PONTIFICIA UNIVERSITÀ GREGORIANA

Human Formation in the Training to the Priesthood With Specific Attention to Psychosexual Integration

A PhD Dissertation by

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1. Introduction

- This study was part of the then **Centre for Child Protection** (CCP), **Pontifical Gregorian University's commitment** "to raise awareness, prevention, and to provide formation" towards the safeguarding of children and vulnerable persons.
- The premises is that **Priestly identity** in the Catholic Church **implies consecrated celibacy**, which **ideally should make the person radically free for Christ**, and lived in the **spirituality of priesthood**.
- When **celibacy is not integrated**, **frustrations and alienations are manifested in inconsistencies**, **psychosexual problems, and deviations**. Sometimes the sexual problems, "may actually reflect other kinds of problems, such as self-esteem, maturity, and difficulty in giving oneself and living deep and stable relationships" (Patrón Wong, 2012, p.6).

2. Theoretical Background

- In the "**serious journey of formation**" the **human dimension** is the **foundation** for intellectual, pastoral, and spiritual dimensions (PDV 42, 43, GPV, 3, 84/c).
- The seminarians are to be guided and strengthened towards an **inner unification** (Patrón Wong, 2019; Rulla et al., 1989). The ideals of priesthood are reached through **internalization of vocational values** (Costello, 2002, 2007; Dolphin, 1991; Nnantamu, 2015; O'Dwyer, 2000; Okeke, 2003; Rulla, 1986; Rulla et al., 1989).
- In recent years whatever the issue about priesthood, **the real question is about integrity and authenticity** leading to the inquiry "where are we in the human formation (HF) to the priesthood?"

3. Methodology

- Mixed method: with both **qualitative** (Interviews) and **quantitative** (MMPI-2, IOF, & Questionnaire) instruments.
- **Participants**: 36 seminarians and 9 of their formators, from three seminaries in Italy.

Seminarian groups were named as:

DSA – Diocesan seminary A

DSB - Diocesan seminary B

PIS – Pontifical international seminary

They represent :

13 Nationalities

17 Catholic dioceses

Four continents (Africa, Asia, Europe, and North America)

Table 1

Overview of the Participants by Seminarian group

Seminarians	DSA		DSB		PIS		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Participants	10	28	10	28	16	44	36	100
No. of Nationalities	1		1		12		13	

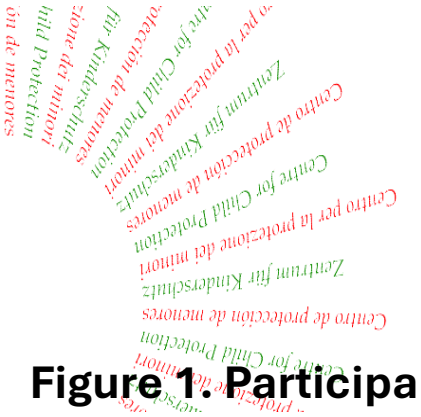


Figure 1. Participants: Seminarians and formators from the three seminaries

4. A Brief Presentation of the Results

- Formation documents and past research studies: human formation, and more specifically psychosexual integration as most challenging and neglected. The findings of this study affirmed this assumption.
- As presented in Figure 3 & 4, seminarians (n=36) are **sub-grouped into three** based on their existential **psychosexual reality** and the **disposition to avail the help** towards the psychosexual integration as revealed in the **interviews**.

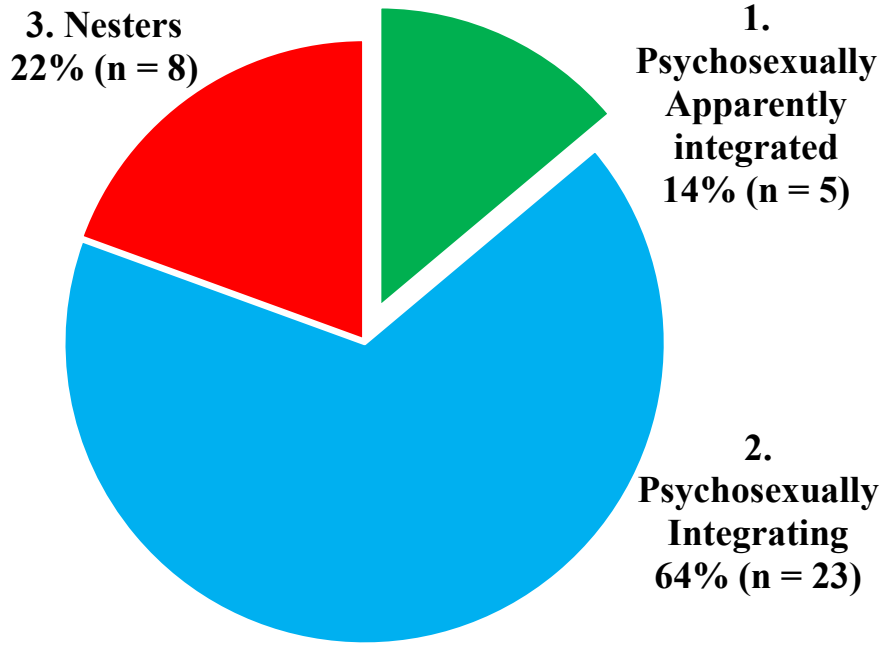


Figure 4. Division into three groups by presence or absence of psychosexual difficulties and the disposition to avail the help for integration

4. Results – cont.

Hypothesis 1: *The seminarians' psychosexual integration is related to healthy psychosexual development and sufficient sexuality education. Seminarians who lacked sufficient sexuality education, showed more psychosexual problems during adolescence and later, than those who had sufficient sexuality education.* The hypothesis was **verified as true**.

- In 81% of families the topic of sexuality was still a taboo in all the cultures. Also, the psychosexual education seemed not attended to in their education. Most of their sexual knowledge was from peer group or social media.
- There was a **strong correlation** between **psychosexual developmental problems** and **current sexual challenges.** The results showed that pornography viewing and masturbation were occurring together in all cultural contexts.
- The seminarians who experienced **CSA** (19%) and **emotional abuse** along with **peer teasing** (37%) are continuing to **struggle with lasting consequences** without addressing the issues in formative encounters. Those with **homosexual** struggles (6%) were sexually abused as minors and are presently struggling with sexual identity issues.
- Those with present **sexual difficulties reported going through emotional distress** due to the moral incongruence. These disturbances were reported as influencing their study, prayer, and relationships.

4. Results – cont.

Hypothesis 2: *The Human formation program (HFP) offered in the seminary helps the seminarians in their psychosexual integration*. The results proved it as **not true**.

- A **majority** 81% of the seminarians **evaluated HF** as **insufficient, not satisfactory** (75%), and **all the formators** confirmed it as the most neglected dimension.
- About 72% of participants expressed that **HFP does not respond to their existential difficulties**. Except for what was learned in academic moral theology studies, there was no **program for psychosexual integration**.
- The **proposals presented by seminarians** **(Figure 5)** suggested what was missing in the seminary formation.

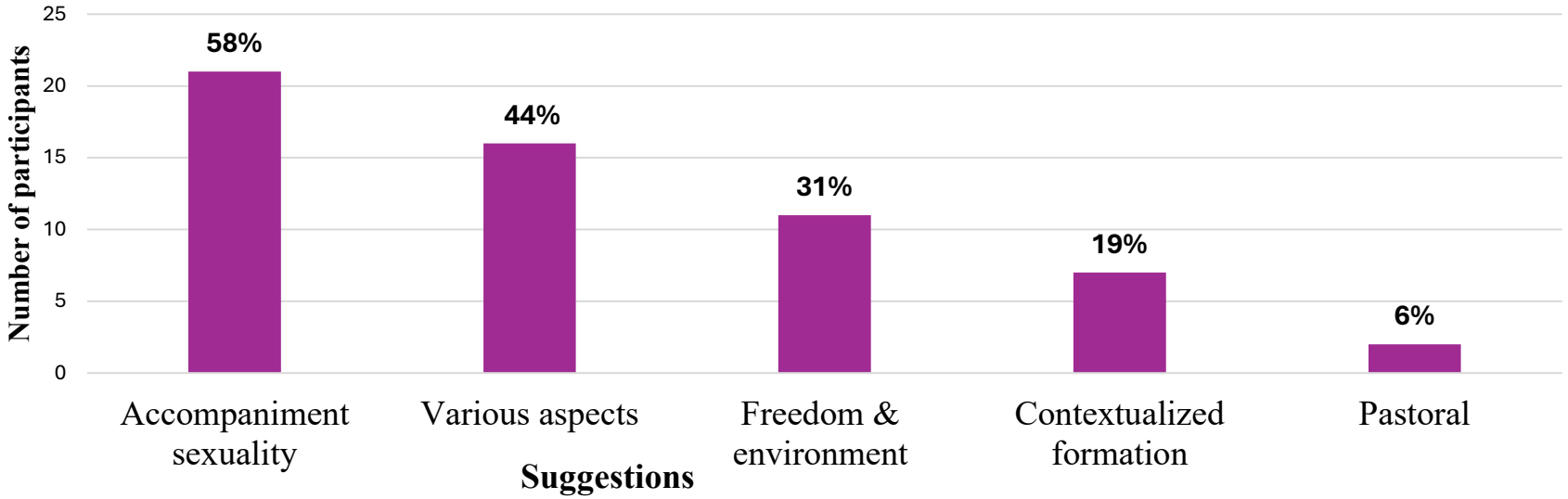


Figure 5. Proposals presented by seminarians

4. Results – cont.

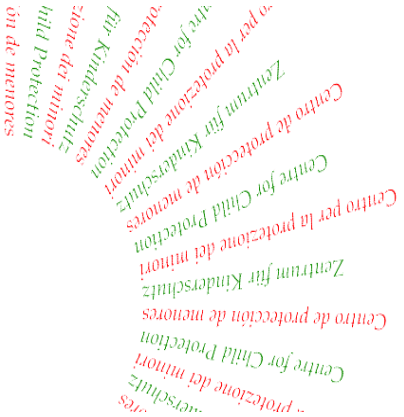
Hypothesis 3: *Those who have a healthy psychosexual maturity perceive priestly celibacy positively and those with psychosexual difficulties are negative about the practice of priestly celibacy.*

- This was **proven as false**, as both - **psychosexually mature and with difficulties, perceived priestly celibacy positively**.
- The results indicated that the seminarians who started to integrate their sexuality also foresaw difficulties in living their priestly celibacy. As presented in Table 2, the **foreseen difficulties and fears** are related to their present difficulties.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics of foreseen priestly celibacy

	N	%	SD
1. Celibacy Difficult	27	75	0.43
a. Fear of falling in love	9	25	0.43
b. Fear of loneliness & internet dependency	8	22	0.42
c. Fear to fall into vulnerabilities	10	28	0.45
d. Fear of media & scandals	3	8	0.28
2. Positive/no difficulties	9	25	0.43



4. Results – cont.

- The results of this study seems to **confirm hypothesis 4:** The seminarians who struggle with SE and IR issues are likely to have problems in living their sexuality well and vice versa.
- In the Interviews, as shown in Figure 6, given **the opportunities for personal accompaniment**, all the participants desired **to work on present difficulties**, more specifically in three areas (IR, Sexuality, & SE).

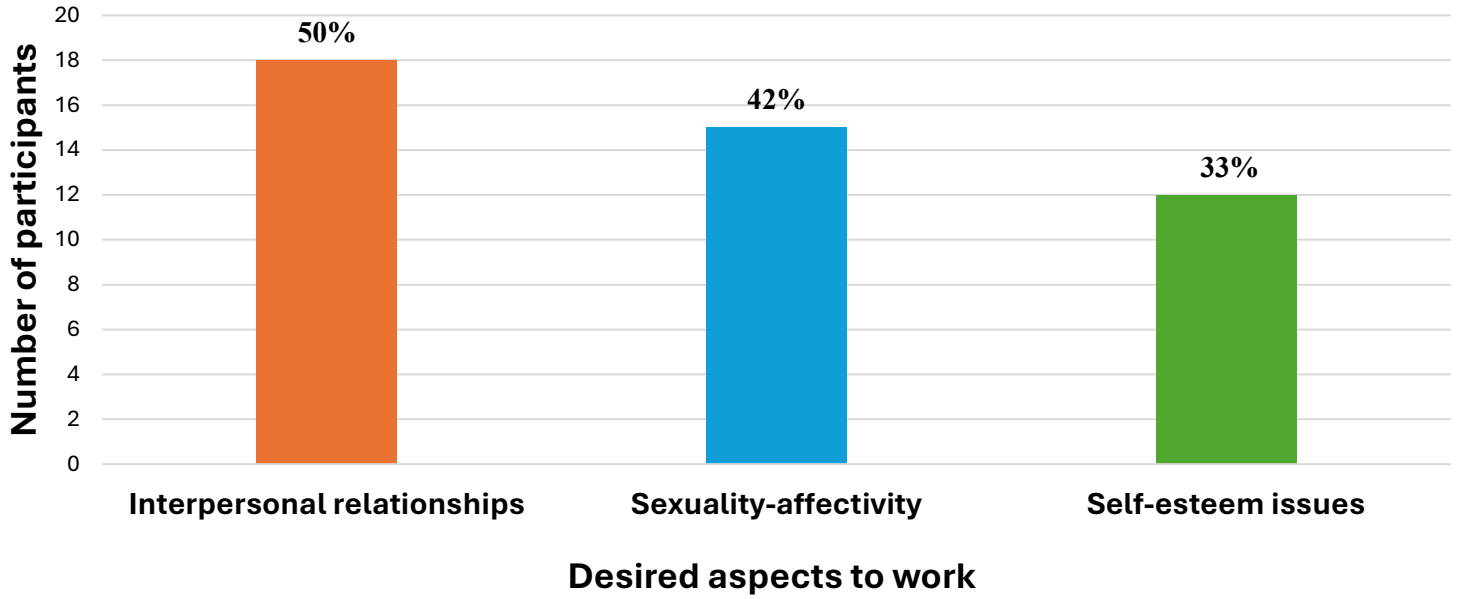
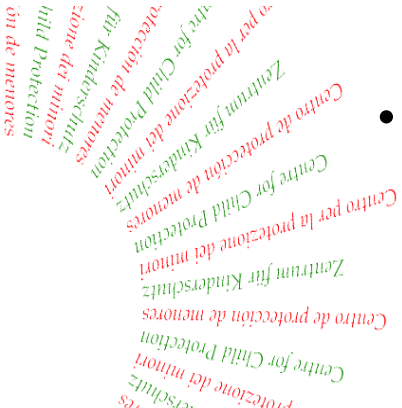


Figure 6. The three aspects that seminarians desire to work on with personal involvement.

4. Results – cont.

Hypothesis 5, *psychosexual weaknesses are present among the candidates who scored less Christian values in the stories of IOF than those who scored higher values*, was proven to be false, as the seminarians who were vocationally mature were not all truly psychosexually integrated.

- There was a **significant difference between seminary groups**, the DSA and DSB groups had a high percentage of vocationally mature (50%) and non-integrated (30%) and less immature (20%). The PIS group had a low percentage of mature (25%) and non-integrated (13%), and a high percentage (63%) of immature.
- The candidates from DSA and DSB from western culture, are more open and working on their issues but those from PIS are more from Asian and African context, less open to deal with their issues with formators.
- Another **interesting result** was, the five (14%) who had not reported psychosexual difficulties in the **interviews** were **vocationally immature in IOF stories**.

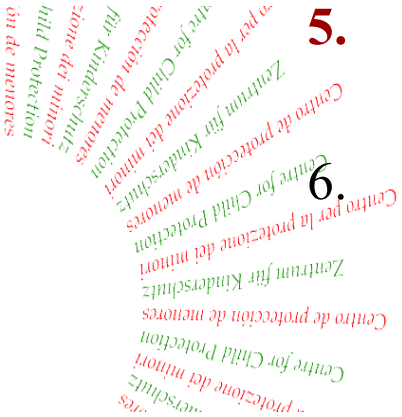


5. Significance of the Research

1. This study **contributes a clearer understanding** of status quo of HF and lack of attention to psychosexual integration in the training to the priesthood in all cultures. Confirming the previous studies (Nnantamu, 2015; O'Dwyer, 2000; Okeke, 2003; Rulla, 1986; Rulla et al., 1989, 1997; Sipe, 1993, 2003, 2007).
2. By **avoiding direct and open discussions about sexuality**, formation houses seem to continue to fail to prepare future priests with solid integration of their priestly identity.
3. By **promoting candidates from one stage to the other** without adequate screening and discernment ends up having priests with secondary motives and not the theocentric love and service.
4. The formation programme **needs to follow the concrete strategies** for prevention and treatment as proposed in GPV (2019).
5. The Insight into the relationship between **CSA and homosexual struggles** need attention.
6. Greater need to pay attention to the **choice** and **preparation of the formators** for this delicate service.
7. Hence, this explorative study exposes the reality of HF, which is "not sufficiently holistic", not conducive for the growth in responsible freedom, and is not adequately attentive to the education and prevention of sexual abuse.

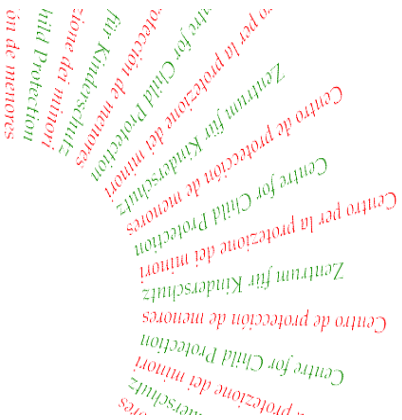
6. Recommendations for further study

1. Future studies should **consider the limitations in this study** with regard to the sample size and representation from across the Church.
2. 9% of the participants have reported **experiences of sexual advancements**, **misconduct, and abuse** from someone outside the seminary, as well as 6% of the participants reported struggling with **homosexual tendencies**, further research is needed on these subjects.
3. The results showed indications of **latent depression** in seminarians (42%), which need a further inquiry to establish its influence on human formation and priesthood.
4. Another recommendation is a **longitudinal study**, which may provide strong causal conclusions and change over time, a more comprehensive understanding of the degree and direction of change over time.
5. **Effective** ways of helping them through a **multidisciplinary methodology** that would attend to the existential problems of the individuals.
6. This study also recommended an understanding of the **socio-cultural influence** in the practice of celibacy among priests.



7. Conclusions

- The **whole process of human formation** carried out in genuine collaborative work is not a mere enlightenment of psyche but it is the **saving work of God himself**
- The role of formators is vital for the life and mission of the Church, hence their ongoing formation to journey at the side of the seminarians is essential.
- However, as the results indicated we need **immediate attention to and change** in the methodology of training to the priesthood.
- To conclude, the **houses of formation** have contributed enormously, sometimes at a great sacrifice, in nurturing the gifts of vocations, however, "Christ summons the Church, as it goes its pilgrim way, to that **continual reformation** of which it always has need, insofar as it is a **human institution here on earth**" (*Unitatis Redintegratio* 6).



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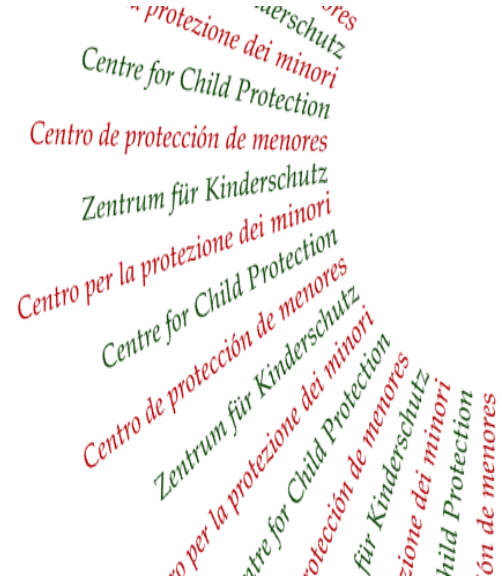

THANK YOU

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