

Seminary Formation And Vocational Discernment: The Role Of Human, Spiritual, Academic, And Pastoral Dimensions

DELA CRUZ, Michael Ceazar C.

 0009-0000-7356-928X; De La Salle University – City of Dasmariñas Cavite, Philippines, michaelceazardelacruz@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of the human dimension, the spiritual dimension, academic dimension, and pastoral dimension of seminary formation in vocational discernment in a Philippine diocesan seminary in Cavite. The study adopted a multiple case study design where 12 participants were purposely selected to make a sample of academic formators, pastoral workers, priests, and seminarians. The data was gathered in semi-structured face to face interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis and the cross-case synthesis. The results show that it is not a one-dimensional vocational discernment but a dynamic interaction of all four dimensions that can result in vocational discernment. Spiritual formation offers the meaning of the foundation, whereas human formation enhances the emotional maturity and the capacity of relations. The processes of academic formation and pastoral exposure put critical reflection and contextualization of vocation into practice, respectively. These dimensions are best combined and not as different domains in the study and formation is best achieved. The findings indicate that seminary education programs need to take a holistic, context sensitive approach to formation that addresses modern challenges.

RESUMO

Este artigo discute o papel da dimensão humana, da dimensão espiritual, da dimensão acadêmica e da dimensão pastoral da formação seminarística no discernimento vocacional em um seminário diocesano filipino em Cavite. O estudo adotou um delineamento de estudo de caso múltiplo, no qual 12 participantes foram selecionados intencionalmente para compor uma amostra de formadores acadêmicos, agentes pastorais, padres e seminaristas. Os dados foram coletados por meio de entrevistas semiestruturadas presenciais e analisados utilizando análise temática e síntese transversal de casos. Os resultados mostram que o discernimento vocacional não é unidimensional, mas sim uma interação dinâmica das quatro dimensões. A formação espiritual oferece o significado fundamental, enquanto a formação humana aprimora a maturidade emocional e a capacidade de relacionamento. Os processos de formação acadêmica e exposição pastoral colocam em prática a reflexão crítica e a contextualização da vocação, respectivamente. Essas dimensões são melhor compreendidas quando combinadas, e não como domínios separados no estudo, para que a formação seja mais eficaz. Os resultados indicam que os programas de formação seminarística precisam adotar uma abordagem holística e sensível ao contexto, que contemple os desafios contemporâneos.

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Introduction

Seminarian formation for the priesthood is a structured and dynamic preparation for seminarians' lifelong commitment to ministry. While priests are appropriately regarded as holy figures, the road to the priesthood is difficult. Modern societal pressures, cultural values, and personal uncertainty can affect a seminarian's vocational discernment (Hoge & Wenger, 2003; Schmalzbauer, 2015).

A well-developed framework for the human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral dimensions guides the formation process. However, limited research has examined how these four dimensions are involved in and impact vocational discernment in this context. Studies show that societal shifts pose challenges, yet there is little empirical investigation into how seminarians cope with these aspects of cultural, economic, and technological change. Pastores Dabo Vobis (John Paul II, 1992) outlines four essential dimensions of seminary formation: human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral. Emotional maturity and interpersonal skills are highly developed in human formation; spiritual formation creates a deep relationship with God; academic formation enhances theological and philosophical foundations and pastoral formation provides seminarians with the practical ministry skills they need (McCarthy, 2018). These dimensions give a structured approach to the formation and discernment of the seminarian in response to becoming a priest.

In the Philippines, the Filipino culture *Ratio Formationis Sacerdotalis* (CBCP, 2023) incorporates local cultural values such as the *kapwa* (shared identity) and *bayanihan* (community spirit) to ensure that formation aligns with current local realities. It also acknowledges new issues, such as socioeconomic disparities and modern distractions, that can affect seminarians' concentration and dedication. Despite these systematic models, little empirical research has explored how these dimensions are perceived and experienced by seminarians in real formation environments. Most existing research is either based on normative or theological perspectives of formation rather than on the lived experiences of seminarians and formators. Although these four dimensions are well-developed structures, there remains a lack of empirical studies that explore their interactions in real seminary environments, especially from various stakeholder perspectives.

This study explores how the four dimensions of seminary formation, human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral, influence seminarians' vocational discernment and career development. The findings will strengthen support systems in diocesan seminaries, ensuring a more holistic and adaptive approach to priestly formation. Additionally, this study aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (UNSDG) 4: Quality Education, as it seeks to enhance the seminary formation process through a more holistic, contextualized approach.

The study will be beneficial to the body of literature as it presents a cross-case, multi-perspective study of seminary formation within a localized, Philippine diocesan setting. Instead of considering the four dimensions in isolation, it analyzes their interaction in the

development of vocational discernment. This is an integrative and situational technique that offers subtle insights that go beyond the current models of prescriptive formations. Ultimately, this study seeks to enhance seminarians' commitment to their vocation and help cultivate a well-prepared and dedicated clergy.

Methods

This study utilized a multiple-case design, treating each of the four formation dimensions—academic, pastoral, spiritual, and human, as separate cases. Yin (2018) emphasizes that a multiple-case study approach enables in-depth exploration of complex social phenomena by analyzing patterns across cases while preserving each case's uniqueness. The 12 participants were intentionally selected for their involvement in seminary formation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key questions focused on formation and vocational discernment.

These interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. Data analysis followed the steps of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, including familiarization, coding, theme development, review, and definition. A cross-case comparison was then performed to identify common themes. To ensure trustworthiness, methods such as member checking, audit trails, peer debriefing, and thick description were employed. This research adhered to established ethical guidelines for qualitative research.

The protocol was reviewed and approved by the Rector and Seminary Administration before data collection. Each participant received an informed consent form explaining the purpose of the study, affirming voluntary participation, and stating that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Interviews were conducted with written permission. To protect confidentiality, participants' identities were not disclosed; pseudonyms were used for identification, and these data were excluded from transcripts. The audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessible only to the researcher.

Results and Discussion

Case Presentation

This section considers the key research findings by the four clustered sectors concerning a seminarian's Academic, Spiritual, Pastoral, and Human aspect.

Case 1: Academic Formators

Academic formation equips seminarians with intellectual and theological foundations essential for their vocation. Through rigorous study, faith integration, and mentorship, they develop critical thinking and a deeper understanding of their calling.

1.1 Commitment to Quality Education

The academic professors stress the importance of giving seminarians a high-quality education and making sure they receive the same level of instruction as students in secular schools.

"Just as I teach regular students from the universities I have taught, I also give them the same quality of education." Academic Professor 1

"I try simplifying the topic so they can understand it better." Academic Professor 3

"I prioritize fostering confidence and self-esteem as foundational elements in my teaching approach." Academic Professor 2

1.2. Challenges in Learning and Academic Preparedness

The professors recognize that many seminarians struggle with academic tasks due to deficiencies in their primary education and challenges in mastering the English language.

"Academically speaking, I can see that the major hindrance to their learning is the significant decline in the quality of their primary education." (Academic Professor 1)

"Many of my students encounter difficulties in using the English language." (Academic Professor 2)

"School tasks like examinations, activities, and Performance Tasks are quite a challenge to them." (Academic Professor 3)

1.3. Integration of Faith in Academic Formation

The professors incorporate faith-based teachings into their lessons, reinforcing the spiritual and moral formation of the seminarians.

"In simple ways, such as praying before and after class and having scriptural readings before class, that sets the mindset of a seminarian that studying is not only an academic endeavor but a religious obligation." (Academic Professor 1)

"In my English proficiency class, I incorporate biblical texts and the teachings of various saints as essay topics." (Academic Professor 2)

"We start and end the class with a prayer led by the assigned student." (Academic Professor 3)

1.4. Personal and Holistic Development

Professors see their role in academic instruction and shaping their students' personal growth, confidence, and character.

"My teaching, I believe, has an impact on the seminarians' growth in terms of communication, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, confidence, and self-assurance." (Academic Professor 2)

"The academic part of my subject is essential to the seminarian's growth, but more importantly, the life lessons, experiences, and values I share with them give them a better outlook when something similar happens to them in the future." (Academic Professor 3)

"Perhaps the most significant contribution I have given them is my knowledge and experience." (Academic Professor 1)

1.5. The Unique Challenges of Seminary Life

The professors acknowledge seminarians' unique challenges, including personal struggles, strict schedules, and expectations.

"Being in a seminary is not only about dealing with the daily tasks and whatever demands the seminary schedule might give. They also have other personal issues like psycho-sexual, emotional, and spiritual struggles." (Academic Professor 1)

"Seminarians are also students like my previous students. I indeed have higher expectations from them, especially about discipline and behavior. However, I understand that seminary life is not easy." (Academic Professor 3)

"With this, they constantly need support to overcome the struggles and weaknesses of being human." (Academic Professor 2)

Case 2: Pastoral Community

Pastoral formation equips seminarians for ministry by developing their practical skills and spiritual depth. Through hands-on experience and guidance, they can serve communities effectively and strengthen their pastoral identity.

2.1. Understanding Pastoral Formation

Seminary prepares seminarians for their future ministry by immersing them in the Church's pastoral realities. It fosters awareness, discernment, and the ability to respond effectively to pastoral needs.

"Pastoral formation trains seminarians in the realities of the Church, helping them become aware, discern, and respond effectively." – Pastoral Formator 1

"It is a spiritual journey that deepens their experience of the Catholic faith, especially in apostolate and evangelization." – Pastoral Formator 2

"It provides holistic formation for seminarians aspiring to be Church leaders." – Pastoral Formator 3

2.2. Practical Experience in Pastoral Formation

Hands-on experiences such as apostolates and community immersions are essential in shaping seminarians' pastoral skills. These encounters bridge the gap between theory and practice.

"Through apostolates, seminarians gain firsthand experience in pastoral ministry, learning insights beyond textbooks." – Pastoral Formator 1

"I guide seminarians in engaging with communities and suggest activities that foster connections." – Pastoral Formator 2

"Integrating real-life experiences into discussions helps them understand pastoral work deeply." – Pastoral Formator 3

2.3. Impact of Pastoral Exposure on Seminarians

Pastoral encounters help seminarians discover their strengths and deepen their understanding of ministry.

"A timid seminarian found his gift in immersing with people, while another learned to ground his academic training in real-life experiences." – Pastoral Formator 1

“Seminarians were tasked to invite young people to church. From just five active members, they brought in 60—a testament to their formation.” – Pastoral Formator 2

“Hearing seminarians' own stories would reveal the true impact of pastoral formation.” – Pastoral Formator 3

2.4. The Role of Pastoral Work in Holistic Formation

Pastoral work transforms intellectual and spiritual formation into meaningful action. It bridges faith and service, allowing seminarians to put their learning into practice.

“Pastoral work applies academic and spiritual training, making Church ministry more meaningful.” – Pastoral Formator 1

“Exposure to people deepens seminarians' faith and strengthens their commitment.” – Pastoral Formator 2

“I see my career as both vocation and apostolate, merging personal faith with pastoral work.” – Pastoral Formator 3

2.5. Preparing Seminarians for Pastoral Ministry

Seminarians must be well-trained in pastoral ministry, as most of their future work will revolve around community engagement and Church programs.

“Pastoral training gives seminarians a realistic view of parish life and helps them prepare for it.” – Pastoral Formator 1

“They strive to apply their learning in Mass services, liturgies, and apostolates.” – Pastoral Formator 2

“Pastoral formation teaches seminarians to empathize with people, rooted in faith and love.” – Pastoral Formator 3

2.6. Personal Contributions to Seminarians' Growth

Formators are vital in shaping seminarians' perspectives and helping them navigate their pastoral journey.

“Simple conversations can significantly impact their formation by broadening their pastoral vision.” – Pastoral Formator 1

“Being a friend who listens and supports them is my greatest contribution.” – Pastoral Formator 2

“Sharing my personal stories helps seminarians grow in their vocation.” – Pastoral Formator 3

2.7. Challenges and Hopes for Seminarians

Despite the challenges, seminarians' dedication offers hope for the future of the Church. Their perseverance is a testament to their commitment.

“Seminary life is tough, but their perseverance assures us that the Church has future pastors willing to serve.” – Pastoral Formator 1

“Seminarians sacrifice time with their families, but they journey together with their brothers and formators.” – Pastoral Formator 2

“Supporting seminarians academically is crucial in fostering a love for learning.” – Pastoral Formator 3

Case 3: Spiritual Formators

Spiritual formation nurtures a deep relationship with God, shaping seminarians' faith and growth. Through prayer, reflection, and guidance, they strengthen their spiritual foundation and influence their formation.

3.1. The Essence of Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation nurtures a deep relationship with God, shaping the seminarians' faith and personal growth.

“Spiritual formation strengthens faith, helping one develop a deeper relationship with God.” – Spiritual Formator 1

“It is a continuous journey of deepening one’s connection with God through Spiritual Direction.” – Spiritual Formator 2

“The goal is to help seminarians grow in their spiritual life.” – Spiritual Formator 3

3.2. Guiding Seminarians in Spiritual Growth

Spiritual formators are vital in directing seminarians toward a life of prayer, reflection, and awareness of God’s presence.

“I guide seminarians to encounter God through Scripture, prayer, and relationships.” – Spiritual Formator 1

“Listening to their experiences helps them recognize God in their daily lives.” – Spiritual Formator 2

“Through sacraments, prayer, recollections, and spiritual direction, I support their formation.” – Spiritual Formator 3

3.3. Transformation Through Spiritual Formation

A strong spiritual life positively influences other aspects of formation, including community, academics, and apostolate.

“A seminarian struggled in formation due to a weak spiritual life. But through guidance, he grew spiritually, which improved other areas.” – Spiritual Formator 1

“Spiritual nourishment helps in self-examination, aligning actions with God’s will.” – Spiritual Formator 2

“It allows me to see God’s work in the lives of future priests.” – Spiritual Formator 3

3.4. Encouraging Spiritual Sensitivity

Seminarians are encouraged to be aware of God’s presence in their lives, finding personal ways to connect with Him.

“I help them recognize unexpected moments of encountering God.” – Spiritual Formator 1

“I encourage them to find their sacred space for prayer and reflection.” – Spiritual Formator 2

“Using Scripture, I guide them to reflect on how God is present in their daily lives.” – Spiritual Formator 3

3.5. Spiritual Formation and Academic Motivation

A well-grounded spiritual life enhances a seminarian's dedication to learning, providing more profound meaning to their studies.

"A mature spiritual life inspires seminarians to study with purpose." – Spiritual Formator 1

"Spiritual life gives strength to fulfill seminary responsibilities." – Spiritual Formator 2

"It offers a perspective beyond academics, adding deeper meaning to learning." – Spiritual Formator 3

3.6. Personal Contributions to Seminarians' Growth

Spiritual formators shape seminarians' development by offering guidance, example, and presence.

"I set an example through prayer and study, guiding them spiritually." – Spiritual Formator 1

"Despite my schedule, I make time for spiritual direction." – Spiritual Formator 2

"Listening and journeying with them are my greatest contributions." – Spiritual Formator 3

3.7. Challenges and Lessons in Formation

Spiritual directors continuously adapt to seminarians' needs while also growing in their spiritual journey.

"I strive to understand and address their spiritual struggles." – Spiritual Formator 1

"Their devotion challenges me to deepen my own spiritual life." – Spiritual Formator 2

"Formation has made me more considerate of each seminarian's unique needs." – Spiritual Formator 3

Case 4: Human Formation

Every seminarian's journey of vocational discernment and career development is unique, filled with moments of growth, reflection, and challenges. This case explores how spiritual formation, academic studies, mentorship, community life, and pastoral exposure shape their vocation.

4.1. Influence of Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation plays a crucial role in a seminarian's discernment. Structured religious practices, such as prayer, retreats, and spiritual guidance, provide a foundation for self-reflection and commitment.

"The seminary environment has shaped my prayer life and deepened my spiritual commitment, making me more certain of my vocation." (Participant 1)

"Daily prayers and reflections help me stay focused on my calling, especially during difficult moments." (Participant 2)

"Through retreats and spiritual direction, I have come to understand God's will for my life more clearly." (Participant 3)

4.2. Academic and Theological Studies

Academic engagement, particularly in theology and philosophy, sharpens a seminarian's understanding of their vocation and prepares them for pastoral responsibilities.

“Through my theology classes, I have gained a deeper appreciation of my faith and its implications in pastoral work.” (Participant 2)

“Studying philosophy has allowed me to engage with my beliefs critically and strengthened my commitment to the priesthood.” (Participant 3)

“The intellectual formation I receive challenges me to think deeply about my faith and how I can serve others effectively.” (Participant 1)

4.3. Mentorship and Guidance

Personal guidance from priests and formators is essential in the vocational journey. Regular consultations and spiritual direction provide reassurance and practical insights.

“Having a mentor who understands my struggles and aspirations has given me clarity in my discernment journey.” (Participant 3)

“Conversations with my spiritual director have provided me with guidance and reassurance in moments of doubt.” (Participant 1)

“My rector's advice has been instrumental in helping me grow in my vocation and remain committed.” (Participant 2)

4.4. Supportive Community Life

Seminary life fosters a sense of brotherhood and shared purpose, helping seminarians build resilience and a more profound commitment to their vocation.

“Living in a seminary community teaches me the value of brotherhood and teamwork, which strengthens my decision to continue.” (Participant 1)

“The friendships I have formed in the seminary provide me with encouragement and a sense of belonging.” (Participant 2)

“Shared experiences with my fellow seminarians remind me that I am not alone in this journey.” (Participant 3)

4.5. Challenges and Struggles in Discernment

Uncertainties and personal struggles are part of the discernment process, yet overcoming these difficulties reinforces vocational commitment.

“There were times when I questioned whether I was truly called, but overcoming those doubts made my vocation stronger.” (Participant 2)

“Struggles with academic demands sometimes made me wonder if I was suited for this path.” (Participant 3)

“The moments of loneliness and sacrifice have tested my commitment, but they have also deepened my faith.” (Participant 1)

4.6. Influence of Family and External Encouragement

Family support, or lack thereof, can significantly impact vocational discernment. Some seminarians find encouragement in their family's acceptance, while others struggle with initial resistance.

"My family's encouragement and their unwavering support have given me the confidence to pursue this vocation." (Participant 3)

"Even though my parents were initially hesitant, their growing acceptance of my decision has been a source of strength for me." (Participant 1)

"Hearing stories of other priests and their journeys has motivated me to persevere." (Participant 2)

4.7. Exposure to Pastoral and Social Engagement

Direct involvement in parish ministry and outreach reinforces a seminarian's vocational conviction by allowing them to experience real-life pastoral work.

"Serving in parishes and being with the people gave me a sense of fulfillment, confirming that this is where I belong." (Participant 1)

"Engaging with communities outside the seminary helped me see the real-life implications of my calling." (Participant 2)

"Experiencing pastoral work firsthand has given me a deeper love for serving God's people." (Participant 3)

Cross Case Analysis

The following presents the analysis and thematic evaluations to explore the experiences of priests, academic professors, and laypeople contributing to the educational, spiritual, and pastoral aspects of seminarians' human development. It also examines seminarians' overall experience, aiming to uncover the deeper essence of these formative dimensions.

Theme 1: Spiritual Formation and Its Role in Vocational Discernment

Spiritual formation is a key part of vocational discernment because it provides seminarians with a framework for finding meaning and a space for self-reflection. The findings suggest that prayer and sacramental life can help shape vocation, though their effectiveness is enhanced when they interact with relational and experiential contexts. This means that discernment is not purely an internal process but is shaped by personal spirituality and experiences.

Subtheme 1.1: Personal Prayer and Reflection

Personal prayer and contemplation are not only acts of devotion but also means of self-control and self-discovery. The results show that prayer provides seminarians with a coherent framework for meaning-making, which helps them handle uncertainty, doubt, and vocational tension. Instead of being just a spiritual compliance tool, prayer functions as a method of self-reflection, encouraging internal dialogue and self-awareness. This suggests that vocational discernment is sustained through ongoing self-reflection, during which seminarians actively interpret their experiences in the context of their perceived calling. In this way, discernment is not a one-time decision but a continuous reflective process grounded in spiritual discipline.

Subtheme 1.2: Sacramental Life and Community Worship

Engagement in sacramental life and communal worship strengthens the spiritual foundation of seminarians. The Eucharist, confession, and other liturgical celebrations help them deepen their commitment to their vocation and cultivate a sense of belonging within the Church. Seminarians stated that attending daily Mass strengthens their commitment to their vocation, as the Eucharist reminds them of their service to the Church. A pastoral formator shared that communal prayers and liturgical celebrations provide a sense of belonging and affirm their calling to the priesthood. Another seminarian noted that confession and spiritual direction help them stay accountable in their vocational journey.

Theme 2: Human Formation as the Foundation of Priestly Identity

Human formation forms the foundation of vocational discernment by developing emotional maturity, self-awareness, and relational skills. The results show that seminarians use these skills to handle personal challenges and stay committed, suggesting that discernment is both spiritual, psychological, and social.

Subtheme 2.1: Emotional Maturity and Self-Awareness

Human formation is vital for seminarians to cope with the emotional and psychological challenges of vocational discernment. The results indicate that emotional maturity is not an individual trait but a developmental product formed during the process of development. Self-awareness helps seminarians identify internal struggles, cope with stress, and respond positively to challenges. This underscores that discernment is both a psychological and a spiritual process, involving the ability to combine emotional regulation and reflection. In the absence of this, spiritual and educational development might not necessarily translate into long-lasting vocational devotion.

Subtheme 2.2: Building Healthy Relationships and Community Life

It is important to note that the relational aspect of vocation is emphasized in the development of interpersonal relationships within the seminary context. The results show that community life acts as a supportive and formative environment where seminarians build empathy, communication, and collaboration. This suggests that a priest's identity is not formed in isolation but is a continuous process shaped by interactions with others. Having the skills to create and maintain relationships is crucial not only for personal development but also for future pastoral duties. In this way, community accountability and shared experiences bolster vocational discernment.

Theme 3: Academic Studies as a Foundation for Discernment

Academic formation helps individuals make judgments through critical thinking and deepen their understanding of vocation. The findings suggest that theological and philosophical learning helps seminarians reflect on and understand their calling, making vocation a more deliberate and meaningful choice.

Subtheme 3.1: Theological Studies and Intellectual Formation

Academic formation helps develop vocational discernment by fostering critical reflection and intellectual interest in faith. Based on the findings, theological and philosophical studies are meant to make seminarians scrutinize their assumptions, beliefs, and motivations. This intellectual interest makes them further comprehend a vocation not grounded in emotional or spiritual inclination. It implies that discernment is enhanced as soon as seminarians can explain and justify their calling within a broader theological context. Vocation thus becomes an informed and committed feeling as a result of academic formation.

Subtheme 3.2: Balancing Academic Demands with Spiritual Growth

The conflict between studies and the practice of religion highlights the need for integration rather than rivalry between these aspects of formation. The results suggest that when seminarians effectively manage these demands, the two areas complement each other. However, an imbalance can lead to stress or disengagement when it occurs. This indicates that discernment is influenced by how seminarians handle competing demands during formation. Intellectual and spiritual growth are crucial and must be integrated, and developing this skill is essential because it is vital for maintaining coherence across different dimensions of identity development.

Theme 4: Mentorship and Guidance in Vocational Growth

Mentorship emphasizes the interpersonal aspect of vocational discernment wherein formators and peers provide advice on how to make decisions. The results imply that the process of discernment is co-constructed by means of interaction in that mentors are the source of clarity and peers emotional reinforcement.

Subtheme 4.1: Role of Spiritual Directors and Formators

Mentorship is a vital part of vocational discernment, and the discernment process highlights the inspiring side of development. The results show that spiritual directors and formators serve as interpreters of experience, helping seminarians make sense of their struggles and desires. This suggests that discernment is not always self-directed but is supported through dialogical processes. Mentors who have field experience provide clarity, confirmation, and correction, aiding seminarians in managing uncertainty more effectively. Therefore, vocational discernment is co-created through relational interaction with authorities.

Subtheme 4.2: Peer Support and Fraternal Bonding

Peer relationships support vocational discernment by offering a shared source of support and understanding. The results show that seminarians rely on one another for encouragement, validation, and reassurance. This indicates that discernment is not only aided by formal structures but also through informal peer interactions. Fraternal bonds strengthen individuals and reduce feelings of isolation, especially during times of uncertainty. Therefore, seminary life has a communal aspect that is essential for sustaining vocational commitment.

Theme 5: Social and Community Life as an Avenue for Discernment

Vocational discernment has grounds on social and pastoral engagement in the real world. It is revealed that exposure to ministry settings enables seminarians to put their calling to the test and affirmation, and the difficulty in these settings is what leads to growth and increased commitment.

Subtheme 5.1: Apostolate and Outreach Programs

The apostolate and outreach programs allow seminarians to experience real-life situations where abstract formation is put into practice. The results show that these experiences are key moments for validation, helping seminarians evaluate their preparation and commitment to ministry. This indicates that discernment improves through experiential learning, where theoretical ideas are tested against real-world realities. Pastoral exposure bridges the gap between formation and ministry, making the vocation more tangible and meaningful.

Subtheme 5.2: Challenges in Community Engagement

The challenges in developing community relationships highlight the supposed educational role of difficulty and loss in vocational judgment. Instead of acting as barriers to growth, these challenges provide opportunities for development, reflection, and adaptation. This understanding is supported by evidence showing that, when engaging with diverse communities and complex social realities, seminarians must confront their limitations and reevaluate their motivations. This indicates that discernment is not built solely through positive experiences but also through facing and overcoming adversity. These challenges build resilience and strengthen professional commitment.

Discussion

This paper has examined the interaction between the four aspects of seminary formation, human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral, in shaping vocational discernment. The formation of seminarians is built around four key dimensions: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development (John Paul II, 1992; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). These areas ensure a comprehensive approach, preparing seminarians for their calling by combining personal growth, theological studies, and pastoral practice.

Although these frameworks emphasize these dimensions as key elements of priestly development, the current findings indicate they are not separate areas but part of an interconnected system. The findings confirm that spiritual formation plays a crucial role, especially in providing meaning and guidance in vocational discernment (Groome, 2011; Boyle, 2014; USCCB, 2005; O'Malley, 2013). However, the results expand on current understanding by showing that spiritual development cannot occur without human formation, which enhances emotional maturity and relationship skills (McCallion & Maines, 2009; McKnight, 2019; USCCB, 2005). This suggests that discernment is not only a spiritual process but also a psychological and relational one.

Additionally, the paper emphasizes the importance of academic training in developing critical thinking and reflective skills (Cavadini & Healy, 2016; Ratzinger, 2007; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Instead of merely imparting theological knowledge, academic work encourages seminarians to critically analyze their calling and to connect faith with intellectual understanding. Similarly, pastoral formation relies on discernment rooted in lived experience, enabling seminarians to confront the realities of ministry in the real world, which can either reinforce or challenge their vocational commitment (Gula, 2010; Ospino, 2014; Vatican II, 1965).

The other important lesson is that vocational discernment is not a straight line or a solo effort. Instead, it is shaped by relationships, mentorship, and interactions within the community. This reinforces the idea that discernment is built socially and contextually, not just internally. The communal aspect of formation is emphasized even more in the Philippine context through cultural values like *Kapwa* and *bayanihan* (CBCP, 2023). These values help

shape relational identity and shared responsibility, which become essential life priorities for a priest. Overall, the results suggest that seminary formation should shift away from isolated approaches toward more integrated and context-responsive methods. The human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral aspects should not be viewed as separate paths but as interconnected parts of a holistic process.

Implications

The findings emphasize the importance of balanced, holistic seminary formation. The spiritual, human, academic, and pastoral dimensions are deeply interconnected, and seminaries must ensure that all these aspects are nurtured together. Formation should not be viewed as separate parts but as a unified process that prepares seminarians for priestly life. Additionally, this has specific implications for the following: In seminary formation, it is crucial to create an environment where intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and pastoral growth happen simultaneously.

Programs should combine theological studies with real-life pastoral applications, ensuring a comprehensive formation. Seminarians should actively participate in all aspects of their formation, understanding that spiritual life, academics, pastoral work, and personal development all contribute to their growth. A balanced approach will help them discern their vocation more effectively. Formators play a vital role in guiding seminarians. They must provide academic knowledge and spiritual guidance while helping them develop emotional maturity. A more personalized and integrative mentoring approach will benefit seminarians.

For priesthood, ongoing growth in all areas of formation is essential. Priests are not merely preachers or teachers but also spiritual guides and community leaders. Even after ordination, continuous formation ensures they remain effective in their ministry. Lastly, the Theoretical Framework affirms the relevance of Super's Life-Span, Life-Space Theory and Holland's Theory of Vocational Personalities and Work Environments in priestly formation. Vocational discernment is a lifelong, dynamic process influenced by mentorship, experiences, and personal growth. This aligns with developmental theories that emphasize adaptability, self-awareness, and continuous learning in vocational identity development.

Seminary formation must be comprehensive, encompassing all aspects of growth. A balanced approach guarantees that future priests are spiritually strong, intellectually prepared, emotionally mature, and pastorally competent. By promoting this harmony, seminaries can cultivate resilient and capable clergy prepared to serve their communities.

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