



# The significance of integration of families of seminarians in the Roman Catholic ministerial formation in South Africa

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.10342>

## Abstract

A family is a basic building block of society created by God and it is crucial for a healthy state and church. In traditional African societies, a family is responsible for the spiritual, emotional, moral, intellectual, and physical empowerment of the child. Parents play a significant role in transmitting knowledge and skills for the survival of the child in their own context. Other structures in society educate the children based on the foundation laid by the family. This article proposes that a family should not be ignored in the formation of ministerial priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) seminary. The delay in involving a family hinders the holistic development of the priest candidate. Involvement of the family in the process of formation challenges the relationship between a seminary and a family and encourages an imbalance of male and female formators in a seminary. This article aims to highlight the significance of the family as an indispensable body in the formation process of an African priest candidate, particularly for the RCC in South Africa.

**Keywords:** African family, African education, seminary, formation, Church, *Ubuntu*.

## Introduction and background

Pope Benedict XVI (2011:42, Madikane & Kaunda 2018:1) states that the family is the 'sanctuary of life' and a vital cell of society and the church. It is in the family that people are formed and acquire the basic life skills. The significance of a family in society and the church is indispensable. For example, Alard and Freeks (2021:1) state that if the family is in crisis it adversely affects both the church and the society, therefore a stable family is a blessing to a church and society. The family as the 'sanctuary of life' is a safe place where a child is formed holistically. The family is important, as it is the primary institute that offers basic skills to every child to partake effectively and fully in society.

The chief aim of this article is to highlight the significance of involving the families of the priest candidates in the process of formation of priests in the Roman Catholic Church's (RCC), St John Vianney, a major seminary in South Africa for the formation of diocesan priests. By involvement, we mean that the families of the priest candidates should not simply be consulted about the decision and acceptance of their child into the ministry of the church. The families of priest candidates within a diocese ought to be informed of the process and implications of being a priest in the RCC. Merely giving information does not call for participation.



Understanding and upholding the demands of priestly life and involvement in the implementation of these demands need collaboration between families and the seminary. Lastly, involvement refers to creating the opportunity for the families of the priest candidates to support their child in various ways and to walk the journey of the formation process with their child.

This article is a contribution to the present ongoing debate on integrative theological education in Africa and the debate in global scholarship in the Roman Catholic Church on the significance of the family in the formation process. According to Naidoo (2021:1) integrative theological education refers to a systematic attempt to connect, synthesise and coordinate the major learning experiences appropriate to the formation and education of priests. In the context of African theological institutions, the implementation of integrative theological education is long overdue and must integrate African approach in theological training of the priests. African indigenous knowledge, culture, experience, and family are part of aspects that should be integrated in a theological training of the priests. The Roman Catholic Church since after the Vatican II has since promoted the integrative theological training through its recognition of local context, religions, and indigenous knowledge systems (Sourou, 2014:142). However, it is the regional episcopal conferences of Bishops that delay taking the opportunity to implement integrative theological education in South Africa due to the late independence of the country that influenced the delay in the choice of relevant black leadership based on the history of the Roman Catholic Church in South Africa (Bate, 1999:157, Iheanacho, 2021:98), and the delay in ownership and inculturation of universal documents to answer the problems, challenges, and needs faced by the local communities to live the gospel values.

The academic debate in the RCC on the significance and integrating family into the learning experiences of students in learning centres is not new but growing debate in the RCC institutions of learning and faith formation (John Paul II 1992: #68, Francis 2016: #148). Studies done in the USA by Frabutt *et al* (2010:29) also indicate that involvement of parents in learning centres like Roman Catholic schools increases the dialogue between parents and teachers and help to unite parents with the mission of Roman Catholic Church. The other study done in USA on the role of the family in nurturing vocations to religious life and priesthood by Gautier, Wiggins, and Holland (2015:1, 3) indicates that parents play a significant role in encouraging their children taking vocation to priesthood. The role of family member and their interaction with institutions of faith formation cannot be ignored and left to chance (Agenzia Fides, 2018). In Africa the role of the family members and their interaction with the faith formation centres like schools or seminaries is of utmost significance (Frabutt *et al.*, 2010:29), if the RCC wants to contribute to personal and cultural transformation of Africans.

The article emanates from the observation of some challenges faced by Roman Catholic priests who are Africans and ministers within the context of their own African culture and community. The RCC is still young among Africans, even though it has been in South Africa for 200 years. Some of the priest candidates are still struggling with some practices of the church relating to community involvement, dealing with celibacy, and having to adjust their cultural framework of morality and role expectations as men. This leads to the priest candidates' psychological disharmony (Juma *et al.*, 2017:4-6) because the soul of an African person is the family. Often, the family of the priest candidate is not well informed of these issues and is excluded or ignored in the formation process of the priest candidates. This leaves a priest candidate family in the dark as to how best to support their child in the ministry of the Lord, so that they avoid exerting undue pressure on their child who will assume a religious role as priest and a leader in the church of the Lord.

Family members and societal expectations compel some priests to prove what it means to be a man. As a result, they succumb to having children, even if it may be in secret and against their sacred vows, simply for saving their father's family name and for being a man (Juma *et*



*al.*, 2017:5). In some cultures, to prove himself, a 'man' is understood to have a child. Lastly, from empirical data, some participants mention that, while they were in the formation process, they often miss physical intimacy such as hugging and kissing. They believe that, due to their celibate lifestyle, this intimacy can be best provided by their family members.

The approach of this article is theoretical and empirical. It is theoretical in that it will interact with literature from various scholars on family studies, and the RCC documents concerning the role of family in the ministerial formation of priesthood. It is empirical in that it will share the views of some of the Roman Catholic seminarians, priests and formators who participated in the qualitative research. The data was collected by sending written interview questions to seven participants who are priests, formators and seminarians. All the participants were involved and studied at RCC seminary known as St John Vianney. Relevant ethical considerations were observed prior to the commencement of the study. The interview questions were about how the family of priest candidates can play a significant role in their formation. The intention was to conduct research on a large scale, but fear, suspicion, and lack of co-operation from some participants hindered such efforts. We, therefore, assume that further research may be conducted in line with the important theme of this article.

This study used hermeneutical theory to critically analyse the context empirically and theologically using an inductive approach to the given context. The purpose for this theory was to seek an authentic link between the text, context, and the tradition of the church. The other reason was to avoid subjective projections and unrealistic speculations about the situation.

In the next section, we discuss the concept of family from a biblical and African perspective; the formation of priests within the African context; challenges of disconnection between a family and a seminary formation, and why the family of a priest candidate must be involved in the different levels of the formation process in the seminary. We include, where necessary, empirical data from our participants in this researched study.

### **Biblical perspective of the family**

God is interested not only in individuals, but also in families, because they are the essential building blocks of society (African Study Bible 2016:1888). Osiek and Balch (1997:41–42) state that, in the traditional Mediterranean world, which is mostly associated with the biblical historical world, the family is understood as a diachronic and synchronic association of persons related by blood, marriage, and other social conventions, organised for the dual purpose of enhancing social status and legitimate transfer of property. A diachronic family is marked by known generations of the deceased, such as the genealogy of the Davidic family (Mt 1:1-17). A synchronic family is marked by many living units, united by blood, marriage, patronage, and other contractual obligations. Examples are Jacob and his many sons, or Solomon and his many wives. Such traditional Mediterranean families provided self-fulfilment and were the essential building blocks of human society (Bayme, 1998:28). They were expected to provide for the spiritual, intellectual, and physical growth of children (Tenney, 1961:100, 101) and to empower the children for their social responsibility to others (Bayme, 1998:29).

Usually, in a traditional Mediterranean family, parents are responsible for providing the spiritual, intellectual, and material needs of their children although this tendency is decreasing to an extent in the current global scenario where many parents are obliged to seek external support in the stated aspects due to employment related stressors. In terms of education, Tenney (1961:100, 101) relates that education involves spiritual knowledge and vocational skills to help children support themselves (Mark 6:3; Acts 18:3). According to Osiek (1998:287, 288), Jesus taught us various aspects concerning a family. A family can be an obstacle to one's call to formation for discipleship. For example, in Mark 3:20-21, Jesus' family wanted to



take him home, because they heard that he was out of his mind. Jesus' mother, although she was a messianic prophet (Luke 1:46-55), did not understand her son's destiny when Jesus was lost in the temple (Luke 2:48-50). In Mark 3:31-35, Matthew 12:46-50 and Luke 8:19-21, Jesus extends the boundary of a family. For example, Matthew 10:37 encourages us to love Jesus more than our family. Matthew 19:27-30, Mark 10:28-30, and Luke 18:28-30 mention that those who left their house and family for the sake of discipleship will be rewarded.

Parents are responsible for training the child in matters of faith and life. Mary and Joseph participated in the mission and ministry of Jesus by their own calling (Luke 1:26-35; Matthew 1:19-25), taking part to protect him (Matthew 2:13, 21-22), teach and introduce him to the Jewish culture and religion (Luke 2:21, 41-47). Jesus' mother pondered on everything she did not understand in the life of Jesus (Luke 2:51). In Jesus' ministry, suffering and trial, his mother walked with him, supporting him to fulfil his mission and ministry to the end (John 19:25-27). After his death, Jesus' mother continued to support the disciples to continue Jesus' mission empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). As a mother, Mary continued the mission of Jesus, because she contemplated his mission, walked with him, and stood by him. This is an encouragement to all families to do likewise. Jesus' human and Divine family were always with him and there was always a connection that was highly significant.

Considering the above, we discuss four main points. First, Jesus extended the boundary of the family, that a family is not limited to immediate family members but to other human beings and His heavenly Father. Our participants'<sup>1</sup> understanding of family shifts from biological family (mother, father, and siblings) to include members of the parish and students and staff members at the seminary, as the new families they adopt during and after their formation. However, even though the participants<sup>2</sup> appreciate the prospect of a new adopted family from the parish or the seminary, some still prefer their own biological family. For example, one of the participants<sup>3</sup> reported that 'even though the seminary becomes your family, you or rather I need my own family blood kin for their personal support.'

Secondly, Jesus taught us that those who leave their family for the sake of the gospel will be rewarded. In the RCC, being a priest involves taking a vow or making a promise to live a celibate life. This is viewed as a call from God to make a gift of your person to Him and His Church (Matthew 19:12), dedicating your life to the service of others, and making the church and the world a better place (online source: [www.arlingtondiocese.org](http://www.arlingtondiocese.org)). The participants had mixed reactions when they left their biological families to join the seminary for training as priests. One of the participants reported: 'I was excited that I was going to do something I like. But on the other side I was worried because I did not know what to expect.'<sup>4</sup> Another participant reported that leaving his family to join the seminary was emotional and difficult, because it was a few years after the passing of his mother.<sup>5</sup>

What is the impact of that separation of a family and priest candidate when he goes to a seminary? One of the participants agreed that the separation between a priest candidate and his family is temporary, but those few years at the seminary create a gap between a family and a candidate.<sup>6</sup> Another participant mentioned that leaving his family to join the seminary created an anxiety of how he, as eldest son, will take care of his family when he completes his studies. The above response of the participants, indicate that it is in difficult moments such as these that Christ comforted his disciples by saying that those who leave their families (Luke 18:29-30) for the sake of the gospel will be rewarded. The church needs to fill the gap and address the anxiety by comforting the priest candidates with words of hope, helping them build

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<sup>1</sup> R7-LF3, R3-P.

<sup>2</sup> R2-P, R6-PF5.

<sup>3</sup> R2-P.

<sup>4</sup> R5-S.

<sup>5</sup> R2-.

<sup>6</sup> R7-LF3.



confidence in their vocation. It should be stressed that in Orthodoxy for example, as in Catholicism, Christ is the head and the body, with the church being the *Laos tou Theou*, or 'people of God' and they are the guardians of all truth, including Christian doctrine and thus priests are vital in this body. The guardian of religion is the very body of the church, which consists of the people (*Laos*) themselves including the priests who are ordained (Nicolaidis, 2010). Thus, it is essential for a priest-in-the-making to be nurtured carefully from within their families.

How does the church play its role to close the gap between the priest candidate and his family? In response, some participants<sup>7</sup> indicated that the diocese and the concerned bishop did promise to take care of the needs of the priest candidate, but one participant was disappointed that his diocese<sup>8</sup> failed to give him the support he needed, namely attending the funeral of his parent. The above report from the participants shows inconsistent reaction of the bishop to the needs of the student, hence there is a need for the church to review how it can close the gap between the bishop, a seminary, and the family of a priest candidate and evaluate whether it does fulfil its promise to support the priest candidates.

Thirdly, from Jesus' story, we learn that parents in a family are responsible for the training of their child in matters of life; hence, Jesus' parents supported him in his ministry. On this point, we asked participants how their families were informed, involved, and supported their formation process in a seminary. In RCC, when an individual feels that he is called to become a priest, he must consult his immediate parish priest and/or vocation director who will guide and lead the process until the individual is admitted into a seminary. The consultation with the family is done by either or both vocation director and the parish on behalf of the church and the seminary. It is important for a family to be consulted on and informed of the implication of being a priest in the RCC and given pastoral care and counselling on how they may support their child who has decided to join a seminary to become a priest.

Considering the process followed to facilitate the priest candidate's joining the seminary for formation to priesthood, one of the participants<sup>9</sup> commented as follows:

parishes of the [priest] candidates are the one[s] who interact with families to inform them about the decision and expectation of the church from the [priest] candidate while in ministry. [But] the problem is that yes the parish does consult with the family of the priest candidate but it often ends there. The next time when it happens is during the ordinations, what happened during the whole formation process the family knows nothing about. The parishes are the one[s] who relate and know the family background of the priest candidate [not the seminaries]. (R6-PF5)

In line with the above question, we asked the participants the following question: Was your family informed of the implications of enrolling for ministry in the RCC and did they fully understand those implications? One participant<sup>10</sup> agreed that his family was informed about him joining the seminary to become a priest in the RCC and the implication thereof, such as he will not marry, and he will not earn a salary. The participant added that his family initially did not approve due to fear and financial constraints but later acceded and supported him in his choice to join priesthood. Majority of the participants<sup>11</sup> had a negative response: For

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<sup>7</sup> R2-P; R6-PF.

<sup>8</sup> Please note that it is not only the diocese, but also the bishop that may fail. We suggest further research on how some Bishops fail in their support of the priest candidates in their care.

<sup>9</sup> R6-PF5.

<sup>10</sup> R3-P.

<sup>11</sup> R1-P, R2-P, R4-S, R5-S.



example, one participant<sup>12</sup> said 'No, I had to teach my family as I got to understand all implications of becoming a priest.' This means that the participant himself not the parish or the vocational director took a responsibility to inform his family about his choice to enrol for ministry and the implications of being a priest in the RCC. The other participant<sup>13</sup> mentioned that, as his family was not informed, it did not understand the implication of him becoming a priest; hence, his family members did not support him at a seminary and later exerted undue pressure on him to marry. Considering the above, not all the priests' families are consulted by the parish or the vocational director to be informed about the enrolment into priesthood and its implication for the priest candidate family and the church. Sometimes it is the priest candidate themselves after understanding the demands of ministerial priesthood who take the initiative to inform their family about the choice and implication of joining priesthood ministry in the RCC.

When a priest candidate joins a seminary to become a priest, he often comes alone, while others may be accompanied by their family members. Under normal circumstances, priest candidates stay alone in the seminary and visit their families during academic recession. Furthermore, the seminary organises an induction programme to welcome new priest candidates. Then a priest candidate is expected to adapt and be responsible for studying and learning for the ministry. What about the role of the priest candidate's family while he is in the seminary? To what extent are they involved in supporting the priest candidate in the seminary? More than half of the participants<sup>14</sup> responded positively about their families being supportive whilst they were in the seminary. This happened to some participants<sup>15</sup> even though the families were not informed of their responsibility and implication of their sons joining the ministry. The support the participants obtained was moral, prayer, financial, guidance, advice, love, and a shoulder to cry on as support. One participant<sup>16</sup> specifically mentioned that his elder sister, was the one involved throughout his formation process, giving him emotional and material support. One participant<sup>17</sup> gave a negative response when he said that he did not receive any support, as the family thought that the diocese was providing for everything. The above implies that, some of the families of the participants were not informed of the process and implications of being a priest, hence one of the participants said his family was not involved at all with what is happening at the seminary. However, some families became involved in supporting their sons even though they were not informed about the implication of their son to join the priesthood. Furthermore, the family members of one of the participants<sup>18</sup> were not informed of their son's suspension from the seminary. The participant had to inform them about the sad incident. If the family of the suspended priest candidate was involved in the formation process, the representative from the seminary or the diocese of the priest candidate would have consulted with the family to discuss the matter and even provide counselling for the priest candidate.

The above discussion indicates that, if the family is well informed of the process and implications of being a priest in the RCC, it will likely offer its full support to the priest candidate who is a member of their family. By contrast, if the family of the priest candidate is not adequately informed of the process and implications of being a priest in the RCC, it will likely offer less support, or possibly not know how to support their son who is in a seminary. Sometimes, the family may assume that the church will offer all the support the priest candidate will need, and this is unfortunately not always the case.

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<sup>12</sup> R2-P

<sup>13</sup> R3-P.

<sup>14</sup> R1-P, R4-S, R5-S, R3-P

<sup>15</sup> R1-P, R4-S, R5-S,

<sup>16</sup> R2-P.

<sup>17</sup> R3-P.

<sup>18</sup> R3-P.



Lastly, from Jesus, we learnt that a family can be an obstacle in the process of discipleship. Often, Jesus' family did not understand the destiny of Jesus (Mark 3:20–21). Based on this statement, we asked participants: Was there any moment when you felt that your family interfered in your vocation to ministry as a Roman Catholic priest? Almost half of the participants<sup>19</sup> did not feel that the family interfered. However, the participants who reported interference of their family said the following: one participant<sup>20</sup> mentioned that his family initially resisted but supported him once he was enrolled at the seminary. The other participant<sup>21</sup> related that the 'priest candidate family sometimes put undue pressure on the priest to marry or have children, and the priest candidate accede[s] to this undue pressure willingly.' The last of the participants, whose family interfered, mentioned that:

they [family members] were worried that I was not going to finish studying since formation takes many years. Another thing that always bothered me, they always asked when I am getting married because they did not really understand what it means to be a Roman Catholic priest. (R6-P).

Considering the above, if the family is consulted, well informed, and supports the priest candidate in the formation process, it will likely not interfere negatively with the priest candidate; in fact, it would support his vocation. However, if the family of the priest candidate is not informed of and not knowledgeable about the formation process, they could totally distance themselves from the priest candidate, or discourage him in his studies, and exert undue pressure on him to marry or have children.

### **A brief discussion on the traditional African family**

In traditional African society, the conceptual understanding of family goes beyond the nuclear family. According to Mbiti (1991:115), a family includes children, parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, cousins, those who passed away, and those still to be born. Hence, Mbiti emphasises that the idea of family in Africa spreads vertically to the spirit world and horizontally to all of creation.

Furthermore, the traditional African family comprises anyone who shares blood ties, whether distant or near (Soungalo, 2006:178). According to Nyathi (2004:84), the interpersonal relationships form a community with each person who has a role to play for the functioning of the whole. Hence, in the context of an African family, the concept 'we' signifies the dependency of individual persons on others (*Motho ke motho ka batho ba bang*) for the purpose of influencing shared values, morals, work ethics and integral relationships with the cosmic world. From a family, a community is built up that share religious values, morals, and practices that identify it from other communities.

All the participants were Black South Africans. Although we did not ask them a specific question on their understanding of the concept 'family' in their interview for this study, we derived from the given data that their notion of family does indeed reflect some elements of understanding of the African family. For example, their understanding of family shifts from blood-related to those in the seminary and parish. Their understanding of family indicates the practice of interdependency. Almost half of the participants<sup>22</sup> reported as follows. In the absence of parents, the elder sister steps in. Another participant said that 'those whom he call[s] family must play a parental role in one's life and offer that needed family support.' Yet another asserted that, in the absence of a biological family at the seminary, all the staff members function as a family to their students. However, it is interesting to note that, due to

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<sup>19</sup> R1-P, R2-P, R4-S.

<sup>20</sup> R3-P

<sup>21</sup> R7-LF3,

<sup>22</sup> R2-P, R4-S, R5-S.



the recent abuse of women or minor children in South Africa, some of the participants preferred to maintain physical contact with their blood-related family members.<sup>23</sup>

### ***Nature of the traditional African family***

In a traditional African family, the mother is the first person with whom the child bonds, relates to and learns from before and after birth (Mosweunyane, 2013:53; Mwiba, 2013:265, van Niekerk 2018:2). In her own capacity, the mother lays down her life for her children; hence, the saying '*Mme o tswara thipa ka bohaleng*' (the mother protects life in all its aspects, even in difficult situations) (Nyasani *et al.*, 2009:182). Therefore, negligence of the importance of a family, more especially the role of a mother, in adult education is negligence of who the persons are in their cultural context, and this can lead to deformation of character. The role of the father in a traditional African family is also crucial. The father provides security, nurtures, disciplines, and passes on cultural traits, especially to a boy so that he may bear the identity of his family, clan, and tribe.

In a traditional African family, parents have unique values they attach to each child and expectations from each of their children. A boy has a unique value and the responsibility to be the one who assures the continuity of the family and clan. Therefore, if an African man does not have a boy with his wife, he marries another wife who can bless him with a boy, in order to guarantee continuity. In many African ethnic groups, a boy is an honour to the family and guarantees the procreation of his father's family name; he has a duty and responsibility to look after his parents until death (Mbiti, 1991:114–115). By contrast, the girl has a unique value in the African family. From her childhood days, the girl is prepared to be a mother in her own household. She is strictly nurtured in household activities and hand skills, while maintaining her dignity and virginity. Eventually, when she is married, her bride price may be of such value that her family is proud of her that she will represent them well wherever she goes.

For children, a family environment is their first place of formation<sup>24</sup> and learning. It is observed that education received from a family mirrors people's social being and is the means whereby that being is reproduced and passed onto the next generation (Sesanti, 2019:436). Traditional education received from home prepares a child for life in society and the future, whether as an adult or an ancestor. To achieve that, in traditional African education you learn by being taught through narrating of stories, setting moral example or imitating the adults in their household chores and you also learn by self-teaching, allowing the children to assimilate creatively the culture, in order to live it and pass it on to their children (Mosweunyane, 2013:53). In an African traditional family, children are educated in the knowledge, customs and culture known to the family, clan, and tribe. Traditional education includes religion that integrates both the visible and the invisible that control the whole of community life (Mbiti, 1991:196).

Hence, when children misbehave, members of the community enquire about the quality of nurturing the children receive from their parents. When a boy marries, his family will enquire about the state of the family of the girl and, accordingly, advise their boy to either marry or not (Mbiti, 1991:109–110). In short, a good family is generally expected to pass on good moral values to their children and receive honour when their children perform well in the community.

Often, in traditional African society, one is recognised fully in society through marriage and the bearing of children. Not to have children is an unfortunate state of life, depriving persons of social, religious, and physical status in their community (Mbiti, 1991:111–112). The more children one has, the more blessed and wealthier one is, and one is guaranteed to be taken

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<sup>23</sup> R2-P.

<sup>24</sup>John Paul II:1992:110.





care of by them in one's old age (Mbiti, 1991:111, 114). Old family members are a source of wisdom, and they are consulted for ritual performances and for handing over customs unknown to grandchildren (Nyasani *et al.*, 2009:182).

The extended family members play a significant role in forming a cradle, a framework, a support system for the family unit and for the development of children in a traditional African society (Nyasani *et al.*, 2009:182, Madikane & Kaunda 2018:2). For example, when children lose their parents, the extended family members are responsible for taking care of the children who are left behind. The concept of an 'orphan' does not exist in African culture. The *Ubuntu/Botho* concept intertwined in the framework of kinship includes caring for orphans, widows, and the elderly by a connection of family bonds within the community (Setiloane, 1986:9–10).

In a traditional African society, the village brings up a child. All the elders in society are responsible to ensure that children acquire morals by scolding, advising, rewarding, and punishing them when necessary (Citome, 2004:220). Skills and a traditional knowledge of nature passed on to children empower and integrate them into society and for survival in their environment (Mosweunyane, 2013:52). From these respectable members of the community, children find their identity by embracing the knowledge upheld by the community, thus urging children to be loyal to their community (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2017:6). In summary, in a traditional Africa society, parents, extended family members, elder brothers and sisters, and members of the community have a role to play in the upbringing and guiding of a child. Morals play an important role in the family and community and build up the customs of society.

Considering the above discussion, a unique and important point to note from the participants is the burden by the son to fulfil the cultural mandate from his family in contrast to his divine calling. The participants<sup>25</sup> as male persons in their family and the ones with the responsibility to carry on their father's name and care of their parents when old, joined the ministry of the RCC with a serious concern of how they will take care of their elderly parents and maintain their parents' wishes of procreation of their family. The other interesting point we learned from the participants is that, when a son<sup>26</sup> leaves home for ministry and is unable to take care of himself and the family, the daughter took care of the son and the other members of the family.

Concerning the role of the mother as raising the children in a family, one of the participants<sup>27</sup> indicated that, in the seminary, women are part of the formators. Some of the women play the role of spiritual directors, and ladies in the laundry and those who are cooking for the priest candidates at the seminary fulfil the role of the mother. To the participants, the presence of women in the seminary helps develop the feminine aspect of spirituality such as compassion and love. Lastly, concerning the role of the extended family member, one of the participants<sup>28</sup> mentioned that his uncle influenced him to become a priest.

### **The formation of priests within the African and South African context**

The RCC formation of ministerial priesthood within both the African and the South African context follows the Eurocentric system of formation developed by the RCC's Magisterium (John Paul II, 1992: #7; Rakoczy, 2012:118). The RCC believes that those who are called to priesthood come from families that are rooted in their cultures and customs into an institute, which itself has a history, culture and customs that have developed over time and wants to pass these on to future generations (John Paul II, 1992: #92; Francis, 2013: #10). Hence, the church must recognise and acknowledge the role played by the family in the primary formation of the priest candidate. Furthermore, the role of the church and the family complement each

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<sup>25</sup> R3-P, R6-PF5.

<sup>26</sup> R2-P.

<sup>27</sup> R7-LF3.

<sup>28</sup> R2-P.



other. The child is born as a human being in a human family, and through baptism, the child is born into the spiritual family, the Church<sup>29</sup>. The RCC believes that the priestly vocation emanates from this sacrament of baptism and is discerned and grows in the context of a culture that differentiates its training and formation in the world (Benedict XVI, 2011: #74; Rakoczy, 2012:118; Francis, 2013:3). It is important to note that each context varies and has attributes peculiar to it demanding ministerial formation that will answer these demands (Francis, 2013:8). The four pillars of formation, namely human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral form an integral part of training and formation in the RCC (John Paul II, 1992: #115, Francis 2016: #89 - #124). Episcopal conferences are tasked with the responsibility to align their formation to their own pastoral region and to assess the needs, challenges and possibilities in their local region and global developments (Rakoczy, 2012:118; Francis, 2013: #7).

Although the participants were not asked about whether the curriculum is more Eurocentric or Afrocentric in its approach, it is a common challenge in many African theological institutions that epistemologies, methods, and literature originate mostly from beyond Africa. On this point, the RCC must be commended. Even though priest formation is originally designed from Europe, it is up to regional episcopal conferences to align the formation with the context. If not, why not?

The RCC priestly formation touches on various dimensions of the priest candidate's development. Based on this, the participants were asked the following question: In the context of family, how do you evaluate teaching and formation at the seminary? One participant<sup>30</sup> mentioned that the family is alienated from formation. Another participant<sup>31</sup> stated that formation at the seminary is lacking in spiritual and scriptural formation. A third participant<sup>32</sup> mentioned that formation needs the involvement of family to emphasise the aspect of human formation or family approach in a seminary. The above discussion confirms that family of the priest candidate is still alienated from formation of the priests even though family in the RCC is valued as essential in spiritual formation process (Francis 2016: #148). The above discussion highlights the issue of determining whether spiritual, pastoral, human and intellectual formations empower the priest candidate as expected and are taught in the context of the candidate's background for holistic development.

As discussed earlier, the episcopal conference in South Africa meets at least twice a year, And it is the one that has the responsibility to facilitate the alignment of formation to their own pastoral region. Is this a reality in Africa and, particularly, in sub-Saharan Africa? The South African episcopal conference needs to assess the process of formation from recruitment to ordination. The involvement of families in this development of change is crucial, as the family is the primary cell for life, learning and formation. This process needs the cooperation between the department for formation, life and ministry of clergy and the laity representing the family. This process ought to be the concern of practical theology as a vehicle of change from the western understanding of the family and the family's responsibility for members to more Afrocentric understanding of the family as the soul of an African person

### ***Challenges of a disconnection between the African family and the theological seminary***

As mentioned earlier, in traditional Africa, education institutions build upon each other in guiding and educating the child throughout his adulthood. Contemporary theological education often ignores the family in the initiation and formation of priest candidates. The family features only at recruitment and at ordination into priesthood. From the discussion on the relationship between the seminary and the family of the priest candidate, we realised that there is some

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<sup>29</sup> CCC 2003:247.

<sup>30</sup> R1-P.

<sup>31</sup> R2-P.

<sup>32</sup> R6-PF5.



disconnection between the two institutions. In this section, we discuss the consequence of ignoring family in the recruitment, initiation, and formation of the candidates in ministerial priesthood. Ignoring the family's background and its involvement during the process of the reception of the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Eucharist, and Confirmation) leads to ignorance in a theological seminary. This practice denies the parents the responsibility to take a spiritual journey with their children and to support them during times of crisis. There is a slim possibility that the family will support the priest candidate to assimilate the Christian values of obedience, poverty, and celibacy, without the knowledge of what priestly formation entails.

In-depth knowledge of Christian culture and its demands are foreign to many Africans. Seminary formation ought to engage, through the dialogue of gospel from the church and culture of the family, the practices of both institutions that conflict with Scripture. According to Juma *et al.* (2017:2), the church should take note that African religion and practices permeate every aspect of life and cannot be ignored if Christianity is to take root in Africa and South Africa, in particular. To avoid dichotomy in practice, the two institutions need to work together for the desired transformation of Christian communities and also the state. Real change starts from the grassroots, from the family, in order to bring the conflicting world views together and produce a well-rounded minister of the gospel. Christian values need to take flesh and be incarnated into an African culture for efficient and effective living of gospel values and ministry.

Government, schools, universities, and theological seminaries cannot solely contribute to the holistic formation of the candidate at the exclusion of the family. In short, the Western theological system of education and learning is mostly theoretical and needs to be grounded in practical life education towards positively transformed societies. Disconnecting the family from the theological seminary has adverse effects on equipping women and men for leadership and ministry (Houston, 2013:113). This implies that men and women will not develop holistic leadership skills if they are not exposed to both feminine and masculine aspects of leadership practices.

On the one hand, the disconnection between a family and a seminary exposes the weakness of a seminary when it fails to fulfil its promise. On the other hand, it makes it impractical for the family to intervene in time of vocation crises. One participant<sup>33</sup> mentioned that, when he was suspended from the seminary, his family was not informed; he had to tell them. Considering the above, the feelings of anxiety, worry, and lack of support from the participant's family or disappointment with the failure of the seminary and diocese to support the participant in times of need, should not have occurred, if there was collaboration and constant interaction between the seminary and the family of the participants.

Disconnection between a seminary and a family denies the priest candidate an opportunity to be physically, emotionally and morally embraced by family members. The priest candidate is thus torn between faithfulness to the culture he emanates from and to sought Christian values. For example, one participant<sup>34</sup> mentioned that he missed his parents who passed away, and that, if they were present, they would have given him the support and encouragement he needs in his ministry. They would truly be open and honest with discipline, criticism and support. What he missed most is their physical contact through hugs, because, due to scandals in the Church, priests need to keep many people at a distance for fear of abuse.

Pope Francis (2013: #2) mentions that 'the relationship of a seminarian with his family will empower him to establish [a] healthy relationship with the laity appreciating their God[-]given talents and allowing them to exercise their ministry in the Church.' Considering this, the disconnection between a seminary and a family denies the priest candidate an opportunity to learn from his own family how to interact with various lay people such as children, the elderly,

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<sup>33</sup> R3-P.

<sup>34</sup> R3-P.



and women. To demonstrate, one participant<sup>35</sup> stated that, if priest candidates are trained by only male formators with no exposure to female formators, they may lack experience in how to interact with other genders in the ministry.

### **Why a family should be integrated into the RCC ministerial priesthood**

Pope Francis relates that "...family bonds are essential for reinforcing healthy self-esteem. It is important for families to be part of the seminary process and priestly life since they help to reaffirm these and to keep them well grounded in reality." (Francis, 2016:#203)

But if one has good quality relationships with one's family, and families are empowered against such demeaning cultural practices of looking down on unmarried persons, the priest candidate will be steadfast and resilient, even if he is humiliated because of his cultural and religious identity.

For Christianity to take root in ethnic groups in Africa, there ought to be a continuous conversation between the gospel values and the African value systems, building a firm foundation for an authentic African witnessing of the gospel (Ruppert, 2004:50). This conversation of gospel and African values cannot happen when a family is not recognised as an important cell for faith formation of their children and seminary formation.(Francis 2013: #66) Hence, if the church continues with individual conversion, training and formation that ignores and occurs outside the family system, the concept of 'I am because we are' is eroded. Their priestly formation isolates them from their own people, and, because of inner conflict, they cannot carry out the mission of Christ with conviction. They will remain in the priest houses and wait to be approached for ministry. The 'going out to the whole world' will remain a mere myth.

Contemporary RCC seminary documents in South Africa do not have a system to implement the requirements of *Pastores Dabo Vobis and Ratio Fundamentalis* on the importance of the family in priestly formation. The South African multicultural society is a challenge for integration and the vastness of the country makes travelling impossible. To kick-start change, funding will be needed, inviting groups of parents starting with the early phases of seminary formation.

In Africa and South Africa, the face of the RCC is becoming Black (Nabuya, 2011:9), challenging seminary formation to cater for the authenticity of Africans, in Africa, for other Africans. Decolonisation of the theological seminary structures, system of education, lifestyle, language and thinking is urgent if the Christian faith is to take root and become an integrated culture for Africans in general. According to Langa (1999:295), 'Understanding culture helps the church to decipher the identity of the people to whom the gospel is addressed.'

Priest candidates in the democratic intercultural South Africa need a system that forms them to know, to do, to live together and to be, for them to participate in the transformation of society (Ekwunife, 1997:204). If priest candidates are aware of the reality of their families' struggles, joy, and hope for a better future, that would be a source of grounding their ministry towards transforming society (Francis, 2016: #203). Exclusion of their own families and denying them to take care of them can cause priests not to perceive the Church's stand for the option of caring for the poor. Journeying together in formation and challenges, based on history and the contemporary situation of the many faces of the family unit, will position the Church to take a decisive step in family formation, by starting with families of candidates to the priesthood.

The African family institution, as is often the case globally, is not perfect, with its oppressive nature towards women (Nyathi, 2004:95). This attitude needs reviewing, especially because many contemporary families are headed by women who carry the weight of managing homes

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<sup>35</sup> R7-LF3.



and providing 'formal and informal income' for the family's sustenance (Mwiba, 2013:263). As noted in Jesus' ministry and in traditional African education, a mother figure is crucial to a child, even in adulthood (Mwiba, 2013:262; Francis 2016: #63). Although Mary, Mother of Jesus, is upheld in the RCC, by contrast, the status of women is ignored, especially in holding positions of importance and in decision-making in the Church.

A seminary is a school where traditional family values and community spirit are nurtured and sustained for the better growth and development of candidates (Ekwunife, 1997:204; General Prospectus 2018:223). The four pillars of formation offered in the RCC theological seminary need the family, in order to ground candidates in ministry and act as catalysts of transformation. In an African traditional setting from birth throughout one's life, one is ushered into human and spiritual relationships (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2017:9). If the priest candidate's family is not rooted in Afro-Christocentric values, do not support the vocation of their son, and do not know the implications thereof, it cannot form a support system in times of crisis. The leadership of the Church cannot enforce effective discipline without the family's involvement and support.

The above addressed the participants' report on why a family should be integrated in the formation of a priest candidate in a seminary. In general, all participants agreed that there is a need for families of priest candidates to be involved in seminary formation, and to play a vital and helpful role in the integral growth of seminarians. The involvement of the close-knit family,<sup>36</sup> in particular within a formation process, can help offer that much-needed emotional, psychological and material support, which seminaries are often unable to offer in times of dire need. On this point, many of the participants<sup>37</sup> indicated that their families are unable to give them adequate support, because they are either not informed of the implications of the priest formation process or deliberately excluded during the process of formation.

### ***How the family can be involved in the seminary formation***

For the Church to carry out her mission efficiently and effectively demands integral training and formation of the priest candidates that includes their families. How the family is pulled into formation needs further research. However, one of the participants<sup>38</sup> hinted at how families of the priest candidates may be involved. He stated that the parish consults and informs the family of the priest candidate about the decision of their child to become a priest. This participant elaborated on how cumbersome it is for the seminary to meet all the families of the candidates. "For seminary to meet the families of the candidates has never happened because that would be cumbersome to implement in the sense of getting you know we have 128 students in the house getting each of you know their families to come [is a challenge]" (R6-PF5).

To counteract lack of contact with the families of the candidate, the same participant reported that formation at the seminary is done by a team of formators who function like a family and students are exposed to other 'formators' who are not only male priests such as nuns, secretaries, cleaners, and so on. Priest candidates also attend Mass, where there are children, elders and women. In short, women are not discriminated to partake as formators in fact they are appreciated.

Lastly, the same participant hinted that, at their seminary, 'very soon the church will convene a conference to deliberate on the issue of how best a priest candidate family can be involved in the ministry [formation process]?'

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<sup>36</sup> R2-P.

<sup>37</sup> R1-P, R7-LF3, R6-LF5.

<sup>38</sup> R6-PF5



Considering the above and the documents of the RCC, there is an awareness of the necessity to involve the families of priest candidates in the formation process. We suggest that involvement of the family should begin from the sacraments of initiation. Family catechesis would empower families to integrate Christian faith in their lives so that it becomes part of their culture and is passed onto their children from a young age. From home to small Christian communities and to the parish, it will be the parents' responsibility, as it is indeed the parents' responsibility, in African culture, to take their children to an initiation school. The church has taken this responsibility from parents and thus deprived them of their duty and responsibility from an early age up to the seminary formation process. When Christian families know, believe and live their faith in Christ, they will pass it on, and seminary formation would be built on a rock. The seminary must have regular or annual interaction with the families, in order to update them on the progress of the priest candidate. One participant<sup>39</sup> suggested that:

[i]nvolving families can be good if the structure is like the one of the interns who have what we call lay support group which journeys with student, critically evaluate him and also form him because after all he will be a priest for the people, so we need their opinions so that we can serve them better. (R4-S)

The bishops can do this when they receive the reports from the seminary. The bishops in their dioceses can call families together with the priest candidates to discuss the reports. During these meetings, cultural, social, spiritual and financial challenges may be discussed with the purpose of how best they may be of assistance to the priest candidates. The extended Christian family, that is the parish, the district, the deanery and the diocese, could also be updated on the developments of seminarians, as they contribute funding towards formation. These different entities form part of the process of formation at different levels and should not only be involved in fundraising and ordination. After all the Church in South Africa has taken the model of "the family of God" for the Pastoral Plan (SACBC 2019: #5). In African culture, the village brings up a child and so should it be in the church. This process will strengthen shared responsibility for practical living out the faith, active participation in the mission of the Church, and effective ministry of ministerial priesthood.

## Conclusion

This article aimed to propose the urgency of the significance of involving the family into the system of training and formation of RCC seminarians. From both biblical and African perspectives, we realised that the family can play both a negative and a positive role in the child's development. The negative role is when the mother of Jesus did not understand her son's destiny, when Jesus was lost in the temple (Luke 2: 48-50). Our empirical research revealed that, due to lack of knowledge of what is happening in the seminary, some families exert undue pressure on the priest candidates to provide material support, to marry and to have children. The positive role is the comprehensive support that families may offer their children during the process of discernment in seminary formation and in times of need.

We also realised that the disconnection of the family of the priest candidate with the seminary creates many challenges for the seminary, the priest candidate, and the family. For example, the disconnection between a seminary and the family of the priest candidate prevents the seminary from knowing the priest candidate better, and exposes the weakness of the seminary, when it cannot offer the support the priest candidate may need whilst at the seminary. For the priest candidate, this disconnection between the seminary and his family exposes him to undue pressures. This disconnection between a seminary and the family of

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<sup>39</sup> R4-S



the priest candidate denies the family the opportunity to partake in the formation of their child and know how best they may support him in his ministry and in times of need. When one joins ministerial priesthood or religious life can be likened to marriage in an African culture where two families, clans are joined together due to marriage between their children. The RCC has become black from the majority of laity, parish priests, and the hierarchy and to implement deep change in ministerial priesthood and integration of the family in formation, relevant leadership is needed that understands the African approach to life from the womb to the tomb and beyond (Agenzia Fides, 2018). The episcopal conferences are changed with this duty and responsibility and with the help of laity expects in African culture could achieve a smooth transition from western processes of faith formation to Afrocentricity of faith living.

The involvement of the family will help with the development of self-esteem, in order to counteract the insult and humiliation that the priest candidate may encounter in his ministry for not being married and “fully a man” for not having children It challenges the relationship between the family and the seminary, and the ratio of male and female in ministerial formation. Lastly, it empowers and exposes the priest candidate to learn about how to minister to different genders. The family and parents, siblings, and extended family members play a crucial role in the lives of children, even when they are adults. Hence, as Trujillo (1997) agrees the inclusion of the family in the process of formation helps enrich the seminarian holistically and makes him part of the society in its struggle and aspirations. In conclusion, the fulfilment of God’s plan rests on the family as a basic unit for the society and the church. Thus the role of the family is critically important as it offers positive role-modelling for a priest candidate seeking to serve his flock.

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