

Journeying Towards Aesthetic Learning through the Integration of the Japanese Philosophy of Wabi-Sabi in the Academic Formation of Seminarians

Elvis P. Ballacay, Jr.

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
epballacay@slu.edu.ph

Nikky S. Garo

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
nsgaro@slu.edu.ph

Geryl John S. Gallardo

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
2245250@slu.edu.ph

Rameces Saul Mancil

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
2245251@slu.edu.ph

Matt Salvador C. Noel

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
2245430@slu.edu.ph

Peter John C. Mortiz

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
2245247@slu.edu.ph

Joel Cuthbert F. Valdez

Saint Louis University, Baguio City
2165258@slu.edu.ph

Abstract

Catholic seminary formation is an intensive process that can be classified into four pillars: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions, all of which aim to shape aspirants to Christ. However, intellectual formation poses major impediments, including heavy academic workloads, difficulties in time management, and constant pressure to maintain high standards of excellence. These struggles often result in anxiety, physical exhaustion, and, in some instances, the decision to leave the seminary. This study addresses this research gap by exploring seminarians' challenges through the lens of an Eastern aesthetic philosophy that celebrates and amplifies imperfection, impermanence, and simplicity - wabi-sabi. Employing a qualitative design and using an unobtrusive strategy, the research analysed seminarians' narratives sourced from available blogs and journal articles online. Additionally, through hermeneutic analysis, the study highlights how seminarians explore the conflict between idealised spiritual expectations and the flawed realities of academic life. The findings show that even if seminarians face hurdles, such as balancing difficult philosophical readings with strict schedules and the hectic pace of seminary life, they still develop resilient coping mechanisms. By integrating wabi-sabi, the study suggests a framework for aesthetic learning wherein seminarians' limitations are seen not as mere hindrances but as meaningful opportunities for personal

development and vocational growth. This approach enables a transition from a traditional view that demands perfection toward acceptance of the aesthetically flawed journey of the priesthood. The research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of seminary formation both for diocesan and religious institutions, conveying that embracing imperfection through aesthetic philosophy allows seminarians to find depth and cherish the beauty of their calling despite the temporal and fragile nature of existence.

Keywords: aesthetic learning, Wabi-Sabi, academic formation, seminarians, philosophy

Introduction

Motivations, challenges, and the path of formation in seminary life

Seminary life is an enriching as well as a unique experience which provides intense formation through study, reflection and spiritual growth. While it demands a religious commitment, rigor in terms of academics, and personal discipline, the life in the seminary provides a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and service (Aligan, 2015). The setting in the seminary integrates essential components such as, study, prayer, and community. The development process for seminary aspirants entails four dimensions namely: human formation, spiritual formation, intellectual formation, and pastoral formation (Carroll, 2022). The core of seminary formation is to form seminarians to become more like Christ; it is a path of unending configuration to Christ (Congregation for the Clergy, 2017). With the prevalence of the new ratio for priestly formation, human formation as a dimension is given more stress, which is a central paradigm of the aspirant's motivation and intention (Porter et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2023). The decision to continue pursuing and responding to the priestly vocation or call is a complex process that demands continuous discernment and prudent reflection on the part of the seminarian (Kelly, 2016; Weiss et al., 2003).

Pope Francis described vocation as "like a divine seed that springs up in the soil of our existence; it opens our hearts to God and to others so that we can share with them the treasure we ourselves have found." For young men to be able to build up the necessity to share in spreading God's word, they must first undergo studies within the seminary, a life with a variety of challenges. One's vocation is vital as it represents one's call, transcending mere career or job (Vatican.va, 2023). Annually, young men begin their preparatory formation at religious formation houses under the Roman Catholic church to journey into the path of priesthood. The Catholic Church also observes the ordination of priests annually. Nonetheless, each year, the Catholic Church also experiences a diminishing number of seminarians who are unable to persevere and persist through their formation journey within the seminary (Hankle, 2010).

As part of seminarians' continuous discernment, they are encouraged to have a clear understanding of their motivations for entering the seminary. Motivation is an essential aspect to be considered in the formation process of seminarians preparing for the priesthood (Manu & Uskono, 2024, p. 2499). In the study of Manu and Uskono, five factors were identified that motivate seminarians to pursue the priesthood: following the Lord and serving His people, fulfilling others' expectations, satisfying personal needs, following the life and good example of others, and developing self-awareness (Manu & Uskono, 2024, pp. 2504–2505). These motivations indicate that entering the seminary involves an interplay of various intentions shaped by personal, social, cultural, and spiritual influences. As seminarians progress in their formation, these motivations are continually challenged and refined through their experiences in the seminary.

Despite their initial motivations, seminarians encounter significant challenges during formation, particularly in their academic life. These difficulties arise from the demands of philosophy, church history, and pastoral responsibilities, alongside external pastoral work such as formation programs and prayer services. The need to balance spiritual activities, community duties, and academic study often disrupts focus and priorities. Furthermore, seminarians face financial burdens from tuition and living costs, as well as personal struggles such as low self-confidence and limited problem-solving skills, which hinder their ability to cope effectively with life's demands (Lim, et. al., 2023).

Understanding the concept of aesthetic learning

Barton et al. (2022), learners acknowledged the importance of aesthetic learning, such as the use of communication in everyday life and future work contexts. Aesthetic learning is often conceptualized as the process by which learners engage with aesthetic experiences to enhance their understanding and creativity. It has gained attention in educational research as both a pedagogical approach and a component of holistic education. Learners argue that aesthetic experience is not merely about appreciating beauty but also about enriching cognitive and affective dimensions of learning (Sarkar et al., 2025). One stream of research emphasizes integrating aesthetic experiences into educational settings to enhance learners' engagement and learning outcomes. Starr (2023) considers that aesthetic experience models human learning by activating complex neural networks that facilitate cognitive flexibility and integrative processing, positioning aesthetic learning and aesthetic experience as contributors to deeper learning processes rather than extraneous add-ons to curriculum content.

Building on these contemporary perspectives, Meyer (2024) situates aesthetic learning within an eco-ontological framework, emphasizing continuity and creativity as central to human growth. As he explains, "Learning, in the most general sense, is this process of realizing or establishing continuity in life situations. All significant growth begins in an encounter with the concrete dynamics of a situation, and through an appreciation of

the aesthetic in which they are continuous as a situation, produces a perspective which preserves the aesthetic integrity of that experience as an experience, thereby enriching it with greater possibilities for further experience and growth" (p. 48). While experience itself is aesthetic in nature, an "aesthetic experience" is an experience in which the aesthetic becomes its focus or purpose. Such experiences are of the sort we typically associate with the arts, but Dewey asserts that aesthetic experience and art are in no way limited to the domain of conventional art forms, nor are they mutually exclusive with conventionally intellectual activities, such as science. It is not science or the intellect that is in opposition to art, but routine and impulse (Dewey, 1929, p. 360), for art, in the most general sense, is "the quest for concretely embodied meaning and value in human existence" (Alexander, 1987, p. 269; Meyer, 2024, pp. 47–48).

The beauty of imperfection: wabi-sabi as a way of life

Wabi-sabi has been regarded as an alternative lifestyle in which minimalism and imperfection are acknowledged as pathways to wellbeing and happiness. This aesthetic philosophy rests on the notion of imperfect beauty (Mukhopadhyay, Panda, & Sinha, 2025). Building on this foundation, the aesthetic principle of wabi-sabi encapsulates imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness. Pilarska (2025) emphasizes that "celebrating the flawed and weathered is not merely an artistic approach but a way of life" (pp. 149–150). Recognizing these qualities can help the audience feel more at peace with their own imperfections and life's uncertainties. Extending beyond art, wabi-sabi functions as an aesthetic-ethical category descending from medieval Japanese culture (Baltrušaitytė, 2023). For instance, the cracked or chipped cups used in tea ceremonies are valued not for their flawlessness but for their history and fragility. These cups serve as reminders of conservation and continuity, embodying reminiscence and easing the present (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025). In this way, wabi-sabi is strongly connected to Zen Buddhism and the tea ceremony, embracing imperfection while welcoming continuous learning and change without striving for a perfect end (Baltrušaitytė, 2023).

From this cultural grounding, the philosophy unfolds into a broader worldview, shaping how imperfection and transience are embraced as sources of wisdom and tranquility. It is often described as the "philosophy of fall," where decline is not negative but a positive dismantling akin to aging. The humble and slow cessation of things embodies preparedness for transience and imperfection (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025). Moreover, wabi-sabi channels meditative understanding of life and death into physical forms such as cracked ceramics and weathered wood, each bearing the marks of time. These artifacts embody the transient beauty of existence, resonating with cultural traditions like seasonal poetry. Pilarska (2025) notes that "wabi-sabi transcends art to become a spiritual practice, reflecting mindful detachment from idealized perfection" (p. 149). This perspective can inspire resilience and acceptance in the audience facing life's inevitable changes.

In contemporary contexts, wabi-sabi also embraces waste, encouraging sustainability in décor, living, and art. This trend toward simplicity has influenced fashion and consumption, leading to a waste-free ideology. Within Japanese tradition, wabi-sabi aligns with minimalism, as "wabi" itself means "poverty"—but poverty by choice, denouncing material cravings to implement the dictum of minimalism (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025, pp. 136–137). Over time, wabi, once associated with loneliness, evolved through Zen monks' ascetic practices into a concept of beautiful imperfection and peaceful simplicity. It came to signify acceptance of reality without despair, echoing the saying "it is what it is" (Baltrušaitytė, 2023, p. 43). Seen from this perspective, wabi-sabi also functions as a technique of anti-fragility, boosting moral resilience against the grief of structural and functional erosion in life (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025, p. 136). Historically, "wabi" and "sabi" were distinct concepts, and interestingly, wabi-sabi lacks a direct translation due to its ambiguity and oral tradition. For centuries, "wabi" and "sabi" existed separately before merging into a single expression (Baltrušaitytė, 2023, p. 43).

Wabi, paradoxically, also means "not belonging to fashionable social circles," signifying detachment from wealth and opinion while sensing something transcendent within oneself (Pilarska, 2025, p. 148). It further indicates understated beauty and rustic simplicity, echoing moral traditions such as ahimsa, asteya, satya, and brahmacharya in Jainism. It is the voice of modesty, training individuals to accept inadequacy (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025, p. 136). In contrast, sabi represents empirical wisdom born of age and experience. It is likened to autumn, when old leaves perish to regenerate, symbolizing acceptance of dissolution to enable creation (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025, p. 136). When taken together, these complementary notions reveal the holistic spirit of wabi-sabi as both an aesthetic and ethical philosophy. Pilarska (2025) elaborates that "wabi roughly means 'the elegant beauty of simplicity,' while sabi means 'the evanescence of time and the impermanence of all things'" (p. 148). Sabi, which initially connoted damage or withering, transformed into a positive notion of beauty and calm brought by age and experience (Baltrušaitytė, 2023, p. 43). Together, they form a philosophy that celebrates imperfection, impermanence, and simplicity as essential dimensions of human existence.

Research gap/objectives

Given these realities, this research seeks to deepen the understanding of seminary formation by examining how seminarians confront and transcend academic struggles through a philosophical-aesthetic approach. Specifically, it investigates how the Japanese aesthetics of *wabi-sabi* may serve as a framework for aesthetic learning, enabling seminarians to reinterpret their challenges as integral and meaningful aspects of intellectual development. While such approaches contribute significantly to seminary education, the role of aesthetic philosophy in fostering human flourishing (particularly in relation to seminarians' intellectual struggles and growth) remains insufficiently explored. This gap underscores a limitation in current studies on seminary formation, which rely

predominantly on Western philosophical frameworks. In contrast, Eastern perspectives such as *wabi-sabi* are largely absent from discussions of seminarians' academic challenges. Furthermore, only a few studies address seminarians' aesthetic learning experiences, even though these experiences could provide a valuable means of deepening their philosophical appreciation of the beauty inherent in their vocation, especially as they navigate human relationships shaped by both the beautiful and the imperfect realities of life.

Hence, this study aims to contribute to a more holistic understanding of seminary formation by integrating philosophical aesthetics with seminarians' personal experiences. By exploring the concept of *wabi-sabi* within the context of seminary life, this study hopes to offer a new perspective that recognizes the beauty and meaning found within the imperfect yet fulfilling journey of the priestly vocation.

Scope and limitations

The scope of this study focuses primarily on the academic formation of seminarians in both diocesan and religious institutions. Although diocesan and religious priesthood differ in terms of mission, formation context, and vows (Lopez, 2013), seminarians in both settings commonly experience similar struggles, particularly in balancing the demands of formation and academic life (Castada et al., 2024). Furthermore, this study is limited to Catholic seminaries, given the existences of various seminary institutions in other Christian denominations. This limitation allows the research to concentrate more specifically on the context of the Catholic Church, which is currently experiencing a significant crisis in religious vocations, particularly regarding priesthood and consecrated life (Kanu & Pilani 2025, p. 2). Through this defined scope and limitation, the study seeks to contribute to addressing this concern within the Catholic Church by examining one of the central dimensions of seminary formation, the academic formation of seminarians, which prepares them for missionary discipleship in proclaiming and defending the Catholic Church.

Methodology

Design

This study employed a qualitative design using an unobtrusive method, as it did not involve numerical values or human participation in the process of data gathering. Instead, it relied on documents containing narratives of seminarians that were available and accessible online, specifically from blogs and journal articles published by reputable sources which perfectly aligned with the unobtrusive quality research methodology (Burles & Bally, 2018). The combined approach allows and invites readers to self-reflect by examining and relating to the shared personal experiences collected as the primary source for research data analysis (Lapadat, 2017) within the seminary context. Drawing from their lived experiences, while integrating the principles of *Wabi-sabi* into academic formation within and beyond the

seminary, can meaningfully transform collective insights and interpret shared experiences through the art of storytelling (Roy & Uekesa, 2020).

Data gathering and analysis

By gathering narratives from the textual sources, the study ensured that seminarians' voices (from the narratives) were preserved in their own words, without any alterations. This approach also allowed for a naturalistic capture of meaning, where the data emerged from seminarians' self-disclosures in online spaces rather than structured interviews or surveys (Ocbena, et al., 2023). Each narrative was examined closely to identify themes of formation, struggle, and transformation, guided by the hermeneutic circle that moves between individual accounts and collective meaning (Lapadat, 2017). The interpretive lens of *Wabi-sabi*—embracing imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness—highlighted how seminarians' struggles and vulnerabilities contribute to holistic formation within and beyond the seminary (Roy & Uekesa, 2020). Finally, storytelling was treated as a collective insight, where seminarians' voices were not isolated but woven into a shared narrative of wisdom, capable of transforming both academic and spiritual formation (Roy & Uekesa, 2020).

Ethical consideration

Following the unobtrusive strategy outlined by Lee (2019) and adopted by Garo et al. (2025), ethical approval was not required, as data were drawn from existing online narratives rather than structured interviews or experiments. This approach enabled a critical examination of published literature and perspectives without formal clearance, while upholding authenticity, honesty, and integrity throughout the process (Babbie, 2010). Artificial intelligence (Microsoft Copilot) was used only for transition and grammar consistency, as well as for literature search support. All outputs generated with AI assistance were thoroughly verified, properly cited, and referenced to maintain transparency, uphold academic rigour, and ensure adherence to scholarly integrity.

Results and Discussion

Navigating academic struggles in seminary life

Seminarians face several difficulties related to intellectual formation, one of which is time management, especially in balancing the demands of the seminary schedule with academic obligations. Seminarians often face difficulties in time management, particularly in balancing the demands of seminary schedules with academic obligations. This struggle is compounded by expectations from formators who assume consistent intellectual

competence, leading to stress and feelings of inadequacy (Binghay, Sibal, & Taja-on, 2024). Pressure from formators, who often assume that seminarians will consistently demonstrate intellectual competence and academic excellence, is also experienced. This pressure may result in feelings of inadequacy or anxiety, particularly in philosophical and theological studies. Gerardo, Villaruel, and Rosales (2025) found that seminarians sometimes discontinue seminary life due to academic pressures, including the expectation to meet intellectual standards set by formators. These pressures contribute to anxiety and disengagement from intellectual pursuits.

Another challenge arises from differences in academic orientation or background, especially among seminarians at the propaedeutic stage. Late-vocation seminarians, entering formation after professional careers, often struggle to adjust to academic responsibilities. Their secular backgrounds may not prepare them for the intellectual rigour of seminary studies, leading to minimal academic engagement or mediocrity (Gerardo, Villaruel, & Rosales, 2025). Seminarians who come from academic tracks in Senior High School such as Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), which do not emphasize the humanities, may experience difficulties transitioning to philosophical studies. As a result, some seminarians struggle to adapt to the analytical and reflective approaches required in philosophy, especially when they enter the discipleship stage or the philosophical level of seminary formation. In some cases, so-called late-vocation seminarians, those who enter the seminary at a later stage in life, also experience difficulty adjusting to academic responsibilities because they often come from secular professional backgrounds. These struggles with academic transition and responsibilities may lead to minimal academic engagement or mediocrity, wherein seminarians perceive themselves as lacking intellectual competence and incapable of meeting academic expectations, which may eventually lead to disengagement from intellectual pursuits.

Furthermore, part of various reasons as to why seminarians might stop in the path as seminarians is that there is a change in personal views or they might no longer feel called which prompts them to depart the clergy or religious life. It is possible that an aspirant cannot study due to mental, physical, and financial problems. Some might leave seminary for violating seminary rules and regulations or due to bad behavior (McDaniel, 2019; Fisher, 2020). These challenges in the academic dimension of seminary life reveal a tension between expectations and reality in seminary formation. Seminarians often enter the seminary with idealized expectations about spiritual life and the priestly vocation; however, imperfections and limitations become evident throughout their formation, particularly in their academic experiences. Thus, seminarians are challenged to recognize the beauty of their formation as they pursue wisdom and knowledge in their academic life, both of which are essential for the priesthood, despite struggles and imperfections. In this context, the philosophical notion of *wabi-sabi* offers a meaningful lens for reflecting on the academic formation of seminarians.

Narratives of struggles and the integration of Wabi-Sabi: An aesthetic learning

The academic formation of seminarians is an integral component of priestly formation. In the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (The Gift of the Priestly Vocation), intellectual formation “is part of the integral formation of the priest” necessary for their pastoral ministry as they understand the Word of God and respond to the needs of the Church and society (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, p.41). However, as seminarians dedicate themselves in the discipleship stage studying philosophy, the inevitability of academic struggles to them are significantly saturated in their seminary formation.

Harmonising academic demands and seminary life through Wabi-Sabi

In the study conducted by Castada et al., (2024) they provided narratives from seminarians who struggle to keep the balance between their formation and academic life. The prominent struggles narrated by seminarians is the difficulty of balancing academic responsibilities with the routinary structure of seminary life which is a common experience from the seminarians. One seminarian from their study expresses the struggle of keeping up with both academic work and other seminary schedules:

“Well, one of my struggles in my formation life is catching up with schedules. Often, I got late in our seminary activities particularly in the morning. It is because, I used to sleep late due to making school assignment/projects or due to preparing for a quiz, such preparation is by reading, memorizing, etc” (Castada et al., 2024).

This narrative shows how a seminarian struggles to experience academic demands in preparing for his assignments and examinations along with his compliance to follow seminary schedules. It implies that as the seminarian gives importance to his academic requirements and obeying seminary schedule, these two priorities can create tension in his formation. With this, seminarians who encounter the same experience a disruption in the rhythm of their seminary life.

One seminarian also emphasizes the difficulty of managing academic workload when heavy philosophical readings are required for them to study:

“I find it difficult to manage my time when it comes to the readings for my philosophy subjects in school. Our professors assign us a lot of reading materials for the entire semester and I struggle to find the time to read and comprehend them all. Additionally, I haven’t been able to adopt an effective study technique” (Castada et al., 2024).

In the face of trials and struggles that seminarians experience in their intellectual life, they also demonstrate various ways of coping mechanisms and strategies to navigate the

demands of academic formation. A common strategy that seminarians apply is to plan for intentional time management and prioritization of duties. This seminarian narrates that:

“In my personal experience, to balance my formation life and academic life, time management and knowing one’s priorities is essential and necessary” (Castada et al., 2024).

The narrative shows how seminarians become aware of their time management and priorities as an effective way to harmonize academic works with spiritual and communal responsibilities. Another seminarian highlighted his approach to balance responsibilities in a structured way:

“Time management, prayer, and self leadership. These are three aspects that serves as my foundation in balancing my formation and academic life” (Castada et al., 2024)

Here, practical skills and spiritual practices are integrated to serve as an essential method for keeping the balance between intellectual life and spiritual formation. Planning ahead of time and organizing responsibilities are effective ways also for seminarians to develop practical strategies in fulfilling academic tasks. One seminarian says:

“There are two ways that I do so that I can balance my academic formation. First, is to do my tasks or assignments ahead of time so that I can avoid pressure and make my task worth it. Second is to list all my responsibilities and to know what task that I should do first , especially those easy ones, so that I can have a lot of time for those difficult task” (Castada et al., 2024).

The narrative shows the proactive ways in which seminarians learn to deal with academic pressures by doing tasks ahead and placing responsibilities based on what they can manage to do one at a time. These are important approaches to maintain the equilibrium of their intellectual life without disregarding equally important tasks.

The narratives of seminarians struggling with academic workload, time management, and intellectual expectations can be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of *wabi-sabi*. As students of philosophy, seminarians are trained to engage with complex philosophical readings and engage in intensive dialogue of ideas that require deep intellectual reflection. This academic rigor can become overwhelming, especially when other facets of seminary responsibilities need to be prioritized such as prayer, community duties, and apostolate or pastoral works. Avdulov (2022) explains that *wabi* is not about immediate perfection but about appreciating the journey, inspiring creativity, and cultivating new ideas (p. 24). In the seminary context, this resonates with seminarians who often feel inadequate when they cannot meet the rigid intellectual standards set by formators. Their struggles, for example, late nights of study, fatigue during lectures, or difficulty transitioning from secular background, can be reframed as part of a formative journey rather than failures. *Wabi* invites

seminarians to see these imperfections as opportunities for growth, where resilience and humility are nurtured over time.

Similarly, *sabi* emphasises the outer form and the appreciation of change, time passing, and natural transformation (Avdulov, 2022, p. 26). This principle reflects the evolving intellectual life of seminarians, where academic competence is not static but develops gradually through discipline and reflection. Just as *sabi* values the weathering of objects, seminarians' experiences of exhaustion, anxiety, and adjustment can be seen as marks of their ongoing intellectual and spiritual maturation. Thus, integrating *wabi-sabi* into aesthetic learning allows seminarians to embrace imperfection and transience as essential dimensions of their intellectual formation. Rather than disengaging from academic pursuits due to pressure, they may learn to appreciate the beauty of their struggles as part of the priestly vocation's unfolding journey.

Exhaustion and equilibrium: Time, imperfection, and aesthetic learning in seminary life

In relation to this experience, seminarians also feel physical exhaustion due to overlapping academic and formation obligations. It affects their attentiveness in class such as this experience from a seminarian:

"My struggle towards my Academic life was I can't listen well with discussions because of lack of sleep. Since we can only study at night during 9pm and sometimes I stopped at 11 or 12. Then, we need to wake up at 5 or earlier so that we can have our bath, or else we go to school unhygienic. With that, during the discussions, I sometimes sleep" (Castada et al., 2024).

This narrative reveals the experience of seminarians sacrificing their rest to fulfill academic requirements while keeping their best to follow seminary schedules. The struggles narrated by seminarians can be reframed through the combined lens of Confucian *xue* and the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi*. Meyer (2024) explains that Confucian learning is not merely the pursuit of moral perfection but an aesthetic practice of "sojourning in the arts of life" (p.44), where growth and meaning emerge from participation in the creative cycles of nature. This resonates with seminarians' experiences of tension between academic duties and seminary schedules, suggesting that their struggles are not failures but part of an aesthetic process of becoming.

The philosophy of *Wabi-sabi* emphasizes embracing imperfection, transience, and incompleteness as integral to aesthetic learning. Pilarska (2025) notes that "celebrating the flawed and weathered is not merely an artistic approach but a way of life" (pp. 149–150). The seminarian who admitted falling asleep in class due to exhaustion embodies this principle: his imperfection is not a negation of intellectual formation but a reminder of human limitation and the beauty of persistence amid struggle. Avdulov (2022) further explains that

wabi inspires creativity and new ideas, appreciating learning as a journey rather than an immediate achievement. This aligns with seminarians who struggle with philosophical readings yet gradually cultivate resilience and reflective depth. Thus, integrating Confucian *xue* and *wabi-sabi* into aesthetic learning allows seminarians to see their academic challenges not as obstacles but as part of a meaningful journey toward wisdom, humility, and priestly vocation.

In similar situations, seminarians experience pressure coming from expectations and the desire for academic excellence, especially those who are constantly keeping their intellectual aptitude. A seminarian narrated this struggle of maintaining high academic performance:

“Maintaining the status as a star honor student. Maintaining the status is really a challenging one because somehow it requires a lot of studies, hardwork, participation, dedication and somehow sleepless nights” (Castada et al., 2024).

The seminarian’s testimony about the exhausting challenge of maintaining high academic performance illustrates the pressure of seminary life, where intellectual aptitude is often equated with vocational worth. Keating (2018) observes that the “frantic pace of seminary life” undermines deeper reflection and integration, leaving seminarians vulnerable to fatigue and anxiety (p. 40). Dewey’s philosophy of aesthetic learning reframes this struggle not as failure but as part of a process of continuity and growth, where meaning emerges through lived tension and adaptation. Learning, for Dewey, is not a static acquisition of knowledge but an aesthetic encounter that culminates in enriched awareness and new possibilities (Meyer, 2024, p. 47).

The Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi* complements this view by embracing imperfection and transience as integral to growth. Pilarska (2025) notes that *wabi-sabi* “transcends art to become a spiritual practice, reflecting mindful detachment from idealized perfection” (p. 149). The seminarian’s sleepless nights and imperfect balance between excellence and well-being mirror the cracked ceramics and weathered wood of *wabi-sabi*: flawed yet meaningful, bearing the marks of time and effort. Baltrušaitytė (2023) explains that *wabi-sabi* signifies acceptance of reality without despair, echoing the saying “it is what it is” (p. 43). In this way, the seminarian’s narrative embodies resilience, showing that intellectual formation is not about flawless mastery but about embracing imperfection as part of the journey. Integrating Dewey’s processual aesthetic learning with *wabi-sabi* allows seminarians to reinterpret academic pressures as opportunities for humility, resilience, and wisdom—qualities essential for priestly vocation.

These testimonies show that the academic formation of seminarians is accompanied also with physical and emotional challenges. For this reason, it is very important to balance the intellectual growth of seminarians with much attention also to their physical, emotional,

and spiritual formation. As part of their commitment to priestly formation, helping to address these issues in the intellectual life of seminarians may inspire their discernment process. The *Ratio* recognizes the relevance of academic formation in the process of discernment of seminarians to their priestly vocation. It states that a seminarian's dedication to academic work is a criterion of vocational growth by giving importance also to the constant monitoring and support of formators and professors in the intellectual development of seminarians (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016, para. 141). Besides, seminary formation should ensure that every academic activity is integrated with the broader involvement of human, spiritual, and pastoral formation of the seminarian.

Thus, the experiences of seminarians narrated above reveal that academic formation in philosophy is accompanied with challenges such as heavy academic workload, time management difficulties, fatigue, and the tension between academic duties and seminary formation. For these reasons, the seminarians are also confronted to face these struggles as they continue to give themselves to formation which despite hardships and imperfections, there are ways that help them overcome these challenges in their academic formation.

Spiritual resilience in navigating academic challenges of seminary formation

In addition to practical approaches, spiritual discipline and practices play a vital role for seminarians to confront academic challenges:

"Trough prayer I can be in a state of peace for a moment, and sometimes I was blessed with a good circumstance without effort such as being forgiven by my formators despite of having multiple lates." (Castada et al., 2024)

Seminarians are not merely students; they are also formed to nurture spiritual life despite the rigor of academic tasks as philosophy students. Cultivating a consistent prayer life provides spiritual stability and emotional resilience that allow them to reflect deeper on their sense of purpose despite academic stress. Another seminarian emphasized also his method in balancing formation and academic life:

"As I strive to balance my formation and academic life, I want to apply a three-step approach that we call the "Three A's"... I just want to apply it as a mechanism for balancing my formation and academic life. These are Awareness, Acceptance, and Appropriate Action." (Castada et al., 2024)

These three-step approaches may serve as intellectual and spiritual principles for seminarians as they cope with the demands of academic tasks accompanied with personal and communal responsibilities. In the *Ratio*, the integration of intellectual and spiritual life aligns closely with the goal of priestly formation that seminarians are called to follow without limiting other possibilities of calling in their vocation. The document highlights that

academic formation should not be limited simply on the transmission of information but seminarians are also formed to develop a deeper capacity to listen to the Word of God and understand the needs of the Church and the world (CC, 2016, para. 117).

The “Three A’s” approach resonates strongly with the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi*. Pilarska (2025) emphasizes that *wabi-sabi* “transcends art to become a spiritual practice, reflecting mindful detachment from idealized perfection” (p. 149). Awareness, acceptance, and appropriate action mirror *wabi-sabi*’s embrace of imperfection and transience: seminarians acknowledge their limitations, accept the inevitability of struggle, and act with resilience. Baltrušaitytė (2023) notes that *wabi-sabi* signifies acceptance of reality without despair, echoing the saying “it is what it is” (p. 43). The cracked ceramics and weathered wood of *wabi-sabi* parallel the seminarians’ imperfect schedules and sleepless nights that embody continuity and growth (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2025, pp. 136–137).

Keating (2018) argues that the ultimate goal of seminary academic formation is not merely limited to the accumulation of knowledge but the cultivation of a love for philosophy and theology. As the author says, “The real test of a successful academic program is not the transfer of massive quantities of data from professor to seminarian, but the transmission of a love for theology and philosophy from professor to student” (Keating, 2018, p. 41). This love for wisdom and faith shapes the future ministry of the seminarian as they pursue priesthood or choose to take another path. Through time management, spiritual practices, personal discipline, and community support, seminarians learn to integrate academic challenges with their seminary formation considering other dimensions of learning in spiritual, pastoral, and human dimensions of development. These coping mechanisms help them overcome academic struggles and at the same time prepare them for the more challenging responsibilities of priestly ministry.

Conclusion

The academic formation of seminarians is best understood not as a pursuit of flawless intellectual mastery but as a dynamic journey of becoming, where imperfection, struggle, and resilience are integral to growth. The narratives of seminarians (whether striving to maintain honor status through sleepless nights, coping with fatigue in lectures, or finding peace through prayer) reveal that intellectual formation is inseparable from spiritual, emotional, and human dimensions. Dewey’s conception of aesthetic learning as process underscores that meaning arises through continuity, adaptation, and the enrichment of lived experience, reminding us that education is not the transfer of data but the cultivation of wisdom through struggle. In parallel, the Japanese philosophy of *wabi-sabi* reframes imperfection and transience as marks of authenticity, teaching that cracks, fatigue, and limitations are not failures but signs of resilience and continuity. Together, aesthetic learning and *wabi-sabi* illuminate that seminary intellectual formation is not about achieving static perfection but about embracing the fragile beauty of becoming, cultivating resilience, and

nurturing wisdom through imperfection. In this way, seminarians are prepared not only for priestly ministry but for a vocation that honours the fullness of human existence, where intellectual, spiritual, and pastoral dimensions converge in the art of living. This vision calls for seminary education to embrace imperfection as formative, ensuring that seminarians learn to dwell meaningfully in the tension between aspiration and limitation, finding beauty in the process itself.

Recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the pressing need to address the academic challenges seminarians encounter in balancing intellectual formation with the demands of seminary life. To strengthen their academic engagement, seminaries should adopt structured interventions that promote effective time management. Workshops on study techniques, prioritisation, and scheduling can help seminarians manage philosophical readings and academic tasks alongside formation responsibilities. Formators and professors should also cultivate a supportive environment that recognises the diversity of seminarians' academic backgrounds. Late-vocation seminarians and those from non-humanities tracks may benefit from bridging programs or preparatory modules in philosophy and theology to ease their transition into rigorous intellectual work. Mentorship systems, where academically adept seminarians guide peers, can foster collaboration and reduce feelings of inadequacy.

Equally important is the integration of holistic formation. Seminary schedules must balance intellectual demands with adequate rest, spiritual practices, and pastoral activities. Flexible adjustments to routines, such as designated study periods, can mitigate fatigue and enhance attentiveness in class. Formators should monitor seminarians' academic progress with sensitivity, avoiding undue pressure while encouraging resilience and growth. Adopting reflective frameworks such as *wabi-sabi* can help seminarians embrace imperfection as part of their intellectual journey. By recognising the beauty in struggle and limitation, seminarians may cultivate humility, perseverance, and deeper wisdom—qualities essential for priestly vocation. Addressing these challenges through practical, supportive, and holistic strategies will not only improve academic formation but also strengthen seminarians' discernment and commitment to their calling.

References

- Alexander, T. M. (1987). *John Dewey's theory of art, experience, and nature: The horizons of feeling*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Aligan, R.E. (2015). *Priestly Formation in the Asian Contexts: Application of the Church's Teachings to the Philippine Church Society*. *Catholic Theology and Thought*, 75: 173-209
- April, K., Bourne, D., & Dharani, B. (2025). Reframing leadership through imperfection: A

- golden repair leadership model for inclusive and authentic leadership in the Global South. *Effective Executive*, 28(2), 34–50.
<https://doi.org/10.71329/EffectiveExecutive/2025.28.2.34-50>
- Avdulov, A. (2022). Understanding Wabi and Sabi in the context of Japanese aesthetics. In *The Asian Conference on Cultural Studies 2022 Proceedings*.
- Babbie, E. (2010). *The practice of social research* (12th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Baltrušaitytė, R. (2023). Perfecting the imperfect: Parallels between the contemporary circus artist's embodiment and the westernized Wabi Sabi concept. *Art History & Criticism*, 19(1), 39–51. <https://doi.org/10.2478/mik-2023-0004>
- Barton, G., & Le, A. H. (2022). A survey of middle years students' perceptions of aesthetic literacies, their importance, and inclusion in curriculum and the workforce. *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, 45, 71–84.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s44020-022-00006-2>
- Binghay, V., Sibal, J., & Taja-on, J. (2024). The lived experiences of seminarians in balancing human, spiritual, academic, and pastoral formation. *Philippine Journal of Formation Studies*, 12(2), 45–62.
- Blake, J. (2024). Aligning teaching philosophy statements with practice: An evidence-based approach using retrospective think-aloud protocols. *Education Sciences*, 14(7), Article 795. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci14070795>
- Blythe, T., & Blythe, T. (2016, January 14). Spiritual direction and the seminarian. *Spiritual Direction with Teresa Blythe*.
<https://teresablythe.net/2016/01/14/spiritual-direction-and-the-seminarian/>
- Bresler, L. (2021). *Aesthetic-based research and learning: The arts in inquiry and pedagogy*. Springer.
- Burles, M. C., & Bally, J. M. G. (2018). Ethical, practical, and methodological considerations for unobtrusive qualitative research about personal narratives shared on the internet. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17, 1–9.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918788203>
- Castada, D. L. L., Sagrado, S. I. D. R., & Paglinawan, J. L. (2024). *Student seminarians' narratives: Balancing formation and academic life*. San Isidro College.
<https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.22487.07844>
- Carroll, M.C. (2022). Kevin's Story: Integrating Seminary Formation. *Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*, 42: 209-216
- Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F., & Hernandez, K.-A. C. (2013). *Collaborative autoethnography*. Routledge.
- Congregation for the Clergy. (2016). *The gift of the priestly vocation: Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
<https://www.clerus.va/content/dam/clerus/documenti/ratio-2026/Ratio-EN-2017-01-03.pdf>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Nielsen Library. <https://adams.marmot.org/Record/.b40623245>

- Dewey, J. (1934). *Art as experience*. New York, NY: Minton, Balch & Company. (Original work published 1929).
- Eisner, E. W. (2020). *The arts and the creation of mind* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press.
- Espartinez, A. S. (2025). Between innovation and tradition: A narrative inquiry of students' and teachers' experiences with ChatGPT in Philippine higher education. *Social Sciences*, 14(6), Article 359. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci14060359>
- Francis. (2023). *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 2023 World Day of Prayer for Vocations: Vocation: Grace and mission*. The Holy See. <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/vocations/documents/20230430-messaggio-60-gm-vocazioni.html>
- Garcia, L., & Ma. (2019). PADAYON SINING: A celebration of the enduring value of the humanities. *Rasa and Wabi-Sabi: Two Eastern aesthetics for everyday living*. <https://www.dlsu.edu.ph/wp-content/uploads/pdf/conferences/arts-congress-proceedings/2019/AA-02.pdf>
- Garo, N.S., Mapalo I, G.L.P., Cancino, S.B., Duco, S.S., Portabes, T.B.C., Pajinag, S.M.P. & Marquez, M.B. (2025). Queer voices in the pedagogical spaces towards inclusivity: Overcoming the binary linguistic standards in education. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 5(3), 247-269. <https://doi.org/10.53378/irsr.353264>
- Garo, N. S., Valeros, M. P. P. M., Galino, M. B., Ponce, A. L. O., Gallardo, G. J. S., & Noel, M. S. C. (2025). Jiddu Krishnamurti's concept of holistic education: Challenging the dominance of world rankings and internationalization in higher education institutions. *International Journal of Educational Management and Development Studies*, 6(4), 163–184. <https://doi.org/10.53378/ijemds.353287>
- Gerardo, C. A., Villaruel, C. L. I., & Rosales, L. S. (2025). Determining factors that cause seminarians not to pursue life in the seminary. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 9(1), 5026–5031. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.9010389>
- Hankle, D. (2010). The psychological processes of discerning the vocation to the Catholic priesthood: A qualitative study. *Pastoral Psychology*, 59, 201–219.
- Ho, B. (2025). Accompanying and discerning the priestly vocation in the context of the Catholic Church. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 5(2), 45–58. <https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2025.25037>
- Hsing Yun. (2006). *The core teachings: Buddhist practice and progress 1* (P.-R. Lee & M.-T. Hsu, Trans.). Hacienda Heights, CA: Buddha's Light Publishing.
- Illeris, K. (2022). *Contemporary theories of learning: Learning theorists in their own words* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Kanu, I.A. & Pilani, M.P. (2025). Vocations Crisis and Management of Religious Vocations in the Light of Genesis 2:5. *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. 11(4), 2-15. https://www.igwebuikeresearchinstitute.org/journal_article.php?paper=775
- Karpouzis, K. (2024). Artificial intelligence in education: Ethical considerations and insights from ancient Greek philosophy. *arXiv*. <https://arxiv.org/abs/2409.15296>

- Keating, J. (2018). Keating, J. (2018). Beyond schooling: Seminaries, integral formation, and the role of academics. In *Seminary academic formation*.
<https://share.google/cVyhy1RNoW7fjsI8O>
- Kizel, A. (Ed.). (2023). *Philosophy with children and teacher education: Global perspectives on critical, creative and caring thinking*. Routledge.
- Lapadat, J. C. (2017). Collaborative autoethnography: Ethical inquiry that makes a difference. *13th International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry*.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1077800417704462>
- Li, F. (2025). Deconstructing Japanese romance films through the lens of Wabi-sabi, Mono no aware, Yūgen, and Kawaii (1990–2010). *CINEJ Cinema Journal*, 13(2), 166–193.
<https://doi.org/10.5195/cinej.2025.679>
- Lim, J. N., Lucmayan, J. A., & Taja-on, E. P. (2023). Challenges of former seminarian students and their coping strategies. *East Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 2(7), 2831–2844. <https://doi.org/10.55927/eajmr.v2i7.4349>
- Lee, R. M. (2019). Unobtrusive methods. In P. Liamputtong (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health social sciences* (pp. 491–507). Singapore: Springer.
- Luo, X. (2024). The learning activity design of aesthetic education in junior high school English reading teaching. *Curriculum and Teaching Methodology*, 7, 181–186.
<https://doi.org/10.23977/curtm.2024.070327>
- Lopez, J. (2013). *The difference between diocesan and religious priests*. Roman Catholic Diocese of Corpus Christi.
<https://diocesec.org/news/the-difference-between-diocesan-and-religious-priests>
- Manu, M., & Uskono, Y. (2024). Exploring seminarians' motivation to pursue priesthood. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, 8(6), 2498–2508.
<https://doi.org/10.47772/ijriss.2024.806190>
- McDaniel, M. (2019). Discerning in, and discerning out: What happens when seminarians leave? *Catholic News Agency*.
<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/41855/discerning-in-anddiscerning-out-what-happens-when-seminarians-leave>
- Meyer, D. S. (2024). The Confucian concept of learning and the aesthetics of human experience: An eco-ontological interpretation. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 31(1), 43–57.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Sage Publications.
- Mukhopadhyay, S., Panda, B. K., & Sinha, M. (2025). Wabi-sabi: A tale of reformation. *Educational Quest*, 16(2), 135
- Ocbena, K. I. V., Eballa, J. D., Ocbena, L. V., & Victoriano, M. A. G. (2023). Spiritual formation: Challenges and coping mechanisms of senior high seminarians in the new normal education. *International Review of Social Sciences Research*, 3(2), 1–15.
<https://doi.org/10.53378/352983>
- Pilarska, J. (2025). The aesthetics of transience in japanese culture: Wabi-sabi, impermanence,

- and the philosophy of décoïncidence. [Estetyka przemijania w kulturze japońskiej: Wabi-Sabi, nietrwałość i filozofia décoïncidence] *Art Inquiry*, 27, 143-166.
doi:<https://doi.org/10.26485/AI/2025/27/8>
- Porter, S. L., Sandage, S. J., Wang, D. C., & Hill, P. C. (2019). Measuring the spiritual, character, and moral formation of seminarians: In search of a meta-theory of spiritual change. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 12(1), 5–24.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1939790918797481>
- Roy, R., & Uekusa, S. (2020). Collaborative autoethnography: “Self-reflection” as a timely alternative research approach during the global pandemic. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 20(4), 383–392. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-06-2020-0054>
- Sarkar, S., Pal, A., & Pramanick, R. (2025). Aesthetic pedagogy as emotional architecture: A conceptual framework for B.Ed. classrooms. *International Journal of Research and Scientific Innovation*, 12(11), 1946–1951.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2025.12110172>
- Starr, G. G. (2023). Aesthetic experience models human learning. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 17, Article 1146083. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2023.1146083>
- Wang, D. C., Reed, A., Greggo, S., Bowersox, L., Drennan, A., Strawn, B., King, P., Porter, S. L., & Hill, P. C. (2023). On the role of seminaries in student formation: An exploratory study with four selected institutions. *Christian Education Journal*. (in press).
- Weiss, R. S., & colleagues. (2003). Guidelines for the use of psychology in the admission and formation of candidates for the priesthood. *Congregation for Catholic Education, Vatican*. Retrieved from
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_co_n_ccatheduc_doc_20080628_orientamenti_en.html?utm_source=copilot.com