

Psychological Problems of Priests and Religious - Risk Factors and Coping Mechanism

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Abstract

Candidates who currently seek admission in seminaries and religious formation houses come with many assets and liabilities. Advertising Commercials and movies that use sex, individualism, and consumerism have warped their understanding of vows, celibacy, and sex. Some formees have already engaged in sexual activity before entering the seminary and struggle with psychological issues. In formation, they understand the importance of the Priesthood and religious life. Still, they undergo lots of emotional and psychological changes to come to terms with their roles and responsibilities in practicality. Therefore, psychological problems of priests and religious and their challenges are presented in this article: relationship conflicts, loneliness, internet addiction, spiritual dryness, suicidal tendencies, and the psychological and scientific techniques needed to meet these challenges are also proposed.

Keywords: Emotional Wellness, Spiritual Maturity, Psychosexual Integration

Introduction

In today's technologically fast-tracking globalizing world, "most people join consecrated life at a very young age, in late adolescence or early adulthood" (Antony, Joan 2021). For a large part of their young life, they exist in a world secluded from the real struggles of life like fending for themselves food, shelter, medicine, personal achievements

and targets to be met, challenges of worldly experiences, of relationships with persons with extremely varied attitudes, cocooned from day-to-day interactions with the opposite gender, lacking many life skills and thus resulting in lacking the experience of the world at large the list can go on. “Some of the adolescents come to consecrated life after experiencing child abuse, addicted to porn, alcoholism, chronic masturbation, and other hidden issues”(Parappully, 2011; Briere, 1996), and which can create psychological problems among consecrated men and women. Some of these issues can be found reported in the media as well. Hence, this article highlights the psychological problems of the Priesthood and religious life, the risk factors, and coping mechanisms.

Priests and nuns have long years of formation before taking perpetual vows or being ordained. They fall into psychological problems even with such training and other spiritual exercises. “Analyzing this problem in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis (Freud, 1976) and Erick Ericson’s developmental theory (Erickson, 1964) can depict their life script, which might include poor family background, negative environmental and inappropriate parental care” (Rossette, 2011). “Therefore, the candidates for the priesthood must be thoroughly screened, especially their personality, cognitive, behavioral and psychosexual maturity traits”(United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2019; The John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004, 2011; Plante & Lackey, 2007).“When they are accepted into the seminary, the formators must play a major role in the making of the formees; helping them with solid spirituality, cognitive-behavioral, psychotherapy, motivational, dialogue, and sex therapies” (Parappully, 2006). If they find in the formative period that the formee is powerless to handle themselves, they need to be counseled to discern more a suitable vocation. When the candidates are not adequately assessed, they will undoubtedly encounter problems in their consecrated lives, deficiently affecting the Church. To diminish this ill effect, the promotion of renewed attentiveness in the selection of vocations for the priests and religious are highly needed. Some modern-day priests and religious women face common psychological problems: 1. Relationship Conflicts. 2. Loneliness 3. Internet Addiction 4. Spiritual Dryness 5. Suicidal Tendency.

Relationship Conflicts

Pannikar (1993), in his Cosmotheandric vision, mentions the triangular relationship of God to Man to Nature. When the relationship is strong in these three aspects, no conflict arises among individuals. When

it deviates, problems will arise. Therefore, relationship plays an essential role in human and priestly life; unfortunately, some priests fail to enjoy the company of their fellow priests. A significant finding of Rossetti's research was that priests lack relationship skills with other priests. As a result, this causes them to burn out in their field, and 42% of priests accept that they fail in relationships (Rossetti, p.120). "Lack of relationship skills causes psychological illness. One of them is Borderline Personality Disorder, which is a pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships and self-image and causes marked impulsivity" (DSM-IV.TR, 2005). Appearing emotionally stable at one moment, the borderline personality can suddenly become intensely angry, depressed, anxious, or questioning identity, goals, and values. Impulsive, unpredictable, and intense verbal outbursts and threats, as well as physical displays of temper or self-damaging acts, including suicide attempts and self-mutilation, are characteristic of this personality.

Loneliness

Psychologist Rook defines loneliness as: "An enduring condition of an emotional state that arises when a person feels estranged from is misunderstood or rejected by, and/or lacks appropriate social partner for the desired activity." Oxford Dictionary defines "loneliness as a feeling of depression resulting from being alone or having no companions."

Similarly, Fitzgibbons (September 1989), in his article *Identifying, Resolving Loneliness in Priestly Life*, mentions

"loneliness as one of the most painful of all human experiences. Driven, consciously or unconsciously, to escape its pain, many priests pursue some type of consolation, emotional high companionship, or warmth. To warm the body, some priests may take drinks and drugs. It might console them temporarily. Other behaviours, which are attempts to rise above loneliness, include chronic masturbation, pornography, heterosexual or homosexual acting out, voyeurism, paedophilia, and a preoccupation with dirty jokes, and sexting."

More compulsive behaviors include compulsive television watching, eating, shopping, exercising, and smoking. "These bad habits raise the level of neuro-chemicals in the brain such as oxytocin, vasopressin, dopamine, norepinephrine, endorphins and serotonin which can lead to chronic addiction" (Wendy & Maltz, 2008; Wilson, 2014).

Subsequently, loneliness can cause Dependent Personality Disorder, a pattern of submissive and clinging behavior related to an excessive need to be taken care of (DSM-IV-TR, 2005). Individuals with dependent personality styles have a pervasive need to cling to more assertive personalities, fearing isolation and being alone. Thus, they hold on to their superiors and peers. If their peers or superiors reject them, they may experience clinical depression and anxiety.

Internet addiction

Pope Pius XII, in his encyclical letter *Prorsus* (1957), the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication *Communio et Progressio*, (1971), underlined that: “The Church sees these media as ‘gifts of God’ which, following His providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for their salvation.” The Church also needs to understand and use the internet as a communication tool to all persons of goodwill. Unfortunately, “misuse of the internet can cause addiction among many religious and clergy and damage their vocation to the priesthood or religious life” (Putnam & Maheu 2000).

Parappully (2006) mentions that “There is an explosion of Internet use, part of which is online pornographic pursuits. Sexually oriented chat rooms draw a large number of Internet users. Seminarians and priests are part of the growing number of online pornography addicts” (Tellis, 2013, p. 37; Putnam & Maheu 2000). And pornography can cause personality disorder in the person. Therefore, religious and priests must use the internet for noble purposes. “Any seminarian involved in sexual acts should be referred for proficient assessment and counseling. Otherwise, he will become an unsuccessful pastor and a sex addict” (Rossetti 2011).

Spiritual Dryness

Spiritual dryness in the Priesthood and religious life has been described as spiritual lethargy, a lack of vibrant spiritual encounters with God, and an absence of spiritual resources, such as spiritual renewal practices and a lack of positive spiritual feelings. Spirituality and Health (2013) magazine published an article that mentioned that 60% of priests experienced spiritual dryness in their life. Similarly, Rossetti (2011) says, “in America among Priests ‘feelings of “spiritual dryness” was experienced occasionally by up to 40%, often or even regularly by up to 13%.” Shockingly, spiritual dryness causes purposelessness, failure

to handle emotions, lack of moral judgment, moral competence, moral identity, feelings of depression, and addiction of various kinds. If this condition prevails among priests and religious people for an extended period, they can leave the priestly and spiritual life.

Suicidal Tendency

There are a few instances of priests and nuns taking their own lives in the middle of their consecrated life. The value of life is less respected in modern society. Some of the data on suicide by priests and religious¹:

1. 19th June 2019- Assam
2. 11th October 2019- Karnataka
3. 7th May 2020- Kerala
4. 20th June 2020- Andhra Pradesh
5. 22nd June 2020- Kerala
6. 1st July 2020- Tamil Nadu
7. 1st December 2021- Punjab

Other than these cited cases, several unreported cases of priests and nuns who committed suicide. The question here is why religious men do, and women commit suicide? It is still an unsolved puzzle, but we can deduce a lack of resilience, self-discipline and weak relationship with God and fellow community members, and a candidate's childhood hurtful memories as factors leading to suicide.

Recommendation

1. "To develop and maintain affective maturity and to live priestly and religious celibacy joyfully and fruitfully, the FABC recommend the following: persevering and regular prayer life, development of deeper self-awareness and appropriate expression of feelings; cultivation of knowledge of sexuality which is appropriate and helps counterbalances over-idealization and idolization of sexualized behavior. They should also be encouraged to seek spiritual guidance and individual counseling, not only when wounds from the past affect current life and ministry. Compassion and commitment to pastoral ministry to others are also a great help for transforming human passion and attractions into the love of Christ. Regular practices of confession, solitude, a meditation on and union with Christ, and filial devotion to Mary are recommended" (Federation of Asian Bishops Conference, 2013).

¹ The names are removed to protect the identity of the priest/religious

2. “The traditional elements of a priest’s spiritual life are essential:
1. Receive the Sacrament of Penance frequently 2. Pray each day privately; consider a daily Holy Hour Pray the Liturgy of the Hours daily 3. Regularly do theological and spiritual reading 4. Take an annual retreat 5. Foster devotion to Mary.

All of these were directly and significantly related to psychological and spiritual well-being. Moreover, several priests wrote on their surveys how important their sacramental ministry was to them, especially the Eucharist. Thus, I would add to that list: deepen one’s love of and connection to the Eucharist” (Rossetti, 2011).

Why are Priests and Religious are prone to fall into Psychological Problems?

Sipe (1995) examines the causes of many psychological and sexual problems of priests and religious struggling to live a celibate life and presents an excellent historical background of those same struggles in the past 2000 years. Subsequently, he provides their psychological problems, dividing them into four categories.

The Genetic Lock. For some sexual offenders, the object of sexual attraction is genetically determined much as their gender (sexual orientation and level of sexual drive) is. Biogenetic factors determine the sexual behavior of these people. Certain people are genetically predisposed to sexual attraction to a particular age group by analogy to mental/intellectual capacity. From the time of their birth, certain persons will never attain “normal” adult intellectual levels of function. “When these priests become sexually active, they might be pedophiles or hebephiles” (Rossette 2019).

The Psychodynamic Lock. Another group of men seems to have unmet childhood needs coupled with early sexual over-stimulation and experiences conspire to lock the person at one level of psychosexual development or make him highly vulnerable to regression to sexual attraction to minors. Psychological factors can be powerful enough to arrest or lock someone into a stage of development or may make persons of a certain age overvalued and over-invested as sexual objects.

The Social/Situational Lock. The third group of men abuse children and women whose predominant lock is social/situational. They fit well into clerical culture. They play by the Church’s rules. Even though they have taken a vow of celibacy, they are not inwardly convinced of this vow.

The Moral Lock. There is also another group of men who sexually abuse minors and others. They coldly, calculatingly, by design involve themselves sexually with minors because they want to; they choose it, not compulsively, indiscriminately, or impulsively. What they do is make a moral choice to sin?

Therapies to Help Cope with Psychological Problems

Psychological, Spiritual, and religious therapies and practices are often associated with healthier living and positive health outcomes. This includes positive health behaviors and practices, enhanced ability to cope with stressors, including many illnesses, and even lower all-cause mortality rates among reasonably healthy Priests and religious. “Spiritual and religious involvement is closely associated with better social, emotional, and mental health, such as lower levels of depression, anxiety, as well as better self-esteem, marital stability and life satisfaction, happiness, and perceived well-being. Importantly, studies are also reporting that psychology, spirituality, and religious engagement relates to positive qualities and personal strengths and character factors, including positive emotions and behaviors, such as forgiveness, hope, and volunteering to serve others” (Plante & Thoresen, 2007). Therefore, to serve the clients, there are different kinds of scientific therapeutic methods, tools, and religious practices as follows:

1. Cognitive behavioral therapy
2. Dialectical behavior therapy
3. Rational emotive therapy
4. Eight-point program of Passage meditation
5. Personal intensive Journal writing method
6. The Ignatian examen Prayer Method
7. Sobriety Plan Method
8. Catholic Mindfulness therapy
9. Psychodynamic Psychotherapy
10. Logotherapy.

Among all methods, a few practical therapeutic methods are explained below.

The Ignatian Examen Prayer Method

The Examen is a 500-year-old end-of-day prayer developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus (better known as the Jesuits). Like many other religious or spiritual practices, such as mindfulness and yoga, “the Examen is suitable as either a spiritually-focused or secular intervention strategy to assist people within clinical psychotherapy practice and elsewhere. Adapting the Examen as a cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy intervention is easy to do and may add another important tool to the toolbox of practicing clinicians interested in thoughtfully integrating spiritually based approaches in

their clinical work with religiously as well as non- religiously minded clients” (Plante 2021).

It is a prayer, not a tabulation of sins; is a God-centered exercise; is a prayer suited to all ages and all walks of life; and is oriented to a process of discernment, discerning the presence of God in daily life. It is recommended to do it at least twice a day for about 15 minutes.

The five steps of Examen Prayer

Thanksgiving. Thank God for all the benefits received during the day. Begin prayer with an attitude of gratitude, being grateful to God who created you and who sustains your life. “It is not happiness that makes us grateful; it is gratefulness that makes us happy.” David Steindl Rast(1984).

Prayer for light. This is a petition for light to appreciate the blessings of God as well as to see one’s failings in the light of faith. Without God’s light, one will not see the subtle deceptions in life.

Review the day. Look at the day and see where God has been active and where the Lifeline leads me. As a God-centered activity, one’s approach will be “where God was during the day and how have been cooperating with or resisting such invitation.” (David, 1984)One can see the shadows in thought-word-deed and interior movements with God’s light. Is there a toxic situation within me? Did I become an agent of reconciliation and peace today? Did I reflect on the character of God in my life and work today? Did I find God in my work, in my neighbor, in the needy? Who was the center of my life today?

Reconcile and Resolve. Accept and own one’s shortcomings, Take responsibility for actions, ask pardon from the Lord for failings, resistances, and lack of generosity. Ask pardon for losing sight of the presence of the Divine during the day, for forgetting ‘great benefits received,’ or for making someone the center of my life.

Hope for the Future. Conclude the examen with a firm resolution to respond to God better, always with His grace. Look towards the future with hope – the hope of finding God in activities and with the hope of responding to the invitation of the Spirit. Conclude with an Our Father or any other appropriate prayer.

Personal Intensive Journal

Progoff (1921-1998) was the godfather of the contemporary journal-writing movement, which has blossomed in the last couple of decades. He says, "Writing in a journal about one's ideas, feelings and experience are almost useful, but an unstructured journal usually just goes around in circles" (Progoff 1992). He suggested "to become a valuable tool of psychological self-care, a journal needs a design that will help a human being answer the question of what his/her life is trying to become" (Progoff 1992). Further, he recommended 12 psychotherapeutic techniques that help get rid of the psychological problems.

Things to Remember Progoff Techniques. Label and date all your journal entries with the month, day, and year. Don't destroy what you write. It might not seem to make much sense today, but next week or next month, or next year it may prove to be very valuable. Your journal can chart your experiences in the medical sense of the word. Cumulative entries can show patterns that may help you understand yourself better or provide suggestions for writing in other journal sections.

Period Log. Begin by writing "It has been a time in which," and describe inner and outer events that come to mind about the most recent period in your life. This helps you place yourself within "the rhythm of time." (Progoff 1992)

To write in the Period Log: 1. Sit in silence, allowing your mind to travel back over this period in your life. Let it take shape within you. You'll probably have about 45 minutes to do this entry if you're writing in a group. 2. Focus more specifically on the contents of this recent period and write about them. Write the memories and facts of your experiences without judgment and censorship. Record the specific contents but not the details of this period. This is an outline picture and an overview of this recent time in your life. Write simply and briefly.

Twilight Imagery Log. Sit quietly, with eyes closed, and let you feel the content of the period just described. Relax and let imagery, impressions, and symbols form in your mind. When you are ready, record them. This gives you an interior perspective on your life.

Stepping stones. List about a dozen key points that have occurred throughout your life. Select meaningful emotional, physical, occupational, and relational milestones. This gives you a sense of continuity and a picture of your life as a whole. Be open to surprises.

Intersections. Roads Taken and Not Taken. Select one steppingstone that marks when you made an important choice (avoid the most recent). Begin by writing “It was a time when,” and record your impressions and recollections. This may help you sort out unresolved issues since “things we regret don’t die - they go underground.”

Life History Log. Read your “intersections” entry and let it stir specific memories – in detail – about that period. This is a place for collecting past experiences without judgment or interpretation.

Daily Log. Think back over the past 24 hours and trace moods, concerns, and thoughts. This is an ongoing record of what is happening to you and a meaningful way to track your awareness. Avoid judging yourself. In the seeing comes the understanding.

Dream Log. Jot down dreams as you recall them – without analysis or interpretation. Dreams often contain valuable information about our life, but awareness takes time to surface.

Dialogue with Persons. Pick someone living or dead of inner importance to your life. Write a statement describing the relationship, then list their life steppingstones. Read the entry and record whatever it stirs in you, beginning with the statement, “As I consider your life, I feel ...” (Progoff, 1999). Write the person’s response and continue the dialogue.

Dialogue with Works. Pick an activity you care about, and write down your thoughts and feelings about your relationship with it. List the steppingstones in the life of this work as if it were a person; speak to it and let it respond. Read over the dialogue and record your reactions. This helps clarify your relationship to work

Dialogue with the Body. List some remembrances of bodily experiences throughout your life, such as times of strength and accomplishment, illness, sensuality, athletics, food, and drug use. Read over the list and write what stirs within you. Let your body speak. This helps you connect with your physical experience, dialogue with the body, a part of the body, a symptom, a condition, a feeling.

Inner Wisdom Dialogue. Pick a person you consider wise, a teacher, counselor, parent, author, spiritual figure. Imagine that person’s presence, speak to them about your concerns and record the discussion. This can lead to significant behavioral and spiritual insights.

Now. The open moment briefly states a vision, prayer, or plan for the next period or stage in your life. This will help you focus on where you are going, sometimes with intense emotional clarity.

Eight-Point Program of Passage Meditation (PM) and Contemporary Challenges

Program of passage meditation was first systematized and taught at the University of California Berkeley during the 1960s by Fulbright scholar Easwaran (1910–99) to support students entering professional life. “Thousands of practitioners of all religious faiths, as well as nonreligious seekers, have used PM throughout the United States and elsewhere to help them deepen their spirituality and manage the stresses of contemporary life with greater clarity and calm. The PM program has been used in college and seminary education, substance abuse recovery, and psychotherapy” (Plante, 2010). Translations of PM instruction materials by independent publishers appear in more than 20 languages in two dozen countries in North and South America, Europe, and Asia. But possibly because the appeal of PM cuts across and transcends the most common categories of religious and sectarian identity, it has only intermittently appeared on lists of popular meditation practices such as Transcendental Meditation, Vipassana, and Zen meditation.

Sobriety Plan Method by strive Organization

The sobriety Plan is introduced by Fraddis, the founder of the striving online mission. His mission is to help people overcome porn and internet addiction; moreover, it is a twenty-one-day program. Fradd (2017) narrates steps to identify healthy behaviors that keep one from living a good and happy life. Subsequently, the author reflects on the Three Circles mentioned below, which can help move towards a healthy and holistic life.

1. Inner Circle (*Setbacks/Falls*). Write in a diary and list the ways you can fall sexually. Examples may include watching porn, masturbation, and adultery so that it could be easy to know the triggers and take preventive methods to cure the problems.
2. Middle Circle (*Unhealthy Behaviours*). It is the second phase; in this step, list the unhealthy behaviors that generally lead you into the inner circle (toward a setback). Examples: 1. Drinking Alcohol 2. Social Media 3. Watching movies late at night.

4. Outer Circle (*Healthy Behaviors*)

Skinner (1965) describes “a reaction sequence that begins when you are in a vulnerable place from that position of vulnerability; there is a pattern of thoughts, subconscious action, and reaction that will inevitably lead the path of addiction.” And outer circle has four layers, in which one needs to carefully examine each layer to heal the inner wounds through positive habits with scientific counseling methods.

1. Spiritual - This circle requires prayer, mindfulness techniques, mantra recitation, and other spiritual methods to evade preoccupied ideas and unholy thoughts.
2. Physical – It requires healthy exercises, a moderate lifestyle, and taking care of one’s body as God’s temple instead of indulging in unhealthy behaviors.
3. Emotional - It requires understanding the unhealthy emotions with maturity and integrates it by engaging in music, gardening, reading books, and spiritual direction.
4. Relational- which requires developing good and qualitative relationships with family, friends, and the community where we live to avoid isolation and loneliness.

Conclusion

“No man should become a priest without a psychological evaluation proving he is suited to a life of chastity,” says Pope Francis” (Zauzmer, 2019); the reason why some of the psycho-social problems among priests and religious exists are due to significant psychological baggage (Rosetti, 2011; Arndt, 1991). As priests, men and women who come from dysfunctional childhoods and have mental health problems, sexual conflicts, and narcissistic traits are more likely to be unhappy. Therefore, screening and formation of candidates can alleviate some of these psycho-social problems (USCCB 2019; The John Jay College of Criminal Justice, 2004-2011; Plante & Lackey, 2007). If a formee feels that he has uncontrollable negative feelings and is fragile to challenge the psychological problem, he should be given spiritual help. The saints of our Church had different unpleasant encounters, but they handled their priestly and religious life following the will of God. Neuroscience teaches about neuroplasticity in our brain- with effort we can change our negative behavior into positive (Huberman, 2021). Amidst all the possible help rendered to the formee to change their behavior, if the

candidate is neglectful and indifferent to the priestly and religious call, he should have the courage to walk out of the priestly life. Unfortunately, many priests feel that they do not have their support. They live alone, with limited or insufficient access to brothers priests to share the load of ministry and have peer support necessary not to feel left alone in emotional isolation. Whenever circumstances demand priests should seek mental and emotional well-being support, they should not feel ashamed to seek help (Rossetti, 2005) to lead their priestly and religious life happily and bring blessings to those they serve.

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