not cure us of this attitude. You would think that with metaphysics being in our curriculum and the training it is supposed to give will counter things like the search for empirical knowledge and all the scientific things that are built into philosophy in the name of clear thinking. This chip on the shoulder of people who begin to do philosophy for the first time and so begin to think that all spiritual things are *hocus pocus* and are not given to reason makes reason to be seen as something against spiritual language. Sometimes I have the feeling that our formation program is jaundiced by the idea that an intelligent person does not meddle with spiritual realities.

Referring to this as intellectual arrogance, P15 affirmed that *"The formation program can do a long way in preparing candidates for spiritual discernment of private revelations. However, we have a problem of intellectual arrogance which tends to deny spiritual realities."* He does not condemn the study of philosophy, but the intellectual arrogance it sometimes create in candidates. It is important for candidates to get to a point of realizing that reason does not have all the answers.

Suspicion

Suspicion came up as one of the consequences of rationalization. All participants spoke about the fact that aspirants who talk about any private revelation in relation to their vocation are treated with suspicion and this is believed to negatively affect their chance of being admitted. Also those already in formation who talk about receiving private revelations are also treated with suspicion. There is a general conception that such persons are either dishonest

or disconnected from reality. P10 recalls that on one of the forms sent to aspirants is a question asking if the person has had any private revelation in connection to their vocation. If the answer is in the affirmative, the person becomes a suspect of some form of abnormality. He said:

The process of admission already show that we are not open to the possibility of private revelations. One of the questions we ask candidates prior to admission is whether they have had private revelations. Once a candidate admits to having private revelations, there is a suspicion about that candidate. From that onset, we have already created an attitude in our candidates concerning private revelations. They therefore, go through the rest of their formation with an air of suspicion for anything that has to do with private revelations. Once someone has such suspicion, their judgment of issues of private revelations can never be objective, because a bias is already there.

For P16, the suggestion is that this suspicion explains why candidates in initial formation do not trust their formators enough or feel free enough to talk about private revelations. In his words:

Some people may talk about private revelations relating to their vocation, and this can make formators to start questioning their mental health. For this reason, there is no trust or freedom in the students in terms of talking about private revelations. Our Christian values help us to understand that private revelations can be true or false, but there is need to know how to determine when it is true and when it is false, when it is the voice of God and when it is coming from other sources. Even when aspirants are being interviewed, if any of them should make reference to a private revelation, like celebrating mass in the dream, they will not only be laughed at, but it is most likely that they will not be admitted, on the grounds that they are not mentally stable. Yet, it is possible for God to call people this way.

On his part, P14 is concerned that the skepticism and the refusal to admit those who talk about private revelations in relation to their vocation, for fear of admitting people with psychological problems, may have caused the rejection of genuine people as well. He said,

If an aspirant is talking about how he received his vocation and he talks about a private revelation, he may be disqualified because of that. In other words, the attitude of those on the admission board trivializes what the person has taken to be serious. I know that they are trying to be careful not to admit people with

psychological problems, but in the process, genuine people may also be rejected.

Discussing the ironic nature of the suspicion around private revelations, P15 said,

When aspirants are applying to join us, and they make reference to private revelations, our attitude is usually to look at them with a lot of suspicion. As soon as the person begins to make reference to a dream or a profound spiritual experience, we begin to look at the person's story as a bit phony, as not 'realistic', as the person's head being in the clouds and the person not being practical. For someone who builds his desire to further in the religious life on private revelations, they would most likely not be accepted, on the grounds that the person is a dreamer, so to speak.

All participants talked about the fact that candidates and aspirants who talk about private revelations are viewed with suspicion. Such was the case also in the USA as reported in the study by Civish (2013) where candidates were asked to talk about personal spiritual experiences. They reported variety of religious experiences linked to how they received their calls, but they also reported being afraid to talk about it, not knowing who to trust, and the fear of being considered crazy.

Fear

In the words of some of the participants, candidates in initial formation are afraid to talk about private revelations. For this reason, they would rather seek guidance concerning private revelations outside of the formation house. Such was the experience of P10 who said:

Students generally do not have the confidence to share anything regarding private revelations with their formators. For example, when I was a student, I was having a recurring dream of myself falling from a cliff. I was unable to share it with my formators. It was only during a retreat conducted by a sister, who in the course of her talks said something regarding dreams, that I was able to talk to her about it and she helped me to understand that my dreams are caused by the fears I was having at the time. Now if someone should come to me sharing such dreams, I will help the person by asking similar questions to the ones asked me by the sister.

P16 explains the reason for this fear, namely that the person may be withdrawn from the formation program or at best be sent for psychological evaluation. He said *“When it comes to private revelations, in the formation house, people are afraid to mention such things. Those in formation will be afraid to talk about such things to their formators as it may cause them to be withdrawn from the formation program. At best, such candidates may be sent for psychological evaluation.”*

It can be understood that the freedom of expression mentioned earlier exists in the formation house, but candidates may not feel it in relation to spiritual discernment of private revelations. The 2018 study conducted in the minor seminary in Nsukka²⁹ by Chukwuorji *et al.* revealed that minor seminarians were filled with a sense of self-protection, and the fear of being sent away. If such fear already exists among minor seminarians, then the possibility exists that it will be carried over throughout initial formation in spite of the freedom of expression given.

Little or nothing

All participants stated that, in the current formation program, there is nothing much being done to prepare candidates in formation to effectively handle private revelations in their future ministry. For example, P05 noted that:

The current formation program, to some extent, makes room for training in spiritual discernment but not much emphasis is placed on how to journey with and respond to individuals faced with the issue of private revelations from God. Consequently, the current formation program does not fully equip the candidate to handle effectively the reality of private revelations that could surface from individuals in his future ministry.

He makes it clear that, though some preparation for spiritual discernment exist, but there is no direct preparation towards helping the laity who seek spiritual guidance in discerning private revelations. Sharing his struggle of first few years in ministry, P14 said:

In terms of private revelations, at this point in their formation they (candidates) do not know much about private revelations, but there is always the need to understand private revelations from the right perspectives. Using myself as an

²⁹Chukwuorji, Ifeagwazi, and Sampson Kelechi Nwonyi, “Sense of Community and Academic Engagement in the Seminary.”

example, I know that passing through formation, there was never a class or forum where it was discussed, how to handle private revelations. Seminary formation as it is right now does not really prepare candidates for handling private revelations. However, most of my training towards spiritual discernment of private revelations happened after ordination, through mentorship received from Fr. Celestine whose assistant I was at the time. We would sometimes share with him what we encountered in the ministry and he would give some guidance.

Also sharing his experience was P06 who said:

Working with the mission team, after every mass or preaching service, we listen to confessions and engage in pastoral counseling. Often times, people come to me to talk about a dream they had and other forms of private revelations. Knowing that I had no formation in interpreting dreams, I started reading about dreams and other private revelations. Looking at the current formation program, I would say nothing prepares us for spiritual discernment of private revelations.

Most participants shared their inadequacies in dealing with private revelations. However, R09 also shared the experience of those who leave the Church due to the inability of the Church to assist them. He said that:

Listening to those who have left the Church, most of them would talk of the inability of the Church to help them in dealing with certain issues. There is a popular politician in Nigeria who was a staunch Catholic before leaving the Church, and when asked he said that the Catholic Church was unable to help him in dealing with the realities he was dealing with at the time, and the Church had no answers to the realities he was dealing with. There are many people who have gone to Priests with their spiritual problems and the Priests end up dismissing them, sometimes insinuating that they may be suffering from Malaria. They will accuse those who come to them of suffering from the figment of their imaginations, and that the reported private revelations are only conjectures of their minds. I have had lay persons tell me that their Priests tell them that dreams are just figments of their imaginations, and have nothing to do with spirituality.

It is easy to blame the Priests, but it may be better to understand that initial formation did not prepare them enough for spiritual discernment of private revelations. In explaining the reason why private revelations are not given adequate attention in initial formation, P14 believes it is because spiritual

discernment is considered a gift of the Holy Spirit and not something that can be learnt. In his words:

I think that one of the reasons why private revelations are not talked about in the formation house is because in this part of the world the interpretation of dreams and private revelations is considered a gift and not something that can be learned in the school. They do not deny the reality of private revelations, but that its interpretation is a gift that God gives to a person, to know beyond the physical. With this, it becomes difficult to make it a topic in the context of formation.

One of the consequences of the inability of Priests and Religious to discern private revelations is that those who seek spiritual guidance end up going outside the Church for assistance, which sometimes further complicate their lives and spirituality. P11 observed that:

For many of us Priests and Religious, we lack the tools for spiritual discernment of private revelations. When people come to us and we are unable to help them, they may end up going to people who are less qualified than we are and these people will tell them to do inhuman things, which they will do because they believe it is an instruction from God.

Recommendations

The study suggests that more research can be done on ways of enhancing initial formation so as to empower candidates with various necessary skills or to respond to various pastoral challenges, such as spiritual discernment of private revelations. In Nigeria, many people believe in witchcraft, demonic possession, and similar supernatural phenomenon. Research can also be done on how Priests and Religious can better be trained to handle such pastoral challenges.

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