

# Stress and Psycho-social wellbeing among the diocesan Catholic priests in the Arch-diocese of Nairobi, Kenya

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**Abstract:** This article offers an explanatory review of the experience of stress and burnout syndromes in relation to psycho-social wellbeing among Catholic priests, a case study of the Nairobi Arch-diocesan clergy. Given the scarcity of studies in this subject a wider spectrum approach was used, which included quantitative and qualitative mixed methodology. Literature reviews and comparative studies with other professions was carried out. The study was based on Job Demands-Resource Theory. This study employed convergent parallel mixed approach. Study population for this study was 180 diocesan priests. Data was collected using questionnaires and interview guides. Cronbach's Alpha was used to check reliability of Likert scale tools whereby 0.7 was found to be the cut off. Reliability of interview guide was examined through triangulation. Pearson inferential statistics was used for analyzing quantitative data while content analysis and verbatim were used to analyze qualitative data. Data was presented in tables, graphs and through direct quotes. Stress prevalence was found manifest in various ways like; priests are surrounded by a metropolitan society where there are conflicts, anger and violence triggered by high populations in sub-urban/urban challenges amidst economic inflation that is very common. This, and other factors of high competitiveness among the city dwellers are likely catalysts to cause disorder and stress especially to the young priests because they are out to adventure, make a life. Older priests experienced psychological stress more because of many responsibilities, more than the younger priests whose minds are still fresh and vibrant. A young priest's psychological stress is because of personal crises or unrealistic expectations. The results reveal various risk factors: work overload, a socio-cultural setup that distrusts the priests, lacking sufficient support (especially from the Church authorities), excessive demands from families of origin versus vocational needs, among others. However, the study also identified positive protection factors: promoting optimism, an approach-based coping style as well as a collaborative way of resolving conflicts, amenities and physical exercises, having a balanced diet, rest, social support (from parishioners, collaborators, bishops) and leading an active spiritual life. Diocesan support strategies like, further studies, deanery meetings, counselling were suggested as helpful for enhancement of psycho-social wellbeing of clergy. Other support systems include sabbatical leave, retreat, rehabilitation, clergy retirement house, and transfers. Enhancing protective factors and mitigating on the impact of risk factors would do much to improve the clergy's wellbeing. All ethical considerations were strictly adhered to.

## I. Introduction

Stressful circumstances are a common part of daily life for all people. Stress is a natural part of the human experience and a normal physiological response. Stressors have a major influence upon mood, our sense of well-being, behavior, and health. Stress however, has a positive dimension in that it has, throughout history, offered both individuals and cooperate resilience models and enhancement of their capacities. In this respect, therefore, stress helps increase resources and optimize productivity. Stress turns problematic when physiological and psychological processes of activation are sustained over long periods of time, because when this happens, resources wears out, and performance suffers. It is therefore important to distinguish between "positive" stress or "eustress" and "negative" stress or "distress" (de Miguel et al., 2009; López, 2012). The relationship between psycho-social stressors and physical stressors is affected by the nature, number, and persistence of the stressors

as well as by the individual's biological vulnerability (i.e., genetics, environmental factors), psycho-social resources, and learned patterns of coping. It requires multiple-spectral approach in handling mental health; however, psychosocial interventions have proven useful for treating stress-related disorders. One very common form of sustained stress or distress is occupational stress. According to person-environment fit theory, occupational stress occurs as a result of a misfit between the employee's coping capacities and the demands of their job environment. This misfit may in turn be due to the fact that either the person's aptitudes and capabilities do not correspond with those required by their job, or their job fails to satisfy their individual needs or expectations (López, 2012; Luceño et al., 2004). With the scanty research done, clergy seem to be ignored notwithstanding they constitute a high-risk population they serve and interact with. We believe that our research will help shed light to identify ways on addressing clergy psycho-social wellbeing.

## **II. Background of study**

One particular type of stress is related to another, for instance, Psychological, physical and psycho-social/ spiritual stress. While stress is meant to be a normal part of everyday life, it's when an individual's "fight, flight, freeze" response doesn't shut off that health starts being impacted. Difficulties often arise in several key stress areas: psychological, physical, behavioral, and interpersonal life of a human being. This study focuses on psychological stress whereby a priest may experience constant worry because his brain is always on the lookout for danger or start feeling hopeless due to the constant overwhelm.

Every month in the United States, approximately 1500 pastors leave the ministry because of burnout, moral failure, or church conflict and 75% of the clergymen experienced a notable stress-related crisis often (Kayler, 2011). In California, Ehusani (2021) noted that the vow to keep the confessional seal unbroken in whatever circumstance exposed the Catholic Priests to mental well-being. Majority of Catholic Priests in Germany feel that the vow of celibacy is a burden and would not choose celibate life again, while others feel that living in celibacy is helpful to minister more effectively (Baumann, Jacobs & Frick, 2017).

In Brazil, Catholic Priests experience numerous stressors in their pastoral work (Dias, 2019), face countless demands and unrealistic expectations, are under constant scrutiny, and are surrounded by a culture that is increasingly diocesan and apparently less supportive (Dias, 2019). Consequently, priests experienced significant levels of burnout (Dias, 2019). According to Ruffing, Bell and Sandage (2020), religious leaders in Belgium have higher post-traumatic stress disorder than those of the general population. The clergy showed low degrees of well-being, high degrees of burnout, experience work family conflict and little job satisfaction.

A study in Australia revealed that 25% of clergy experienced burnout as a severe or significant problem and 50% were considered at risk of developing burnout (Kaldor and Bullpitt, 2011). Raj and Dean (2005) found that, among Catholic priests in India, 15% were highly exhausted and 12% experienced high depression levels. In Mexico, Vicente-Galindo, López-Herrera, Pedrosa, Suárez-Álvarez, Galindo-Villardón and García-Cueto (2017) found that diocesan priests were exposed to difficult situations in areas such as doubts, inner conflicts, tiredness and anxiety. Multiple stressors affect priests daily including lack of social support, work overload, interpersonal goals and self-esteem problems.

In Ghana, providing counseling, social amenities, moral and financial support to their congregations, communities, and families contribute to work-related stress affecting the clergy's work and family life. The workplace stress among the clergy increases as the clergy role in church increases (Bonsu, 2016). Rossetti and Rhoades (2013) associated priests' psychological well-being in Nigeria with job satisfaction, inner peace, relationship to God, and good friends. For Catholic priests, strong psychological and spiritual support systems was the most important in preventing burnout, especially for those engaged in the demanding positions of caring for others.

## **III. Statement of the Problem**

The religious leaders respond to a calling of self-sacrifice and service as mediators, pastors, administrators, organizational psychologists and counselor cum educators. In all these functions; Priests are expected to provide moral standards with perfection requirements, which mostly affect both their personal

health and work efficiency. Both internationally and locally Clergy undergo psychological distress and burnout from time to time but in varying levels depending on; personal, psychological, vocational, environmental, and pastoral or ecclesial factors. Due to their reverential status of ordination and vows, most of the Clergy hardly share what happens deep in their personal lives. In Kenya, there are many cases of a Priest who out of psychological stress ended up in some form of maladaptive patterns of living. One of the deans in the Arch-diocese of Nairobi, noted that some notable cases like, alcoholism, depressive sicknesses and addiction. He also added that in the year 2020, 4 out of the 14 priests in the deanery, either suffered from depression or depressive related disorders. The affected were either recommended to take spiritual retreats, or taken on transfers, sabbatical/ study leaves, while a few others were recommended for rehab and specialized professional therapy. The media reports of priestly 'poor example in moral standards' among church leaders today. Shortage of priests due to the fact that priesthood is not a career but, a life of self-sacrifice and vocation; makes priests to handle multiple tasks of workload. This results to mental and physical fatigue among other conditions. Others suffer psychological strains due to poor working relationships, family of origin-expectations, burnout related issues resulting in health impairment and poor relations with seniors.

Regardless of the priests' experiences, there was little help from the diocesan leadership and from colleagues. In the international arena, quite a large number of clergy are empowered on self-care, and are trained with professionalism how to assist colleagues, the laity and others people with emotional challenges for general wellbeing; while in Africa, dioceses and specifically in Kenya, a few apply effective wellbeing skills, while most priests majorly apply only spiritual measures in addressing psycho-spiritual and emotional challenges, both for personal and care of others. In Kenya, and especially, within the Arch-diocese of Nairobi, there are hardly related studies. It is with this in mind that the current study endeavors to undertake and bridge the gaps highlighted above. To shed light on the modern and updated insights on clergy emotional health and coping skills for enhancement of their psycho-social wellbeing.

#### **IV. Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by two theories namely;

**The Job Demands-Resource Theory:** (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001). JD-R theory assumes that job strain is a result of the interaction between extensive job demands and limited job resources (Demerouti et al., 2001). This assumption has been confirmed by research that shows job demands are at the foundation of employee problems, whereas job resources facilitate employee motivation (Bakker, Demerouti, DeBoer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Bakker, Demerouti, & Verbeke, 2004). Therefore, if consistent job demands are experienced consistently and the individual lacks the necessary job resources, they will sooner or later cause prolonged job strain and eventually burnout. Similarly, job demands and resources interact to predict important organizational outcomes: job demands are initiators of a health impairment process while job resources are initiators of a motivational process in the work context. Job resources are responsible for strong motivational potential which would support higher levels of work engagement (Bakker, Demerouti, Taris, Schaufeli, & Schreurs, 2003; Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005). Buys and Rothmann (2010) suggest that job demands in the priestly ministry may include the amount of work and the rhythm of work whereas job resources would include the value associated with a certain type of work and any growth opportunities that may be available. If the work or job demands exceed the job resources, priests could experience burnout. On the contrary, if priests have high levels of resources, this promotes work motivation and consequently work engagement. Particular job demands such as the lack of moral and financial support can compromise priests' well-being and lead to burnout. Alternatively, job resources such as support from bishops, religious superiors and congregants can facilitate the well-being of priests and enhance their apostolate efficiency.

**Transactional Theory of Stress and Coping:** The transactional theory of stress and coping was developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1987). They explained coping as "a phenomenon that involves both cognitive and behavioral responses that individuals use in an attempt to manage internal and/or external stressors perceived to exceed their personal resources." Resources can be physical (health, energy), social

(social support one can get from family, friends and social network), psychological (beliefs, self-esteem, perceived control, morale), or material (financial, tools). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed that coping serves two major functions; the regulation of emotions or distresses that come with the stressful situation and management of the problem that is causing the stress by directly changing the elements of the stressful situation (problem-focused coping). According to transactional theory of stress and coping, there are five stages of coping with stress. The first stage is the external or internal stressor perceived by the individual to be emerging either from an external source or from internal bodily sensations. The second stage is where by the individual appraises his or her capacity to deal with the stressor and he/she then decides whether he or she has the resources to cope. In the third stage, stress responses occur which include behavioral, affective, sensory, imaginal, cognitive, interpersonal, and physiological changes. In the fourth stage, individuals appraise the effectiveness of the coping strategies they have used. The fifth stage relates to the continuing process and long-term consequences. This theory was applicable to this study which aims at exploring the coping strategies used by Catholic Priests to cope with variety of emotional imbalances of stress in their life and ministry. This is because coping capacity, for the most part, largely determines where in the five stages the individual finds himself. Thus, if the Clergy is unable to adapt to their challenging experience, they will most likely sink into a dysfunctional level and will be unable to cope or survive the adversity.

## V. Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed convergent parallel mixed approach, specifically quantitative and qualitative designs. The convergent parallel mixed method is a one-phase design in which researchers implement the quantitative (explanatory) and qualitative (phenomenological) methods during the same timeframe and with equal weight.

### Research Area

This research was carried out in the metropolitan Arch-diocese of Nairobi, which covers across two devolved political units of governance, called counties: - the Nairobi County also Kenya's Capital and the neighboring Kiambu County. According to the Nairobi Catholic Arch-diocese website (2021), the Arch-diocese coverage 3,721sq. Km. There are 14 deaneries or zones, with 14 Clergy leaders (deans).

### Research Population

The target population for this study comprised of one hundred and eighty (180) Nairobi Arch-diocese diocesan priests. The study comprised of only priests between the ages of 35 to 70 years to help establish if there are statistical significant differences in psychological distress and age among the clergy. This choice was influenced by the available statistics which indicated that in the Nairobi Arch-diocese, majority of priests were aged 50 years and over.

### Sampling Size and Procedures

The researcher acquired a list of all the diocesan Nairobi Arch-diocesan clergy. The study used a sample size of 124 respondents from the diocesan clergy of the Arch-diocese of Nairobi. The study considered the key informants through census sampling whereby the entire population of deans was purposely taken. Census sampling is effective since all elements of a population are sampled (Lavrakas, 2008). The feedback from the respondents was not as expected as only 116 brought back their responses, making up a response rate of 93.5 percent.

The respondents were sampled using Taro Yamane sampling formula as shown below;

$$n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$$

Where:

n=Number of samples

N= Total population

e= Error tolerance (0.05)

Therefore:

$$124 = \frac{180}{1 + 180(0.05)^2}$$

### Data Collection Instruments

The study used standardized questionnaires to collect quantitative data and interview guide to collect qualitative data. The questionnaire contained both close-ended and open-ended questions. The prevalence of stress was measured using Maslach Burnout Inventory scale (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). The last section of the 5-Lakert scale questionnaire, covered priests' psycho-social wellbeing which was measured using Ryff (1989) Psychological Wellbeing Scale. While the interview guides were designed for the zone leaders-informants (deans). Pilot study comprised of 15 respondents (2 deans, 3 parish priests and 11 assistant priests), in a similar metropolitan environment- Nakuru diocese. Raw data from both qualitative and quantitative tools were analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22 and presented through means, frequencies, percentages and tables. Qualitative data then, was sorted out and categorized into themes and finally presented in a narrative format and direct quotation.

## V. Key Findings

### Response Rate

The study used a sample size of 124 respondents from the diocesan clergy of the Arch-diocese of Nairobi. The researcher managed to reach only 116 respondents. From the 124 self-administered questionnaires distributed to the respondents, 8 questionnaires were returned without being fully filled. The 8 incomplete questionnaires, representing 6.5% of the sample size, were discarded. The researcher remained with 116 questionnaires which represented about 93.5% of the selected respondents as illustrated in table 1.

Table 1:

*Instrument Response Rate*

Respondents	Sample size	Number Collected	Return rate (%)
Priests	124	116	93.5
Deans	14	10	71.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>138</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>Average 82.4</b>

Table 1 shows that the average response rate was 82.4%. This was considered as a good representation of the sample size and therefore good for analysis. A response rate of more than 70% was recommended by Mugenda and Mugenda (2019) as adequate for analysis. The higher response rate was due to researchers' effort in carrying out intensive data collection and creating a good rapport with the respondent.

### Prevalence of Levels of Stress

Table 2:

*Prevalence of Levels of Stress in Percentage*

Prevalence of Stress Levels	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional exhaustion	116	4.00	16.00	9.011	2.931
Depersonalization	116	4.00	19.00	9.413	3.587
Personal accomplishment	116	5.00	20.00	11.023	2.317

According to Maslach Burnout Inventory scale; EE of less than 17= low burn out, 18-29=moderate burnout, and more than 30= high burnout. D less than 5= low burnout, 6-11 moderate, and more than 12 high burnout. PA less than 40 low burnout, 34-39 moderate, and more than 33 high burnout. The findings show low level of emotional exhaustion (m=9.11), moderate depersonalization (m=9.413), and high personal accomplishment (m=11.023). On average, the score for the three measures of burnout was 9.818 which could be interpreted as moderate level of burnout among the priests. This was supported by all deans who commented as follows:

Priests are surrounded by a metropolitan society where there are conflicts, anger and violence triggered by high populations in sub-urban/urban challenges amidst economic inflation that is very common. This, and other factors of high competitiveness among the city dwellers are likely catalysts to cause disorder and stress especially to the young or newly ordained priests because they are out to adventure, make life, and so on, unlike the elderly priests. Older priests experiences psychological stress more because of many responsibilities more than they stress the younger and newly ordained priests whose minds are still fresh and vibrant. A young priest’s psychological stress is because of personal crises or unrealistic expectations (Interview, 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2022)

This implies that although the priests have various responsibilities, they are making efforts to manage them and control emotional exhaustion. The priests may at times become impatient with congregants especially when much is expected of them. They however make efforts to accomplish their goals. The results are contrary to the research of Vukani (2017) which showed that Catholic priests experienced high levels of emotional exhaustion. Muasa, Selvam, and Ndung’u (2021) also found that majority of Catholic religious’ men and women had a moderate emotional exhaustion, moderate depersonalization, and high personal accomplishment.

Table 3:

*Age versus Psychological Stress among Diocesan Priests*

Age		Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment
35-40 years	Mean	9.000	11.285	9.524
	Standard deviation	3.130	2.723	3.572
41-45 years	Mean	8.850	11.500	10.400
	Standard deviation	2.777	2.585	4.005
46-50 years	Mean	8.515	12.153	9.770
	Standard deviation	2.980	1.676	2.166
51 and above	Mean	9.011	10.121	8.606
	Standard deviation	2.931	1.798	3.741

Findings show that priests aged 35-40 years and more than 51 years have higher levels of emotional exhaustion than those aged between 41- 50 years. Priests aged 46-50 years have higher levels of depersonalization while those aged 41-45 years have higher levels of personal accomplishment. Results are in agreement with Rosimar (2019) that younger priests experience higher levels of burnout. Dias (2019) also reported higher levels of burnout among younger than older priests.

Table 4:

*Education Level versus Psychological Stress among Diocesan Priests*

Education level		Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment
Bachelors	Mean	9.333	11.167	9.357
	Standard deviation	3.317	2.556	4.281
Masters	Mean	8.914	11.228	9.714
	Standard deviation	2.418	2.030	2.946
PhD	Mean	9.011	9.700	8.600
	Standard deviation	2.931	1.946	2.366

Findings show that the priests who have attained only a bachelors' degree experience higher stress levels than those who have attained Masters and PhD. Priests who have attained Masters score higher in depersonalization and personal accomplishment than the priests who have attained bachelors and PhD. Findings also indicate that education level determines stress levels amongst priests. Findings differ with Cynthia and Tanya (2021) that social workers with lower education levels experienced lower compassion fatigue than professionals.

Table 5:

*Experience versus Psychological Stress among Diocesan Priests*

Number of years of service		Emotional exhaustion	Depersonalization	Personal accomplishment
1-5 years	Mean	8.909	12.00	8.727
	Standard deviation	3.145	3.256	4.584
6-10 years	Mean	9.631	11.526	10.736
	Standard deviation	2.852	1.896	2.400
Above 11 years	Mean	8.824	10.667	9.105
	Standard deviation	2.940	2.190	3.658

Results show that emotional exhaustion is higher among priests who have been serving for 6-10 years, depersonalization higher in those who have served for 1-5 years and personal accomplishment is higher in priests who have been working for 6-10 years. This implies that stress is low as the priests start the vocation, rises as the years progress but reduces once they have served for more than 10 years. This could be a result of the roles delegated to priests after they serve for more than five years but they get used to the roles as they approach ten years in the service. Findings concur with Jacobson, Rothschild, Mirza and Shapiro (2013) which showed that years of experience and previous experience of depression were related to burnout.

#### Levels of Psycho-social Wellbeing for the Clergy

Table 6:

*Priests' Psycho-social Wellbeing*

Psycho-social Wellbeing	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Autonomy	116	7.00	15.00	11.493	1.648
Positive relations with others	116	9.00	29.00	20.885	3.718
Environmental mastery	116	4.00	14.00	9.896	1.635
Personal growth	116	4.00	15.00	11.908	1.702
Purpose in life	116	3.00	14.00	9.160	1.873

Self-acceptance	116	8.00	28.00	21.046	3.536
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Findings show that the priests score high in self-acceptance (m=21.046) and positive relations with other (m=20.885), moderate in personal growth (m=11.908) and autonomy (11.493). Majority of the priests however scored low on purpose in life (9.160) and environmental mastery (9.896). Findings support Francis et al. (2018) that higher sense of receiving support promoted positive relationships with the clergy and personal growth. Ghoshal and Mehrotra (2017) also highlighted that spiritual wellbeing is concern purpose in life, connecting with others and the divinity.

### **Church Support Systems for Clergy Wellbeing**

Table 7:

#### *Support Offered by the Church*

<b>Support offered by the church</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Sabbatical leave	16	13.8
Retreat	17	14.6
Rehabilitation	11	9.5
Counselling	27	23.3
Deanery meetings	32	27.6
Further studies	38	32.7
Transfers	3	2.6
Clergy retirement house	9	7.7

**N=116**

Findings show that the most dominant support systems offered by the church were; sponsoring the priests for further studies (32.7%), deanery meetings (27.6%), counselling (23.3%). Other support systems include sabbatical leave, retreat, rehabilitation, clergy retirement house, and transfers. Findings are in agreement with Angetile (2021) that key measures used by the church to support stressed clergy include reviewing working conditions to ensure pastors work comfortably, establishing regular seminars and workshops to educate the clergy on how to deal with stressors and conflict reduction in the church.

Table 8:

#### *Effectiveness of the Support Offered by the Church*

<b>Effectiveness of the support offered by the church</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Very Effective	9	7.8
Effective	14	12.0
Fairly Effective	31	26.7
Ineffective	47	40.5
Very Ineffective	15	13.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>116</b>	<b>100</b>

Findings show that majority of the priests (40.5%) perceive the support offered by the church to be fairly ineffective, 26.7% fairly effective, 13% very ineffective, 12% effective, and 7.8% very effective. Findings concurs with Morris and Blanton (2014) who also found out that although majority of the churches were aware of the stresses experienced by their clergy, only a few provided support services to help the clergy manage stress effectively.

**Relationship between Prevalence of Stress and Psycho- social wellbeing**

Table 9:

*Prevalence of Stress and Psycho-social Wellbeing among the Clergy*

		Prevalence	Psycho-social wellbeing
Prevalence of Stress	Pearson	1	-.280**
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.002
	N	116	116
Psycho-social wellbeing	Pearson	-.280**	1
	Correlation		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002	
	N	116	116

The results in table 9 show that a value of 0.002 as the correlation between the variables under study. The findings show that there is weak positive correlation between the prevalence of stress and the psycho-social wellbeing of the participants. The result showing a weak correlation value was in disagreement with the result of a study conducted in Latino America by Rosimar (2019) which showed that approximately one third of priests in Brazil experience moderate to high burnout rates.

**VI. Recommendations**

Curriculum review of in-servicing of trained priests, seek various professionals during retreats and clergy workshops, improved church support to the training of seminarians. Bishops should ensure good and well equipped rehabilitation centers, amended priests behavioral approach towards each other and establish priests' habitable retirement houses, improve on incentives and clergy allowances among others, as factors if put in place, will improve the priests' psycho-social wellbeing. The Bishops should empower priests and facilitate psychotherapy awareness programs to curb emotional- state issues, burnouts and depressive lifestyles, both in the diocesan level and nationally, within the Episcopal Conference of the bishops of Kenya.

Improvement of the initial formation program for the clergy as a remedy for improving interpersonal relations from an early stage of training. Older priests should relationships within their members and create trustworthy rapport for airing out and freely their emotional concerns and other trends for their general wellbeing. The laity should open their scope to understand and journey with their priests both in human and divine realms. The lay Christians should also be empowered by the church authorities to have effective communication with their priests, like advising them in ways can will improve and promote their psycho-social wellbeing rather than critiquing them. The society in general should view priesthood as a God-given calling and priests as human beings, this can be possible through empathized sensitization and awareness on accompanying church ministers as fellow members of the human society.

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