

Between Formation and Vulnerability: Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing and Emotional Disclosure among Catholic Seminarians in Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Catholic priestly formation seeks to integrate human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development, but little is known about how seminarians in sub-Saharan Africa experience its psychological dimensions or how institutional and relational conditions shape emotional disclosure. This qualitative study explored how senior seminarians understand psycho-spiritual wellbeing and institutional, relational, spiritual, and socioeconomic factors that facilitate or constrain it. An Interpretive Description methodology was used in two Catholic major seminaries in Southeastern Nigeria. Nine participants volunteered: six final-year theology seminarians, who provided the primary experiential accounts, and three resident formators, who provided complementary institutional perspectives. Semi-structured interviews and institutional documents provided the data, which were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Four themes were constructed. First, psycho-spiritual integration was uneven within a comprehensive four-pillar formation structure; human formation was viewed as foundational but historically underemphasised, while spiritual direction was valued but inconsistently accessed. Second, participants described movement from spiritual enthusiasm to routinised practice and spiritual dryness, alongside efforts to recover intentionality. Third, emotional concealment emerged as a deliberate strategy for managing perceived disclosure risks within an evaluative environment. Fourth, family financial responsibilities and pre-existing difficulties constrained wellbeing. Reviewed documents contained no explicit procedures for systematically assessing or supporting psycho-spiritual wellbeing. Findings suggest that wellbeing depends on relational safety, perceived confidentiality, authentic engagement, and contextual pressures, supporting clearer separation of confidential psychological support from formation evaluation and stronger operationalisation of human formation. The study highlights psycho-spiritual wellbeing as a relational and context-dependent dimension of priestly formation, indicating that formation systems must create conditions in which seminarians can seek psychological support without fearing adverse evaluative consequences.

Keywords: Interpretive Description; psycho-spiritual wellbeing; seminary formation; emotional disclosure; relational safety; Catholic seminarians; Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Catholic priestly formation seeks to integrate human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development into a coherent process of preparation for priestly ministry (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016; John Paul II, 1992). The *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* presents these dimensions not as four unrelated programmes but as interconnected aspects of a single formative process, while assigning particular importance to human formation as the foundation of the other dimensions. Yet less is known about how this integration is experienced by seminarians themselves and about the institutional and relational conditions that may facilitate or constrain it in particular cultural settings.

Research on clergy and seminarian wellbeing has increased in recent years, but much of the literature remains quantitative. A systematic review of research on clergy and chaplains identified individual, relational, and organisational factors as important influences on distress and wellbeing and called for greater attention to systemic and organisational conditions (Hydinger et al., 2024). Research among Catholic priests and seminarians

on the Indian subcontinent has also identified variation in wellbeing according to demographic and developmental factors (Noronha & Braganza, 2022). Other research has examined seminarian wellbeing from family-systems perspectives, emphasising the relational contexts within which psychological difficulties emerge (Smith et al., 2022). Research among seminary students has additionally linked financial strain with shame and poorer mental health outcomes (Blea et al., 2021).

The Nigerian literature remains comparatively limited and is predominantly quantitative. Chukwurah (2023), for example, examined spiritual intelligence and psychological distress among seminarians in one Nigerian diocese and found no significant relationship between the two variables. Ehusani (2023) examined trauma awareness and perceived preparedness among senior seminarians in two Nigerian major seminaries and reported substantial gaps in awareness and preparation. These studies contribute useful evidence concerning particular dimensions of seminarian wellbeing, but their designs provide limited access to how seminarians themselves understand psychological difficulty, spiritual development, institutional expectations, and the decision to disclose or withhold personal struggles.

This gap is particularly important because psychological distress cannot be understood solely through its measurable presence or absence. Within a seminary environment, a participant's willingness to disclose difficulty may itself be shaped by perceptions of authority, evaluation, confidentiality, relationships, and future vocational consequences. Consequently, research that asks only whether distress exists may overlook the institutional conditions that influence whether distress becomes visible.

The present study therefore used a qualitative approach to examine seminarians' own accounts of psycho-spiritual wellbeing. The study focused particularly on the relationship between formation structures, spiritual experience, emotional vulnerability, and contextual pressures.

Two research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do senior seminarians describe and make meaning of psycho-spiritual wellbeing within seminary formation?

RQ2: What institutional, relational, spiritual, socioeconomic, and contextual factors do seminarians and formators perceive as facilitating or constraining psycho-spiritual wellbeing during formation?

This study contributes a contextually grounded account of psycho-spiritual well-being among Catholic seminarians in Southeastern Nigeria. Its principal analytic contribution is to interpret some forms of emotional non-disclosure as strategic responses to anticipated evaluative consequences, while identifying institutional and relational conditions that may make formation feel either supportive or restrictive. This interpretation is offered as a transferable analytic possibility, not as a prevalence claim about Nigerian seminaries.

Conceptual Orientation

Consistent with Interpretive Description, two conceptual resources were used to sensitise the researchers' attention to potentially relevant dimensions of participants' accounts rather than to impose predetermined categories on the data (Thorne, 2016).

The first was the Catholic Church's framework for priestly formation, particularly the four dimensions articulated in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* and the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (John Paul II, 1992; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016) was applied. This framework helped situate participants' accounts within the institutional purposes and practices of Catholic formation.

The second was the conceptualisation of psycho-spiritual wellbeing as involving dimensions such as self-awareness, connectedness, meaningfulness, compassion, and self-transcendence, as described in the development of the Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing Scale (Egunjobi et al., 2023). The associated scale was not administered or analysed in this qualitative study.

These resources informed attention to formation, self-awareness, meaning, connectedness, and transcendence without functioning as fixed coding categories. The analysis is therefore best described as theoretically sensitised and abductive: it moved recursively between participants' accounts, the institutional context, and concepts that helped explain the patterns constructed from the data.

METHODS

Design and Methodological Orientation

The study employed Interpretive Description (ID) as its qualitative methodology. Interpretive Description was developed as an applied qualitative approach intended to generate contextually grounded interpretations that can inform professional practice rather than to establish a universal theory or identify an invariant phenomenological essence (Thorne et al., 1997; Thorne, 2016). This orientation was appropriate because the study sought to understand how psycho-spiritual wellbeing is experienced within a particular institutional and cultural setting and to generate findings relevant to those responsible for seminary formation.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the principal source of experiential data. Institutional documents were reviewed as a complementary source of contextual information. Reflexive thematic analysis was used as the analytic method within the broader Interpretive Description methodology.

The qualitative component was conducted within a larger convergent parallel mixed-methods project (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The present article addresses the qualitative questions and dataset only; quantitative findings were neither used to construct the themes nor integrated into the interpretations reported here. The article is therefore presented as an independent qualitative study.

Reporting Standards

The manuscript was prepared with reference to the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ; Tong et al., 2007) and the Standards for Reporting Qualitative Research (O'Brien et al., 2014). A completed COREQ checklist is available as supplementary material.

Setting

The study was conducted at two Catholic major seminaries in Southeastern Nigeria: Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, and Seat of Wisdom Seminary, Owerri. Bigard Memorial Seminary was founded in 1924 and has a long history of priestly formation in Nigeria. Seat of Wisdom Seminary was founded in 1990 and serves the Owerri Ecclesiastical Province. The institutions were selected because they differ in institutional history and development while both serving as major centres of Catholic priestly formation.

Both seminaries provide philosophical and theological formation together with pastoral experience. Participants described broadly comparable formation structures involving academic study, spiritual formation, community life, pastoral experience, and formator accompaniment. There were, however, institutional differences in how particular elements of formation were organised and experienced.

Participants, Sampling and Information Power

Nine participants took part in the study: six senior seminarians and three resident formators. Three senior seminarians participated from each institution. One formator participated from Bigard Memorial Seminary and two from Seat of Wisdom Seminary.

Table 1 Distribution of participants by institution and formation role

Institution	Senior seminarians	Resident formators	Total
Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu	3	1	4

Seat of Wisdom Seminary, Owerri	3	2	5
Total	6	3	9

Participants were recruited through voluntary self-selection. After institutional permission had been obtained, eligible participants were informed about the study and invited to volunteer. Seminary authorities did not nominate individual participants or determine who would participate. Participation therefore depended on each eligible individual's willingness to take part.

For seminarians, eligibility required current enrolment in the final year of the theology cycle at either institution and willingness to discuss personal experiences of seminary formation. Final-year seminarians were selected as the eligible group because they had experienced most of the formation programme and were therefore positioned to reflect on its cumulative influence. They were also approaching a stage at which formation assessment could have important implications for progression towards ordination. Formators were eligible if they were resident members of the seminary community and had direct responsibility for an area of formation.

Participants were between 25 and 36 years of age and had spent an average of approximately nine years in seminary or priestly formation. The sample included both diocesan seminarians and seminarians preparing for ministry within religious institutes. Demographic information is presented only in broad terms to minimise the possibility of identifying individual participants within the small institutional cohorts.

Sample adequacy was considered using the concept of information power rather than saturation (Malterud et al., 2016). Saturation was neither used as a recruitment criterion nor claimed as an outcome. The sample was considered appropriate because the research questions were focused, participants had direct and substantial experience of the phenomenon under study, the institutional context was clearly defined, and the interviews generated detailed accounts relevant to the study questions.

The two participant groups were also treated differently in relation to the research questions. Senior seminarians constituted the primary experiential participants because the study centred on their experience of formation. Formators provided complementary institutional and supervisory perspectives. Their accounts were therefore used to contextualise, corroborate, qualify, or complicate seminarian accounts rather than to substitute for them.

Recruitment, Voluntariness and Power Relations

Following ethical approval and institutional permission, the researcher approached eligible participants and explained the purpose and procedures of the study. Those who were interested were invited to volunteer. No participant was selected or nominated by seminary authorities, and no financial or material incentive was provided.

Prospective seminarian participants were given the interview questions in advance and allowed at least 30 minutes to read and consider them before deciding whether to participate. Those who subsequently agreed to participate were interviewed individually. Participants were informed verbally and in writing that participation was voluntary. They were told that they could decline participation, withdraw from the study, or decline to answer any question without giving a reason and without penalty.

Given the hierarchical nature of seminary formation, participants were specifically informed that participation or non-participation would not affect academic assessment, formation evaluation, progression, or standing within the seminary. Interviews were conducted privately, and the identities of participating and non-participating seminarians were not disclosed to seminary authorities.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview guide explored four broad areas: formation structures and practices; experiences and understandings of psycho-spiritual wellbeing; challenges to psycho-spiritual integration; and the perceived influence of specific formation practices. Broad questions were followed by focused probes when clarification or elaboration was required.

Interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, and were conducted individually in private settings within the participating institutions. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Field notes were written after each interview to document contextual observations, non-verbal features relevant to interpretation, and preliminary analytic reflections.

Institutional documents were reviewed using a structured checklist covering formation handbooks, human and spiritual formation guidelines, retreat and spiritual direction schedules, community-life regulations, and seminarian evaluation forms. The documents were treated as institutional artefacts rather than as complete or neutral representations of practice (Bowen, 2009). Attention was given to both explicit provisions and areas not addressed in the documents.

The documentary corpus consisted only of materials made available to the researchers. Consequently, the absence of a provision from the reviewed documents does not establish that the corresponding practice did not occur informally or through undocumented arrangements.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts, field notes, and relevant document extracts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and subsequent guidance concerning quality in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The first phase involved repeated reading of the transcripts alongside the audio recordings. Initial observations and questions were recorded in analytic notes.

The second phase involved coding the dataset. The first author conducted the principal coding, while the second author independently reviewed a subset of transcripts and discussed emerging interpretations with the first author. This second reading was used to challenge assumptions, identify overlooked meanings, and broaden interpretation rather than to calculate inter-rater reliability. Such an approach was considered more consistent with the interpretive orientation of the study.

Coding was both semantic and latent. Attention was given not only to what participants explicitly stated but also to meanings concerning relationships, expectations, vulnerability, institutional authority, and perceived consequences of disclosure. The conceptual resources described above sensitised the researchers to potentially relevant issues, but codes remained grounded in the participants' accounts.

Candidate themes were then developed by examining relationships among codes and assembling related patterns of meaning. Themes were reviewed against the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. Where themes overlapped or lacked sufficient coherence, they were revised. Two provisional clusters concerning emotional concealment were subsequently combined because they represented different aspects of the same underlying pattern.

Institutional documents were analysed alongside the interview data and incorporated into the themes where they provided relevant contextual evidence. They were not treated as independent proof of participants' experiences.

Discrepant and contrasting accounts were actively considered. Accounts describing trust, adequate support, positive disclosure experiences, or sustained spiritual engagement were not excluded simply because they differed from the dominant pattern. Alternative interpretations were recorded in analytic memos and examined against the broader dataset.

NVivo was used to organise codes, retrieve coded material, and manage data extracts. The software was used as a data-management tool; interpretation and theme development remained the responsibility of the researchers.

Table 2 Illustrative movement from data extract to interpretation

Illustrative data extract	Initial code	Sub-theme	Theme
"What if I tell this person now, and he begins to say I am working against the formators" (SS1)	Disclosure may be recategorised as disloyalty	Vulnerability under evaluation	Theme 3
"after all, is it not four years? I will finish and go" (SS1)	Endurance with a defined endpoint	Strategic management of distress	Theme 3
"the third month you will find yourself derailed" (BS3)	Devotional resolve erodes and is remade	Routinisation and dryness	Theme 2
"You must be human, first of all" (SF2)	Human maturity as prior condition	Human formation as foundational	Theme 1
"Nobody does it. They actually give you" (BS2)	Direction of support reversed relative to other contexts	Family financial obligation	Theme 4

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

The first author is a Catholic priest who personally underwent Catholic seminary formation before ordination. His experience as a former seminarian provided first-hand familiarity with the structures, practices, language, expectations, and relational dynamics of seminary formation. However, he had no current or previous institutional, evaluative, supervisory, or pastoral authority over any participant and had never served as a formator at either participating institution.

His position therefore combined familiarity with the broader seminary environment and relative institutional distance from the participating institutions. This familiarity was an interpretive advantage because it allowed institutional language and practices to be understood without extensive explanation. At the same time, it created the possibility that familiar practices might be taken for granted or interpreted through assumptions derived from his own formation experience.

His identity as a Catholic priest could also have influenced the research encounter. Participants may have regarded him as someone who understood their experiences, but they may also have been cautious when discussing sensitive matters involving authority, vulnerability, formation practices, or institutional relationships. The study therefore recognises that the researcher's positionality may have influenced both what participants disclosed and how their accounts were interpreted.

To address these risks, the first author maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis. The journal recorded assumptions, expectations, emotional reactions, points of surprise, moments of identification, and emerging interpretations. Particular attention was given to situations in which the researcher's own experience of seminary formation might have influenced the questions pursued or the meanings attributed to participants' accounts.

Emerging interpretations were also discussed with the co-authors. One co-author had no personal experience of seminary formation and therefore provided an external perspective that helped challenge interpretations that might otherwise have appeared self-evident because of the first author's insider familiarity. Where these discussions led to changes or refinements in interpretation, the rationale was recorded in the analytic audit trail.

These procedures were not intended to eliminate positionality, which is neither possible nor necessarily desirable in interpretive qualitative research. Rather, they were intended to make the researcher's position visible and subject its influence to sustained critical reflection (Berger, 2015).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was considered using the four criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was strengthened through the use of multiple sources of evidence, including seminarian interviews, formator interviews, and institutional documents. Attention was also given to discrepant and contrasting accounts rather than only to evidence supporting the dominant interpretations.

All nine participants took part in a participant-reflection and validation process. Each participant received the transcript of their interview and the researcher's interpretation of that interview individually. Participants were invited to identify inaccuracies in the transcription and to comment on whether the interpretation adequately represented their experience. Their feedback was documented and considered during the analysis. The feedback did not result in substantive changes to the four identified themes, although several participants provided clarifications that helped refine the wording and presentation of the findings.

Transferability was supported by providing contextual information about the participating seminaries, the participant groups, the recruitment process, and the conditions under which the interviews were conducted. These details allow readers to assess the relevance of the findings to other seminary contexts. The study makes no claim of statistical generalisation.

Dependability was supported through an audit trail documenting important decisions made during data collection and analysis, including coding decisions, theme development and revision, alternative interpretations, and changes resulting from analytic discussions.

Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive documentation and by grounding interpretations in participants' accounts and relevant documentary evidence. Together, these procedures enhanced the transparency and methodological credibility of the study.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Veritas University, Abuja, on 8 May 2026. Institutional permission to conduct the study was obtained separately from the respective rectors of the two participating seminaries.

Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants. Before the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to decline to answer any question or withdraw without penalty, the limits of confidentiality, and the intended use of the data.

Because the interviews addressed potentially sensitive emotional and spiritual experiences, participants were informed before each interview about the pastoral and psychological support available to them. This information was repeated at the conclusion of the interview so that participants could seek further support if they wished.

Audio recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected repositories accessible only to members of the research team. Identifying information was removed during transcription. Participants are identified in the manuscript by institution and formation role rather than by name or other direct identifiers.

FINDINGS

Four themes were constructed from the data. Seminarian accounts constitute the primary evidence for the experiences under investigation, while formator accounts and documentary material are used to contextualise, corroborate, qualify, or complicate those accounts.

Participants are identified as BS1–BS3 for senior seminarians from Bigard Memorial Seminary, SS1–SS3 for senior seminarians from Seat of Wisdom Seminary, BF1 for the Bigard formator, and SF1–SF2 for the Seat of Wisdom formators.

Structured Formation and Uneven Psycho-Spiritual Integration

Participants described both seminaries as having comprehensive formation structures organised around the four pillars of human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation. These structures included academic programmes, spiritual conferences, retreats, recollections, spiritual direction, community life, pastoral experiences, and regular interaction with formators.

The presence of these structures was not generally questioned. What appeared less consistent was the extent to which they were experienced as producing psycho-spiritual integration.

One formator emphasised the foundational importance of human formation:

“You must be human, first of all, before you become spiritual, before you become intellectual, before you become pastoral. Previously, that has been overlooked. Spiritual and intellectual are so much emphasized. And you see that people were made very spiritual, very intellectual, but they are not made humanly.” (SF2, formator, Seat of Wisdom)

This account suggests a perceived distinction between the formal presence of human formation within the institutional framework and the extent to which it has historically received practical attention.

BF1 similarly observed that some seminarians entered formation carrying difficulties that they themselves had not fully recognised and suggested that the formation environment was not always adequately equipped to respond to such complexity.

Spiritual direction provided another example of uneven implementation. Participants generally described it as valuable, but access and engagement varied. SS3 questioned whether some spiritual directors were sufficiently familiar with the experiences and concerns of younger seminarians:

“Spiritual directors should be elderly priests, but sometimes they lack experience of what the young people are passing through.” (SS3, senior seminarian, Seat of Wisdom)

At Bigard, by contrast, participants described some institutional practices more positively. BS1 regarded the rector's conference as an important part of his formation and described strong commitment to it.

The accounts therefore suggest that the issue was not simply whether formation structures existed, but how consistently they were implemented and experienced.

Participants at both institutions identified apostolic or pastoral placement as particularly integrative because it required them to draw simultaneously on human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral capacities in real-life situations. This suggests that participants experienced integration most strongly when different dimensions of formation were required to operate together in practical settings.

The institutional documents reviewed were consistent with participants' descriptions of a strong formal emphasis on the four pillars. However, the reviewed materials did not contain explicit procedures for systematically assessing or monitoring psycho-spiritual wellbeing. Human formation was addressed at the level of broad principles, while spiritual formation documents focused more heavily on activities and schedules than on the quality of participants' psychological or interior engagement. These findings concern the documents made available for review and should not be interpreted as evidence that no relevant practices existed informally.

From Spiritual Zeal to Routinised Practice

Participants' retrospective accounts suggested changes in their spiritual engagement during formation. Several described an initial period of enthusiasm followed by increasing familiarity, routine, and, at times, spiritual dryness. Some also described deliberate attempts to recover intentionality in their spiritual practices.

Because the study was cross-sectional and relied on retrospective accounts, this pattern should not be interpreted as a demonstrated developmental trajectory. Rather, it represents how participants themselves remembered and interpreted changes across their formation.

SS2 described one aspect of this experience through the image of becoming “a spectator” during liturgical practice: physically present and participating correctly while experiencing a reduced sense of interior engagement.

BS3 similarly described repeated attempts to establish devotional practices that were difficult to sustain:

“You might think, ok, I will start up my old church, and I will be doing it every month. The first month, second month, but the third month you will find yourself derailed.” (BS3, senior seminarian, Bigard)

This account suggests that spiritual dryness was not necessarily experienced as rejection of spiritual practice. Rather, participants continued to value spiritual practices while struggling to maintain consistent interior engagement.

Some participants referred to this experience as “mechanical spirituality.” Their accounts suggest that compulsory or highly routinised activities could sometimes be experienced as continuing externally while becoming less meaningful internally.

BS1 illustrated the distinction between spiritual and psychological experience when he described his psychological wellbeing as relatively low while simultaneously describing seminarians as making considerable efforts in their spiritual lives:

“For the spiritual aspect, seminarians are doing well. They are making their best efforts. But for the psychological aspect, I wouldn't really have a say much there.” (BS1, senior seminarian, Bigard)

The numerical rating in this account is treated as part of the participant's narrative rather than as a quantitative measure. Importantly, participants' accounts also included continuing efforts to renew spiritual commitment. The pattern was therefore not one of simple disengagement but of tension between institutional routine, interior engagement, and attempts at renewal.

Emotional Concealment as a Strategy for Managing Perceived Institutional Risk

The most prominent interpretive finding concerned participants' accounts of how they managed emotional difficulty within formation. Several participants described withholding or managing personal difficulties privately because they perceived uncertainty about how disclosure might affect their standing within the formation system.

SS1 described this concern explicitly:

“You are even afraid. What if I tell this person now, and he begins to say I am working against the formators.” (SS1, senior seminarian, Seat of Wisdom)

The concern expressed here was not simply fear of being regarded as psychologically weak. Rather, the participant anticipated that disclosure could be interpreted as opposition to the formation team.

SS1 also described endurance as a deliberate strategy:

“You have to fight those things. Battle them. Then you now tell yourself, after all, is it not four years? I will finish and go.” (SS1, senior seminarian, Seat of Wisdom)

This suggests that some participants calculated the perceived costs and benefits of disclosure and concluded that managing the difficulty privately was preferable to risking possible institutional consequences.

The evidence does not establish that disclosed information was actually transmitted to evaluation bodies or that participants were in fact penalised for disclosure. Rather, it establishes that participants perceived such a possibility and that this perception influenced their willingness to disclose.

Formator accounts provided additional context. BF1 acknowledged that some seminarians entered formation with difficulties that had not been fully recognised, while SF2 described human formation as an area that had previously received insufficient attention.

The institutional documents reviewed likewise did not specify a clear separation between confidential psychological support and formation evaluation. The reviewed evaluation materials focused primarily on academic, spiritual, communal, and pastoral dimensions and did not contain a distinct documented measure of psycho-spiritual wellbeing.

Taken together, these accounts support an interpretation of strategic non-disclosure or institutional self-protection. The term is used cautiously: the study does not claim that every participant concealed distress or that stigma was absent. Rather, the dominant account suggests that at least some participants understood disclosure as carrying possible institutional consequences and adjusted their behaviour accordingly.

Contextual Burdens on Psycho-Spiritual Wellbeing

Participants also located psycho-spiritual wellbeing within circumstances extending beyond the seminary. Family financial responsibility was one of the most prominent contextual concerns.

BS2 described the continuing financial expectations placed on seminarians and contrasted these expectations with what he perceived as the situation in some Western contexts:

“In Western seminarian formation, nobody considers that. As a priest, my family members call me and say, Father, please this and that. Nobody does it. They actually give you.” (BS2, senior seminarian, Bigard)

The important point in this account is not the participant's broad comparison between Western and Nigerian settings, which should not be generalised from a single interview. Rather, it is the participant's perception that family responsibilities continue during formation and may extend into priestly ministry.

SF1 similarly identified financial instability as a recurring contextual factor in cases of psychological difficulty encountered during formation.

Another contextual concern involved difficulties that predated seminary entry. BF1 described some seminarians as entering formation with unresolved or unrecognised personal difficulties. The documentary materials reviewed did not contain evidence of a systematic procedure for psychological assessment or referral at entry.

These findings suggest that some challenges affecting psycho-spiritual wellbeing may originate outside the seminary and subsequently interact with the demands of formation. The significance of these factors therefore lies not only in their individual effects but also in the way they intersect with the institutional environment described in Theme 3.

DISCUSSION

This study explored how senior seminarians understood psycho-spiritual wellbeing within seminary formation and what participants perceived as influencing it. The findings do not portray the participating institutions simply as successful or unsuccessful. Rather, they reveal a more complex tension: the seminaries provide comprehensive structures intended to promote human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral development, while some participants simultaneously experience aspects of the formation environment as evaluative in ways that may make emotional vulnerability difficult.

Relational Safety and Perceived Evaluative Risk

The central interpretive finding is that emotional non-disclosure may sometimes reflect an assessment of institutional risk rather than simply psychological stigma, immaturity, or unwillingness to seek help.

Formation requires openness, self-knowledge, honesty, and accompaniment. At the same time, formation personnel participate in evaluating candidates whose progression towards ordination depends on institutional judgement. Participants may therefore perceive an inherent tension between the need to disclose vulnerability and the possibility that disclosure could affect how they are evaluated.

This dynamic is compatible with the concept of psychological safety, which refers to the perception that individuals can express concerns, uncertainty, or mistakes without fear of interpersonal or status-related consequences (Edmondson, 1999). Goffman's (1959) work on presentation of self also provides a useful sensitising perspective because it highlights the ways people manage information about themselves in situations involving social evaluation.

The present findings should not, however, be taken to demonstrate the absence of psychological safety across the institutions. Rather, they indicate that some participants perceived disclosure as potentially risky and that this perception influenced their behaviour.

This distinction has practical significance. Simply encouraging seminarians to “open up” may be insufficient if they remain uncertain about who will receive the information and whether it can influence formation evaluation. A more structural response would involve clearly communicating confidentiality boundaries and, where feasible, providing access to appropriately qualified psychological support that is demonstrably distinct from evaluative processes.

Spiritual Practice and Interior Engagement

Participants' accounts of spiritual routinisation should not be interpreted as evidence that structured religious practice causes spiritual dryness. The data do not establish such causation.

Instead, participants distinguished between participation in spiritual activities and the quality of their interior engagement with those activities. This distinction is important because an institutional system may be capable of documenting attendance and compliance without necessarily assessing how participants experience the practices.

Research on spiritual dryness among Catholic priests has associated it with burnout and psychological distress (Büssing et al., 2013), while research on Catholic clergy has identified relationships between psychological and spiritual variables in relation to burnout (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013). The present study does not test those relationships quantitatively, but participants' accounts similarly suggest that psychological and spiritual experiences cannot always be treated as entirely separate domains.

The practical implication is therefore not to reduce spiritual formation but to create opportunities for participants to reflect honestly on the quality and meaning of their spiritual engagement.

Human Formation as an Explicit Formative Task

The formators' emphasis on human formation is consistent with the Catholic Church's own understanding of human formation as foundational to priestly development (John Paul II, 1992; Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). The findings nevertheless suggest a possible gap between the formal recognition of human formation and its operationalisation. If human maturity is treated primarily as an expected outcome of spiritual and intellectual formation, aspects of emotional development, psychological self-awareness, relational maturity, and help-seeking may remain insufficiently explicit.

The Nigerian quantitative literature provides relevant context. Chukwurah (2023) found no significant relationship between spiritual intelligence and psychological distress among seminarians in one Nigerian

diocese, while Ehusani (2023) identified gaps in trauma awareness and preparedness among senior seminarians. The present study adds qualitative evidence concerning how participants themselves experience some of these tensions.

The findings therefore support a cautious conclusion: human formation may need to be treated not merely as a principle within seminary formation but as an explicit and operationalised formative responsibility.

Socioeconomic Context

Participants' descriptions of family financial obligations demonstrate that seminary formation does not occur independently of wider social and family relationships.

The present study does not provide sufficient evidence to characterise all Nigerian seminarians as financially responsible for extended family members. However, several accounts indicate that family expectations can remain psychologically relevant during formation.

This finding is consistent with research linking financial strain among seminary students to shame and poorer mental health outcomes (Blea et al., 2021). It also suggests that socioeconomic context should not automatically be treated as an external issue unrelated to formation. Where financial responsibilities influence emotional wellbeing, vocational discernment, or psychological stress, they may become relevant to the formation process itself.

Implications For Formation Practice

The findings suggest four areas for consideration.

Within the limits of this small, context-specific study, four practice considerations follow. First, seminaries could distinguish confidential psychological care more clearly from formation evaluation. Written and verbal explanations should specify who receives information, what remains confidential, and what safeguarding or fitness-related exceptions apply. Independent clinicians or referral pathways may reduce role conflict, although the feasibility and canonical implications require local assessment. The objective is not to remove legitimate formation responsibilities but to reduce uncertainty concerning how confidential disclosures are managed.

Second, human formation could be operationalised through developmentally appropriate goals, facilitated reflection, referral protocols, and periodic programme review, addressing emotional maturity, self-awareness, interpersonal functioning, help-seeking, and psycho-spiritual well-being within formation programmes.

Third, formator preparation could include greater emphasis on training to recognise psychological difficulty and how to respond without premature judgment, recognise role boundaries, and when to refer concerns that exceed the formator's competence to qualified professional clinicians. This recommendation does not mean turning formators into clinicians.

Fourth, institutions could examine whether spiritual direction is sufficiently accessible, relationally credible, and responsive to seminarians' developmental concerns. Spiritual direction should complement, rather than substitute for, professional psychological care when clinical needs arise.

Strengths And Limitations

A major strength of the study is its access to participants within Catholic major seminaries in Nigeria, a population that remains relatively under-represented in qualitative research. The inclusion of both seminarians and formators also allowed the researchers to examine the phenomenon from complementary perspectives.

The sample was small, consisting of nine participants. Although the focused research questions, participant specificity, and information-rich interviews provide a reasonable basis for an Interpretive Descriptive study, the findings cannot represent the full range of experiences across Nigerian seminaries. Transferability must therefore be judged by readers in relation to the similarity of their settings.

The voluntary self-selection process may have influenced the sample. Seminarians who were more comfortable discussing their experiences may have been more likely to volunteer, while those who were particularly distrustful, distressed, or disengaged may have been less likely to participate.

The decision to focus on final-year theology seminarians also limits the range of perspectives represented. Participants who had left formation, been dismissed, or were experiencing acute difficulties at earlier stages were not included. Their experiences may differ substantially from those of participants who remained in formation until the final year.

Participants' descriptions of change across formation were retrospective and cross-sectional. Consequently, the study cannot establish developmental trajectories or causal relationships.

The study's central finding concerning emotional concealment also raises a methodological limitation. If participants perceived the research encounter itself as potentially evaluative because of the researcher's priestly identity, some experiences may have remained undisclosed despite the safeguards employed. The reported pattern of concealment may therefore be conservative.

The documentary analysis establishes what was present or absent in the materials made available to the researchers. It does not establish that an undocumented practice did not occur.

Finally, interviews were conducted in English. Although English is widely used in Nigerian educational and ecclesial settings, conducting interviews in a participant's first language might have enabled some participants to express emotionally complex experiences differently.

CONCLUSION

This study suggests that psycho-spiritual wellbeing within Catholic seminary formation cannot be understood solely in terms of the presence or absence of formal spiritual, academic, pastoral, and human formation programmes. Participants' experiences indicate that the effectiveness of these structures may also depend on relational safety, perceived confidentiality, the quality of engagement with spiritual practices, and contextual pressures carried into formation.

The most significant interpretive finding concerns emotional non-disclosure. Participants' accounts suggest that withholding personal difficulties may sometimes represent a deliberate response to perceived institutional risk rather than simply stigma, immaturity, or lack of awareness. Where the person receiving a disclosure is also perceived as connected to the evaluation of the seminarian, participants may reasonably question whether vulnerability is safe.

This finding changes the practical question. The issue is not simply how to encourage seminarians to disclose more, but how to create institutional conditions in which appropriate disclosure can occur without unnecessary fear of evaluative consequences.

The study therefore points towards clearer confidentiality arrangements for psychological support, stronger operationalisation of human formation, appropriate preparation and referral pathways for formators, and accessible spiritual accompaniment. These recommendations should be understood as implications arising from participants' accounts rather than as evidence that either institution is systematically failing to provide care.

Future research should include seminarians who have left formation, use longitudinal designs to examine changes over time, and investigate directly how confidentiality arrangements and formation evaluation influence help-seeking and emotional disclosure. Further research could also examine whether the integrative experience reported during apostolic placement is related to differences in supervisory structure, autonomy, or perceived evaluative proximity.

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