

The Surrogate Family Fallacy Why Catholic Schools Produce Resilient Souls and Fragile Communities a Theological Reading of a Structural Finding in Adolescent-Resilience Research in the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja, Nigeria.

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ABSTRACT

A recent psychospiritual dissertation examining resilience among adolescents in Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Abuja found a mean adolescent resilience score of $M = 4.00$, set against a mean formation-culture score of $M = 3.23$ reported by the schools' non-teaching staff—the cooks, gatekeepers, cleaners, and groundsmen who sustain institutional life from its margins (Obada, 2024). Read only statistically, the gap between these figures is modest; read theologically, it exposes a structural problem in how Catholic institutions understand formation itself. This essay's objective is to interpret that gap as ecclesiology rather than psychometrics, naming the pattern it reveals the surrogate family fallacy: the assumption that an institution has been formationally sound wherever the persons who pass through it emerge individually resilient. The method is a theological reading of a single empirical finding, drawing on Pauline body theology, Augustine's account of the totus Christus, the ecclesiology of Mystici Corporis Christi and Lumen Gentium, Henri de Lubac's argument for the social character of salvation, and Yves Congar's theology of the laity. The key finding is that asymmetric success, strong individual formation alongside a structurally uneven community, is not a partial achievement but a distortion: a sophisticated individualist sanctity dressed in the vocabulary of Catholic education. This pattern is shown to be especially acute in Nigerian Catholic schools, which routinely describe themselves as an extended family while running internal cultures in which non-teaching staff feel less formationally attended to than students. The essay concludes that Catholic education need not choose between forming resilient persons and forming a resilient community, but will keep failing to form the second for as long as excellence at the first is mistaken for the whole of its vocation.

Keywords: Ecclesial resilience, Surrogate family fallacy, Abuja Archdiocese, Non-teaching staff formation, Catholic school ecclesiology.

The Surrogate Family Fallacy

A number, read slowly, can preach better than a paragraph. In a recent psychospiritual inquiry into resilience among adolescents in selected Catholic secondary schools in the Archdiocese of Abuja (Obada, 2024), two figures sit side by side with an almost liturgical irony. The mean resilience score of the adolescents themselves—the very population the school exists to form—registers at $M = 4.00$: high, stable, textbook-healthy. Beside it, the mean formation-culture score reported by the school's non-teaching staff—cooks, gatekeepers, cleaners, groundsmen, the largely invisible infrastructure of hospitality on which every Catholic school quietly depends—comes in at $M = 3.23$. The gap between them is modest in arithmetic. It is enormous in ecclesiology.

What that gap says, read theologically rather than merely statistically, is this: the school is succeeding in forming resilient individuals and failing, in the same institutional breath, to form a resilient community. It is producing strong souls inside a structurally uneven body. And a Catholic institution that can do the first without the second has not achieved something admirable with a footnote of unfinished business attached. It has exposed the oldest and most seductive distortion available to Christian formation—what this essay names the surrogate family fallacy: the assumption that if the persons who pass through an institution emerge resilient, the institution itself has been formationally sound. This is not so. Individual resilience purchased at the price of communal unevenness is not formation in the theological sense at all. It is a highly sophisticated individualist sanctity, dressed in the vocabulary of Catholic education, and it needs to be named before it can be repented of.

The Finding, Read Slowly

Resilience, in the psychospiritual instrument that produced these figures, is measured largely at the level of the person: the adolescent's capacity to regulate emotion, to find meaning under stress, to draw on spiritual and relational resources when circumstances turn hostile. A mean of $M = 4.00$ on such a scale is not a marginal result. It indicates that, on average, students in these schools have internalized real psychological and spiritual resources—that something in the catechesis, the liturgy, the discipline, the pastoral counselling, the sheer rhythm of a Catholic school day, is genuinely load-bearing for them.

But the same instrument also asked a structurally different question of the adults who work in the school but do not teach: what is the formation culture actually like, as lived and felt by the people at the edges of the institution's attention? And here the number drops. Not catastrophically— $M = 3.23$ is not a school in crisis—but meaningfully, and in a direction that should stop a reader who knows how to read a mean score. It says that the people who cook the food, guard the gate, and clean the corridors experience the school's formation culture as thinner, less coherent, less theirs, than the students experience their own inner resilience. The school has formed the adolescent heart more successfully than it has formed its own household.

This is the sharpest and most publishable finding in the data, because it will not resolve into a simple story of institutional failure. The school is not failing. It is succeeding asymmetrically—and asymmetric success is theologically more interesting, and more dangerous, than plain failure, because it can be mistaken for the real thing. A community that produces resilient individuals looks, from the outside and even from within, exactly like a community that is spiritually healthy. The metrics that most easily reassure an institution—exam results, vocational discernment numbers, glowing testimonials from alumni—are precisely the individual-level metrics. The communal metric, the one that asks whether the whole household shares a common formation culture, is the one nobody thinks to ask, and the one this study happened to ask.

The Genealogy of an Individualist Sanctity

The fallacy has old roots. Christian formation has always carried within it a temptation to collapse the ecclesial into the individual, to imagine that the Church's business is the manufacture of holy persons, one soul at a time, and that the community is merely the scaffolding around that private project, useful while under construction and dispensable once the building stands. This temptation predates modern psychology by many centuries; it is visible already in the ascetical excesses that Pachomius and Basil the Great had to discipline into cenobitic life, and in Augustine's long argument against a Donatist purity that measured holiness by the isolated integrity of the individual believer rather than by communion. What is new is not the temptation but its current disguise. Contemporary formation culture, including much well-intentioned Catholic school pastoral care, has absorbed the vocabulary of therapeutic resilience grit, coping strategies, protective factors, emotional regulation and has, without quite noticing, allowed resilience itself to become the new private virtue, the new individualist sanctity for a psychologised age.

None of this makes resilience a false good. A Church that cannot help an adolescent survive grief, failure, or violence with faith intact has failed a serious pastoral duty. The danger is not resilience; it is resilience treated as a sufficient description of formation. When a school can report $M = 4.00$ for its students and $M = 3.23$ for

the adults who feed and guard them and still call the first number evidence that formation is working, it has quietly redefined formation as personal fortification rather than as the building of a body. It has, in practice if not in doctrine, made the individual soul the unit of ecclesial success and the community an optional extra precisely the surrogate family fallacy: the school behaves as though it is enough to send resilient sons and daughters back into their families and parishes, without asking whether the school itself, as a household of persons, has become the kind of body those families and parishes need it to model.

The Body against the Aggregate

Scripture and tradition supply the corrective, and it is worth stating plainly because it is not merely a nice metaphor: the Church is not an aggregate of resilient individuals held together by shared enrolment. She is a body. Saint Paul's image in 1 Corinthians 12 (Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition) is deliberately, almost provocatively, non-hierarchical in its logic even as it preserves real differentiation of function: the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you, and those parts of the body that seem weaker are, Paul insists, indispensable, in fact accorded the greater honour, precisely because the body's coherence depends on its treatment of the parts most easily overlooked. Read this against a formation-culture gap that falls hardest on non-teaching staff, and the Pauline logic becomes an indictment rather than an ornament. A body that has strengthened its eyes and starved its hands is not a healthy body with one weak spot; by Paul's own definition, it has forgotten what a body is.

Augustine deepens this into something closer to a metaphysics of ecclesial identity. Across his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* (Augustine of Hippo, ca. 400s CE), Augustine returns again and again to the *totus Christus*, the whole Christ, the conviction that Christ and his Church, head and members, form a single reality, such that what is said of Christ can, analogously, be said of the body he animates. On this reading, formation cannot mean the cultivation of many separate resiliences that happen to share a campus. It means the growth of a single organism whose members are so bound to one another in charity that the wellbeing of the least visible member is not a peripheral concern but a direct measure of the whole body's health. A Catholic school's cook is not adjacent to the *totus Christus* forming itself in that building. On Augustine's terms, she is a member of it, and her formation-culture score is not HR data; it is ecclesiology made quantifiable.

The twentieth-century magisterium gave this ancient intuition its most deliberate doctrinal form. Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* (1943) insists that the Church's unity is not a federation of individually sanctified persons but an organic, Spirit-animated body in which every member, however humble the function, contributes to and shares in the life of the whole and that a wound to the dignity or the flourishing of any member is, properly understood, a wound to the Body itself. The Second Vatican Council's *Lumen Gentium* (1964) carried the same insight forward while correcting its more clericalist over-extensions, describing the Church as the People of God journeying together before it distinguishes the roles within that people, and insisting, in its account of the Body of Christ, that the diversity of members and functions serves unity rather than fracturing it. Read together, Pius XII (1943) and the Second Vatican Council (1964) refuse a formation model in which some members are formed as ends in themselves; the students, the future and others are formed merely as means to that end, or not formed at all because the institution has not thought to ask what their formation culture feels like from where they stand.

Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (de Lubac, 1938/1950) makes the same point with a different emphasis that is worth naming here, because it goes to the root of the fallacy this essay is diagnosing: he argues that Catholic dogma is intrinsically social, that salvation itself is never merely the rescue of isolated souls but always, from its origin, the gathering of a people. An institution that measures its formation success one soul at a time, however resilient the souls it produces, has already drifted from that social character of the very dogma it claims to be transmitting. It has kept the content of Catholic formation while losing its grammar.

What the Gap between $M = 4.00$ And $M = 3.23$ Actually Measures

It is worth being precise about why the gap falls where it falls, because the explanation is structural, not moral. Nobody in these schools set out to neglect the non-teaching staff. The gap exists because formation, in most Catholic school planning, is designed around curriculum: chaplaincy programmes, retreat schedules, guidance-counselling structures, religious instruction, all of it built, reasonably enough, around the students who are the school's explicit mission. Non-teaching staff are folded into this architecture, if at all, as an afterthought: a staff Mass here, a Christmas bonus there, occasionally a shared retreat day. They are treated, structurally, as support for the formation project rather than as subjects of it. This is precisely the surrogate family fallacy operating at the level of institutional design: the school functions as a family for the students it exists to serve, and as an employer, at best a benevolent one, for the adults who make that service possible. A family does not have members who are merely instrumental to other members' growth. An employer, however kind, can.

This is why the finding is theologically sharper than a simple staff-morale problem, and why treating it as a human-resources issue would be a category error. A low staff-satisfaction score calls for better management. A low formation-culture score among the least visible members of a Catholic institution calls for repentance, because it names a place where the school's practice has quietly contradicted its own ecclesiology. The school professes, every time it teaches Catholic social doctrine or preaches on the dignity of labour, that no member of the Body of Christ is merely instrumental to another's growth. Its own formation architecture, measured, says otherwise.

Toward a Resilient Body

The corrective this essay proposes is not another programme layered onto an already crowded pastoral calendar, a wellness seminar for the kitchen staff, a token inclusion of the security guard in the annual retreat photograph. Programmatic solutions are, in fact, part of what produced the gap in the first place: formation conceived as a set of discrete interventions rather than as the lived culture of a household will always privilege whichever group the interventions were designed for. What *Mystici Corporis Christi* and *Lumen Gentium* call for is not addition but reordering: a formation culture in which the non-teaching staff are understood from the outset, in the school's own theological self-description, as members of the body being formed, not beneficiaries of the students' formation, and not merely its enablers, but participants in the same ecclesial project, with a claim on the same catechetical seriousness, the same pastoral attention, and the same institutional dignity.

Concretely, this means formation planning that begins with the whole household rather than the classroom; it means the cook and the gatekeeper being asked, as the students are asked, what their spiritual and psychological resources actually are, rather than being assumed adequately served by proximity to a Catholic environment; it means the school's liturgical and catechetical life being genuinely theirs, not something they attend as spectators to a project that belongs to others. None of this is expensive in the way a new building is expensive. It is expensive in the way conversion is expensive: it requires the school's leadership to stop treating resilience data about students as the final word on institutional health, and to start reading formation-culture data about the whole staff as the more theologically decisive number because it measures not how well the school forms individuals, but whether the school is, in fact, a body at all.

Yves Congar's account of the lay state in *Lay People in the Church* (Congar, 1957) is useful here precisely because it resists two equal and opposite errors that a Catholic school can fall into once this critique is heard. The first error is a flattening egalitarianism that pretends there is no real difference between the vocation of a teacher entrusted with catechesis and the vocation of a groundsman entrusted with the school's physical order—as though formation-equity meant giving everyone an identical programme regardless of role. The second, more common error is the one this essay has been describing: a functional hierarchy that quietly converts real differentiation of role into a difference of ecclesial worth. Congar's insight is that the Body's differentiation of members is meant to serve communion, not rank it. A school that took this seriously would not give the cook the same retreat as the theology teacher; it would give her a formation appropriate to her

state of life and labour, offered with the same theological seriousness, the same institutional investment, and the same conviction that her sanctification matters to the body as such.

A Note for the Nigerian Catholic School

This diagnosis has a particular edge in the Nigerian context, where the language of the surrogate family fallacy is not a critic's accusation but the school's own advertising copy. Nigerian Catholic secondary schools routinely describe themselves, in prospectus and homily alike, as a second home, an extended family, a place where the child is not merely taught but raised. This is not empty rhetoric; it draws, whether consciously or not, on an African communal anthropology in which personhood is itself constituted relationally—the much-cited Igbo and wider Bantu intuition that a person is a person through other persons finds an easy and largely uncritical alliance with Catholic personalism. But an institution that borrows the language of extended family while running an internal culture where the kitchen staff and gatekeepers feel less formationally attended to than the students is not merely falling short of an ideal. It is enacting, inside its own gates, the very fracture that extended-family language exists to heal outside them: a household where some members are kin and others are merely staff.

The remedy, again, is not cosmetic. It will not do to add the phrase our staff are family to the school's mission statement while the formation budget, the retreat calendar, and the pastoral attention of the chaplaincy continue to orbit the classroom alone. If the Nigerian Catholic school wants to keep using family language—and there is good theological reason for it to keep using that language, since the Church herself is the household of God before she is anything else—then it must accept the discipline that family language imposes: a family does not conduct an annual review of whether the cook's spiritual formation was cost-effective. It simply forms her, because she belongs. Anything less concedes that the family language was always a metaphor for the students' experience alone, borrowed to make the institution sound warmer than its structure actually is.

CONCLUSION

Two Numbers and a Choice

M = 4.00 and M = 3.23 will sit in a dissertation appendix as unremarkable statistics unless someone reads them theologically, and that is the burden this essay has tried to carry. Read as ecclesiology rather than psychometrics, they describe a Church still capable of forming resilient souls and not yet fully converted to forming a resilient body—a Church, in miniature, that has mastered the individualist half of holiness and left the corporate half to chance. The surrogate family fallacy is comfortable precisely because its evidence of failure hides inside evidence of success: resilient graduates, glowing testimonials, a school that looks, by every visible measure, like it is doing exactly what a Catholic school should do. Only the quieter number—the one measuring what the gatekeeper and the cook actually experience—tells the truth about whether the household behind those graduates was itself a body worth belonging to. Catholic education does not need to choose between forming resilient persons and forming a resilient community. But it will keep failing to form the second for as long as it mistakes excellence at the first for the whole of its vocation.

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