

**THE PROCESS OF SCREENING, SELECTION AND ADMISSION
OF CANDIDATES FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE PRIESTHOOD
(Part 1)**

Sr. Josephine Enenmo, OLA¹

ABSTRACT

Whereas, in certain parts of the world, vocation directors travel up and down all year and are happy to find a few candidates who show interest in exploring religious or priestly life, vocation directors in Nigeria do not seem to have to 'dig too deep' to find candidates. This essay shares the author's years of experience in the formation of candidates especially the process of discernment of vocations and admission into consecrated life in Nigeria. It uses what is now known as the 'Iperu model' to describe a process of interviewing candidates which would be of benefit not only to trained formators and superiors, but also to people coming into the formation ministry for the first time. The author concludes that it is important to put into practice a prudent selection process that will foster both the individual candidate's growth and the good of the Church.

INTRODUCTION

I wish to express my gratitude to the editor of the *Voyage* for inviting me to write this article at this moment of my transition from the Institute for Formators, Du, Plateau State to another mission. This affords me the opportunity to reflect on my experience of formation. I must begin by acknowledging the growth that has taken place in formation ministry in Nigeria. Before the founding of the Institute for Formators, many priests and religious were trained outside the shores of Nigeria for formation. Thanks to the vision of the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious (NCWR), the Institute was founded in 1990 to train formators locally. This has helped religious Institutes in Nigeria to improve on their method of forming candidates especially for religious life. I write this article as a person who has been involved in the various stages of initial formation since 1996. In 1997, Divine Providence placed me in a very vital position to teach some courses in human development to novices in the inter-novitiate programme at the Dominican Priory in Ibadan. I have also been invited to be a member of the interview panel not only of my religious community but also of other religious institutes and societies of

¹ Sister Josephine Enenmo is a religious sister of the Congregation of Our Lady of Apostles (OLA). She was in charge of formation of postulants from 1996 to 1997, and in charge of formation of novices from 1997 to 2005 in her Congregation. She had her postgraduate studies in Theology at Heythrop College, University of London; she is a psychodynamic psychotherapist with an MA in Psychoanalytic Studies, Roehampton University, London. From 2012-2018, she was Director of the Institute for Formators, Du, Plateau State (Nigeria), training priests and sisters for the work of formation. She currently is a team member of the Religious Formation Ministry Programme at Loreto House, Dublin, Ireland, a project of the Association of Leaders of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI).

apostolic life in Nigeria. In recent years, I have been invited to direct workshops alongside other formators on many aspects of formation. Among these are the following: the dynamics of priestly formation; the process of interview and/or evaluation of candidates as well as evaluating formation programmes. My experience during these long years of being involved in formation ministry has immensely helped in my personal growth, for my religious community as well as for the candidates I have come in contact with.

The formation ministry is an enriching ministry. Using the image of a porter or the image of a palm oil miller in our Nigerian context, one realizes that one cannot be a porter or an oil miller without one's hands being soiled by clay or by oil. Consequently, my experience of being a formator for over twenty four years has concretely taught me that being a formator is also being in the process of formation. I have grown in many ways as a result of this ministry. I must admit that candidates have in various ways experienced my strengths and my weaknesses and seen me grow through these. The only way candidates can acquire and internalize the values we propose to them is, if formators model them clearly and consistently. Formators are not super humans and should not pretend to be by any means. Having been involved in the formation of formators for the past seven years and more, I have been further enriched by the sharing of priests and religious on their process of accompanying candidates in their various formation programme. Therefore, this write-up is a combination of ideas from all these multiple experiences.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Nigeria today, like many other African countries, is marked by poverty, religious and ethnic conflicts, violence, insecurity and human trafficking. The environment is ravaged for the sake of cooperate/personal profit, leaving more and more people without job or means of livelihood. Coming along with information and communication technology is the alluring power of internet pornography. There are parents who have abdicated their responsibility of raising their children, outsourcing such responsibility to nannies, and many preachers have taken to prosperity gospel. Integrity and our village norms, including respect and traditional values are fading away. One can go on and on. It is from this environment that God continues to call many young people to follow him in the priestly or religious life, and this gives us a sense that 'all is well with the Church in Nigeria', a sense of vocation boom.

The scenario described above makes it increasingly obligatory to have experienced and well trained formators to accompany candidates. The current context of the situation of life of the candidates for priestly and religious vocations raises some challenges for the Church as well as for religious Institutes and dioceses especially in the area of discernment of vocation and formation. It is important to think carefully about admitting into formation programmes individuals who have unresolved psychological issues hence the need for a carefully thought out selection process. As one welcomes a candidate into a formation programme, it is important to offer him/her a context that will facilitate the integral human development of

his/her personality in view of the priesthood or religious life. It seems important that we begin with the period of aspirancy.

ASPIRANCY

The journey of a religious vocation begins when a person expresses some interest in religious or priestly life. Many authors have described this as a “come and see period” which was Jesus’ invitation to his apostle at their first encounter with him (cf. Jn. 1: 38-39). This desire to come and see was beautifully exemplified in an encounter with a young woman. At the celebration of the feast of Our Lady of Apostles i.e. Saturday before Pentecost, a young woman walked up to the sister sitting beside me and said “Sister, I want to come with you.”

The sister, thinking that she was asking for a ride said “Where do you want us to drop you?”

The young woman responded, “I want to be a sister.”

I listened very attentively to this conversation because I had earlier challenged three sisters of different congregations on their method of accompanying aspirants. From these discussions I discovered that once a candidate indicates interest in religious life, she is rushed into the formation programme with little or no room given for reflection, accompaniment and discernment. The task of vocational discernment is easy to set aside or do poorly, and today there are enormous pressures against doing it well either because there are fewer candidates applying to join us or because of the need for more hands for the apostolate. We seem eager to accept these candidates into the religious life or the priesthood without giving them the necessary assistance to discern, as far as possible the will of God.

An individual begins a vocational journey when s/he expresses some interest in religious or priestly life. In most Congregations/Dioceses, some people are entrusted with the task of accompanying prospective candidates. Their task is to journey with this candidate to enable him or her discover the will of God. No matter the richness of the formation programme we put in place, the kind of persons we select is very important. We are reminded “the harvest is great but the laborers are few. Pray the master of the harvest to send laborers into the harvest” (Lk. 10: 2; Mt. 9: 37-38). Therefore, we should not be in a hurry to admit candidates without spending some time in prayer and without proper accompaniment. Accompaniment of the youth in their search for a vocation is a slow process and the duration varies from one person to the other. The need for patience and respect of the personal journey of the individual is vital.

In most religious institutes and congregations, some people are entrusted with the task of accompanying prospective candidates in the process of discernment. Their task is to journey with the prospective candidates to enable them discover the call of God. But how do we engage in this process? Various methods have been adopted by many congregations. However, there is need to reflect a little more deeply on why we adopt some of the strategies used. We need to question ourselves in order to know for whose benefits these models are adopted – are they adopted for the benefit of the candidate or of the Congregation or of both? To begin this

reflection, three models of aspirancy that has been adopted by some congregations of women religious in Nigeria will be discussed.

First to be considered is a one-year non-residential aspirancy model. Following this model, the prospective candidate is advised to aspire for at least one year before she joins the congregation. During this period, she is encouraged to get to know this particular congregation as well as other congregations, she visits the community frequently, is invited for live-in experience, and when she is ready, she is invited for a final selection interview.

This model gives the candidate the advantage of needed space to explore and then make up her mind whether or not she wishes to become a religious, and then to decide which congregation to join. Its disadvantage, if it can be called a disadvantage, is in the fact that the candidate may find her vocation elsewhere and may not return to the initial congregation.

The second model is one in which the prospective candidate is given employment in one of the apostolates of the congregation. She is provided accommodation (where possible in the convent or in a nearby house), and receives a wage for her work. She is invited to share in some parts of the life of the community, for example, prayer, celebrations, etc. and when she is ready she is invited for an interview. Its advantage is that the candidate gets to know the congregation from a close range and earns her living as she discerns her vocation. Its disadvantage, again if it can be so described, is that she might experience the vulnerability of the sisters and might decide not to join them.

Third model is one of residential aspirancy. The candidate, as soon as she indicates her interest, is invited to the community for a live-in period of at least one month. Then she is told to go back home and to prepare for a three-month experience. During the three months, aspirants are given lectures on religious life, the history of the institute etc., and are involved in the apostolate of the congregation. At the end of the three months the candidates are interviewed and given a prospectus to begin a one-year residential aspirancy. The advantage is that candidates are closely observed and sufficient time is given, hopefully, to discern the choice of religious life on both sides. Its disadvantage is that candidates run the risk of getting too involved in the apostolate – baking, sowing, farming etc. A young woman complained about a congregation thus: “all we do is sew, sew and sew this is not what I want. I have been in the programme for five months and I am not satisfied.” Surely there is more to religious life than the apostolate!

Certain questions come to mind: what is the purpose of this one-year residential period of aspirancy? The fear that if the candidate is allowed to come, see and then go or step back she may not return could be one of the reasons for getting an aspirant to make a commitment to join the congregation so quickly. Yet, this period to come, see and decide if she wants to spend another month or months is an essential aspect of the discernment process. What happens if the candidate does not continue with the congregation after spending the year with the congregation? Would she be considered by other congregations as one who has been admitted into religious life previously? In some cases this aspirant is given a uniform to indicate

that she belongs to a particular group. What about helping her to settle back into the society from which she came?

The Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes state that aspirancy is a time of transition from family life to community life. It is a time in which the candidate is helped to value her previous life experiences and is gradually introduced to the Institute. Candidates should be made to understand that those who are interested in religious life have not already become members of the institute.² Since the modality of growth and response to the call is different from person to person and following the directive quoted above, one could argue that the second model in which the prospective candidate is given employment in one of the apostolates of the congregation but given the space to live separately from the community so as to be free to visit the community when she wants is more profitable for discernment on both sides. This model could be further developed according to the needs of the candidate and/or the congregation. In some cases the period could be extended beyond the one year proposed. For example, the candidate could be given the opportunity to repeat her West African School Certificate Examination (WASCE) or be given further accompaniment/counseling as might be considered necessary as she continues working in the establishment.

Whichever method of aspirancy is adopted, experience has shown that it is very important to visit the candidate in his/her home setting. Meeting the youth where they live and work and also inviting them to spend specific periods in a community must be seen as essential aspects of the period of aspirancy. Usually these would afford an opportunity for mutual acquaintance between the interested youth and the community before envisaging admission into the postulancy. All these occasions must be centered on personal accompaniment, which is an indispensable tool for discernment. Each congregation has her own criteria for discernment. Taking these criteria into account is indispensable for all those who, directly or indirectly, have a role to play in the vocation ministry.

During the period of aspirancy, which can last from a few months to some years, a number of facts need to be ascertained about the individual's life so as to have a sense of who s/he is and to get a sense of his/her vocational call. This is the beginning of the discernment process and it is mutual. You want to help the candidate explore his/her vocation and his/her suitability for your particular way of life and the dynamics that underlie his/her inspiration. In brief, the crucial question has been, is this candidate capable of freely saying yes – to the life s/he wants to live? At some point during the aspirancy, some people or one person has to take responsibility to ascertain whether the candidate is ready to begin the process of formation. The seriousness of this exercise cannot be over-emphasized – the candidate we admit today is the priest/religious of tomorrow. *Renovationis Causam* states that

Most of the difficulties encountered today in the formation of novices are usually due to the fact that when they were admitted they did not have the required maturity. It certainly is not required that a candidate for the religious life be able to

²*Directives on Formation* n 44

assume all of the obligations of the religious life immediately, but he or she should be found capable of doing so progressively.³

The *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes* suggests that “the possibility of making such a judgment justifies the time and means employed in reaching it”⁴ therefore admission should be delayed whenever that seems a better option. In our rush for candidates we sometimes overlook or forget this important aspect.

SELECTION OF CANDIDATES

The growing diversity in the range of candidates coming forward to prepare for priestly/religious life demands a more detailed method of screening to enable proper discernment. To have a clear focus, as a team, there is need to have a clear picture of the kind of candidates we are looking for. How do we identify a candidate that is suitable for the priesthood or for religious life as lived by this congregation? This question, I suppose is at the heart of many formation teams. Yet, a clear, direct answer is rarely, if ever given. Any adequate answer must be based on criteria that are relevant, concrete, realistic, and observable. I guess that most selection teams are looking for indications that candidates are positively choosing the priesthood/religious life and not just expressing the desire to be a priest/religious to avoid the challenges of life out there. Formators are looking for candidates that have the capacity to develop their talents and personality in a healthy manner during their period of formation. That they have the potential to benefit from relatively long period of formation rather than for ready-made candidates for ordination; for candidates who show they can live celibate lives. Though difficult to assess, we are seeking candidates who have reached a certain level of maturity in various aspects of life. This can be ascertained from observing the candidate’s behavior with his/her colleagues and listening to him/her as s/he narrates his/her life story. However, because this area is delicate and important, it is also essential that candidates undergo psychological assessment. This should be done separately from the selection interview.

Unfortunately, the term “psychological assessment” has become a threat to many candidates and formators, and some superiors are accused of using it to threaten candidates during their period of initial formation. One candidate believed she was sent for psychological assessment because she challenged the formator. Another said he was told that the priest who carried out the psychological assessment said he had no vocation and so recommended that he should be sent away. Psychological assessment should not be seen solely in terms of “screening out unsuitable candidates”. It has much to contribute to establishing the most fruitful ways of meeting the candidate’s needs and developing his/her potential. Having worked with some candidates after they received the result of their assessments, I can say that when they are properly prepared for the assessment and when they accept the feedback, they are able to own up their giftedness and begin to work on their weaknesses. In this sense, psychological assessment provides useful

³Cf. *Renovationis Causam*, 4

⁴*Directives on Formation*, 42

information so that the time and resources spent on the formation of a candidate can be more specific and effective.

As we prepare candidates for psychological assessment it is important to explain to the candidate, in clear language, the purpose of psychological assessment to reduce tension as well as enlighten him/her on its benefit for personal growth and vocational discernment. The candidate's consent must be obtained in an explicitly clear manner. It is also important that s/he signs a consent form giving his/her permission for release of information. Those who are to have access to the report should be specified in the form.

THE PROCESS OF INTERVIEWING A CANDIDATE

Use of questionnaire for interview

Many congregations give the candidate a questionnaire to complete before the oral interview. On this form could be found a certain amount of family data – parents, number in the family, brothers/sisters, position in the family, who they live with – health records, studies etc.

Medical test/report

Many Congregations insist that prospective candidates submit a medical report from a hospital of their choice to the vocation director. While this is praise worthy, some candidates have submitted medical reports that have not been found credible. Experience has shown that it is advisable to carry out medical test in a reputable hospital chosen by the Congregation while the candidates are in the community for the final interview. Candidates should be told what medical tests would be carried out and then they should be asked to sign an informed consent form for same – giving permission to the congregation to carry out named tests and receive the report for these. The outcome of the test should be shared with the candidate. In my opinion, although this could be capital intensive, the Congregation should pay for the test.

It is essential that members of the interview team take the needed time before the oral interview, to study the results of the medical test and the responses to the questions so as to ascertain the accuracy of information given.

I would like to discuss briefly four methods of interviewing candidates.

1. A team of six sits round with the candidate in the middle and they interview him/her one after the other. This can be quite intimidating.

2. A candidate goes from one room to the other to be interviewed by three different persons. While this may not be as intimidating as the first method, it may not give the interviewers time to discuss common concerns.

3. A team of three in a single session. This was my experience at the beginning of my formation ministry. I must say that emphasis was laid on gathering

data. The session ended with a final judgment about the suitability of the candidate. While this provided a quick process of interviewing many candidates, the process placed the team under considerable pressure to make a decision about the suitability of candidates and gave little room for further discussion or clarification. The result was not satisfactory.

4. A team of three interviews the candidate in three distinct sessions with each session having a definite focus of discernment. This method is commonly referred to as 'the Iperu model'. I have practiced this model since 1998 and I have found it very useful. Following the first interview, there is the opportunity in the second and third sessions to explore certain points that emerged earlier, and to seek further clarification on facts not sufficiently investigated in the previous session. This greatly enhances the discernment process so as to arrive at a more mature decision. Furthermore, the possibility of meeting the team again gives the candidate the opportunity to gradually get used to the interview. Considering that some congregations have many applicants, this method of interviewing candidates might seem impossible as it will take a long time to meet all the candidates. Perhaps, where the group is large and the interviewing team is large enough, instead of six people sitting together in one setting to interview a candidate, the team could be divided into two to carry out this responsibility with each team of three interviewing the same candidates for the three sessions to achieve the same objectives. Below is my experience of using this method for interview.

First interview

The first interview is usually a brief session lasting between ten and fifteen minutes. To put the candidate at ease, it begins with an introduction of members of the team and a few questions to get the conversation flowing. Confidentiality is assured, and the candidate is asked to briefly say something about the following:

1. Family background—where s/he comes from, occupation of parents, brothers, sisters, stable or moving from place to place. Who has s/he lived with?
2. Religious background—when was s/he baptized, received Holy Communion, confirmation, Church attendance, involvement in church activities etc.
3. Educational background—examination results, how many times before s/he got the present result. For example, it was observed that a candidate, 18 years of age, sat for the secondary school certificate examination in two states. When she was asked why, she gave no convincing reason. The interviewers kept this information in mind as the interview progressed.
4. Life after school—what has s/he been doing since s/he left school? Has s/he held any paid job? What has s/he been doing with the money earned? Are there any lengthy periods unaccounted for?
5. Health—does the candidate have any health problems? What sicknesses has s/he had?

Conclusion and assessment – the candidate is told that s/he will be called again for two more times and that the interview will follow the same heading and format. The interview team discusses general impression of the candidate, and each

member of the panel makes his/her opinion known as regards the suitability or otherwise of the candidate at this point.

Second interview

This is the main interview session and lasts for about an hour. Here, a long interview is better than a short one as this gives the team the opportunity to confirm and build upon findings of the previous session as well as get other fresh details of the candidate. It continues the conversation that began in the first session. The dialogue flows from one aspect of life to the other in the following order:

1. Family background—the candidate's early life, interpersonal relationship with parents and siblings, who in the family s/he was closest to and why. In a few words how would s/he sum up his/her childhood?

2. Educational background — how could s/he describe primary school experience? What happy and sad memories has s/he of those days? Was secondary education in a mixed or single-sex school? What was the happiest or saddest memory of secondary school? Was s/he ever punished? Did s/he change School? If so, why? Was there any involvement with a group (cultism)? Were there friends at school?

The candidate discussed above, who wrote secondary school certificate examination in another state, was again asked about her choice of place for the examination. She insisted that she went to that state because her friend was there. This took a good part of the time for the second interview and, noting that she was not willing to say more, the interview progressed.

3. Occupational/work history—has the candidate shown some ability to commit self? Is s/he reliable? Has s/he the ability to manage relationship, to manage conflict with authority? Is there an awareness of what s/he contributes to conflict? Again the candidate discussed above blamed others for the conflicts that she experienced in life.

4. Relationships—the candidate is encouraged to talk about relationship with both sexes. The candidate should be allowed to freely talk about his/her experiences. How close has the candidate been in relationship with the complementary sex? What did s/he learn from that experience? Has a person of the same sex ever tried to relate with him/her in a sexual way? What does s/he think about celibacy? Would s/he be willing to remain celibate? If yes, what makes her/him think so?

This is a very delicate area and we must not shy away from exploring this aspect of life. Therefore we must thread delicately on this holy ground and not be intrusive asking questions about details that are not relevant. Experience has shown that it is beneficial to talk about sexuality with the candidate during interviews just as we ask questions about family, education, work etc. To buttress this point, I wish to share an experience of meeting a deacon that I was opportune to interview before his admission into the seminary. He said to me, 'Sister, you interviewed me a few years ago'. I was unsure what his next comments would be so I just nodded. He went on to say that because he talked about his experiences and was accepted for

formation he had nothing to hide rather he was able to continue exploring and working through these experiences during accompaniment. He was grateful to have been able to share all before he was given the admission. Even if the candidate is found unsuitable for religious or priestly life, such sharing could be a source of healing for the person concerned if handled properly. Furthermore, certain help could also be offered to the candidate, for example, counseling where necessary.

5. Personality – It is a matter of knowing: who is this person before me for interview? What are his/her strengths and weakness? What big decisions has s/he made so far? How did s/he make them? What was his/her greatest crisis? How did s/he handle it? What does s/he usually do when angry? Has there been any significant trauma or loss? How did s/he react or manage? What does s/he do when s/he does not have to do anything? Is this person able to relax? What does s/he want from life? What things are most important in his/her life?

Team assessment after the second interview – the panel is to ascertain if there is consistency in the candidate's answers, and verify his/her level of understanding as this is more important than any academic performance. It is also a matter of ascertaining how mature the candidate is. How integrated? Each member of the interview team is to take time to discuss their impressions about this candidate, and again, their disposition towards accepting or not accepting him/her? A straw vote is also taken at this point.

Third interview

This session focuses on the spirituality and vocation of the candidate. It lasts between fifteen and twenty minutes. The panel is to tidy up issues that are carried over from the previous session. Having discussed some of the issues that came up during the first and second interviews of the candidate who wrote the examination outside her state, the team decided to help her explore further the issues that came up. She finally admitted to having gone to a "miracle centre", a School where she was assisted during the examination so as to make the required credits. When asked what this meant she remained mute.

How does the candidate pray? Is s/he a member of any Church society? Over the past year that s/he has aspired with you, has s/he got any new understanding or insight about life, about God, about Jesus? If so, can the candidate explain? Has his/her stay with the community helped his/her spiritual life? How?

Regarding vocation, how does s/he know s/he has a vocation to be a religious/priest? Has s/he had a deep conversion experience? Could s/he be confusing this with a call to religious life/priesthood? When did s/he first notice that s/he had a vocation? Has s/he any doubts? When did s/he first hear of this religious community? What influences and attracts him/her to this Congregation? What obstacles/difficulties does s/he see on the way? What would s/he do if s/he is not given admission? Has s/he entered another Congregation/Diocese? Has s/he spent time in any formation house before? If yes, why did s/he leave? (It is necessary to visit that congregation to ask verbally why she left or why she was asked to leave).

Team assessment after the third interview seeks answers to the following questions: does her/his sense of vocation seem genuine or not? Do I sense that this young person desires this way of life above all others, or is it just the only choice at the moment? What alternative does this person have (or would have if his/her situation was different? Are there possibilities to suggest that s/he can grow and mature through formation? This again is followed by some discussions by the team and then a straw vote as regards suitability. The team comes to a final decision as regards whether or not the candidate is considered suitable and makes recommendation to the relevant superiors if s/he is not present at the interview.

At some point in formation ministry or the other we have faced some doubts as regards the suitability of a candidate for acceptance into the formation programme or for progressing to another phase of formation. What do we do at such times? With careful accompaniment and prayer, one could discern, to a certain extent, the will of God. I can recall times when the decision has been, either from the formators or superiors, to 'give him/her a chance'. For some candidates this has proved a spring board for growth while for some others this has proved to be a wrong decision as in most cases the outcome has not been favorable. Some candidates who were 'given a chance' to continue with formation in spite of the doubts experienced by formators/superiors continued life as temporary professed with this doubts accompanying them even nine years after. This has prompted some people to say "when in doubt, send them away". Could one really argue this point to a single conclusion? I do not think so. Since individuals mature at different pace, it is important that close attention be given to the reason for the uncertainty. From the word go, formators should explain to candidates that formation is about discernment. If it becomes necessary to tell a candidate that s/he is not suitable for religious life as lived by this particular congregation, at any stage, this should be done with understanding and compassion. But when it is obvious that, with all good intentions, a particular candidate is found to be unsuitable for the priesthood or the religious life, we should have the courage to take a decision to ask the person, in charity, to search for the will of God elsewhere.

It is important to put into practice judicious selection process that will foster both the individual candidate's growth and the good of the Church. The process of the selection of a candidate for the priesthood or religious life gets carried out all through the initial formation right up to the time of ordination or final profession. First of all, the admission criteria permits one to discern the initial seeds of a vocation and, afterwards, a regular evaluation of the strengths and challenges the future priest or religious has met at each of the stages of formation and how he/she has coped with the challenges. Following the admission of the candidate, there is need to elaborate a type of integral human formation that can allow the candidate, from the point of entry to truly take charge of his/her life and make his/her own God's plan for him/her. There is need to empower the candidate to be responsible for his or her formation. To this end, the candidate must take part in a process of growth and in an on-going self-assessment of his or her stated objectives and those goals of the formation process which foster maturity.