



SUSTAINING PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING AMID LIFE CHALLENGES: EXPERIENCES OF PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT :

Priestly and religious vocations involve a commitment to a life of service, prayer, and dedication to the mission of the Church. Individuals who embrace these vocations often undergo extensive spiritual, human, intellectual, and pastoral formation intended to prepare them for ministry. However, the realities of religious life and pastoral service may expose them to personal, relational, and institutional challenges that can affect their psycho-spiritual well-being. This qualitative study explored how priests and religious understand psycho-spiritual well-being, experience its key dimensions, navigate challenges to sustaining it, and seek to maintain it amid life challenges. Using purposive sampling, eighteen priests and religious from Nigeria responded to semi-structured questions administered electronically through Google Forms between 20 February and 6 March 2025. Participants were assigned codes ranging from P01 to P18 to maintain confidentiality. Data were analyzed using a thematic content approach. The findings indicate that participants understood psycho-spiritual well-being as a dynamic integration of spiritual, psychological, and emotional dimensions. Their accounts reflected five interrelated dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being: connectedness, self-awareness, self-transcendence, meaningfulness, and compassion. Participants described a range of challenges to psycho-spiritual well-being, including interpersonal misunderstandings, spiritual dryness, sexuality-related inner struggles, institutional constraints, and time pressures. They described sustaining their well-being through practices such as deepening their prayer life, engaging in personal reflection and counseling, practicing acceptance and compassion, seeking solitude and rest, and personal discipline. The findings highlight the importance of integrated spiritual, psychological, and emotional support for priests and religious. They point to the need for intentional personal spiritual practices, accessible psycho-spiritual counseling, supportive leadership structures, and formation programs that promote holistic human development. The study contributes to the understanding of psycho-spiritual well-being within the lived realities of priests and religious in Nigeria and offers implications for ongoing formation, pastoral accompaniment, and community life.

Keywords: psycho-spiritual well-being; priests and religious; life challenges; Nigeria; psycho-spiritual counseling.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the psycho-spiritual well-being of priests and religious within the lived realities of ministry and community life. By examining how participants understand psycho-spiritual well-being, the challenges they encounter, and how they seek to sustain it, the study offers insights that are both academically relevant and pastorally meaningful. The findings may help priests and religious better understand the importance of integrating the spiritual, psychological, and emotional dimensions of their lives. They may also provide useful insights for bishops, superiors, formators, and community leaders responsible for the accompaniment, formation, and overall well-being of priests and religious. In addition, psycho-spiritual counselors and pastoral caregivers may draw on the findings when developing supportive interventions that are responsive to the inner struggles, relational realities, and vocational demands experienced by priests and religious. The study also contributes to the literature on psycho-spiritual well-being by bringing forward the voices and lived experiences of priests and religious themselves, particularly within the Nigerian context.

I. BACKGROUND

Priestly and religious vocations are widely understood as sacred callings dedicated to the service of God and humanity. Individuals who embrace these vocations are often expected to embody spiritual and emotional strength and stability while navigating their own personal struggles. Such expectations may create situations in which they continue to care for others while their own spiritual and emotional needs remain insufficiently addressed.

Scholars have increasingly recognized that priests and religious experience various forms of stress and psychological strain related to the demands of ministry. Research has identified pastoral workload, relational conflicts, loneliness, spiritual dryness, and emotional exhaustion among priests and religious, and these pressures may affect personal well-being and pastoral effectiveness (Habimana et al., 2024).

In response to these realities, the concept of psycho-spiritual well-being has gained increasing attention in pastoral care and spiritual psychology. Psycho-spiritual well-being refers to the dynamic integration and harmonious functioning of the spiritual, psychological, emotional, physical, and relational

dimensions of the human person. Five key dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being are connectedness, self-awareness, self-transcendence, meaningfulness, and compassion. This holistic well-being integrates spiritual and psychological well-being within broader cultural and contextual realities, consistent with Egunjobi's (2023) biopsychosociotechno-spiritual model of wellness. The Catholic Church recognizes this integrated approach to formation, as articulated in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which outlines four dimensions of priestly formation: human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral (John Paul II, 1992, §43). Similarly, *Vita Consecrata* emphasizes the importance of holistic formation for consecrated men and women (John Paul II, 1996, §69).

For priests and religious, psycho-spiritual well-being is particularly important because their vocation requires sustained spiritual depth, emotional availability, and relational maturity. Despite these ideals, they may encounter pressures that challenge their well-being. When such struggles remain unresolved, they may experience increased vulnerability in their pastoral and community life. Understanding how they sustain psycho-spiritual well-being within these realities is therefore an important area of inquiry.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent research has examined the well-being of priests and religious in relation to the demands of ministry. Scholars have noted that pastoral ministry often exposes ministers to emotional strain, relational challenges, and spiritual fatigue. Priests and religious frequently carry multiple responsibilities, which can create emotional burdens, particularly when they are confronted with the suffering and struggles of those they serve (Habimana et al., 2024). Meaning and purpose are important considerations in understanding psycho-spiritual well-being. For priests and religious, the experience of vocation may provide a framework through which personal struggles, service, sacrifice, and commitment to a higher calling are interpreted. Frankl (2006) emphasizes the human capacity to discover meaning even in the midst of suffering, suggesting that meaning can serve as an important resource in responding to difficult life experiences. This suggests that identity, meaning, and mission are not peripheral to well-being but central to it.

Psycho-spiritual well-being has been conceptualized as an integrated framework that acknowledges the interconnectedness of spiritual and psychological aspects of life through five dimensions: connectedness, self-awareness, self-transcendence, meaningfulness, and compassion (Egunjobi, 2024). Connectedness refers to a sense of belonging and relationship with God, self, others, and the broader environment. It involves experiencing oneself as part of a larger whole and encompasses relationships across spiritual, social, emotional, technological, and professional domains (Egunjobi, 2024). Kiplagat et al. (2019) highlight the role of supportive communal structures and shared spiritual practices in the well-being of consecrated religious women. Consequently, among priests and consecrated men and women, connectedness is fostered through spiritual practices such as personal prayer, meditation, Eucharistic adoration, participation in the Holy Mass, the sacrament of reconciliation, praying the Rosary, scriptural reflection, spiritual direction, and communal worship. Through these practices, individuals gradually achieve self-awareness, recognizing their strengths as well as the areas of their lives that need healing or improvement.

Thus, self-awareness is another important dimension of psycho-spiritual well-being. It involves seeing oneself clearly, including awareness of one's internal experiences and the effects of one's behaviour on others (London et al., 2023). Scazzero (2006) argues that authentic spiritual maturity requires emotional awareness and honesty about one's inner life. Practices such as silence, reflection, and journaling may help individuals recognize patterns of thought and emotion that influence behaviour and relationships. As such, self-awareness enables individuals to accept themselves more honestly. From self-awareness, they begin to understand others more deeply from their own perspectives and life experiences. Such understanding leads to self-transcendence, whereby one rises beyond mere human impulses such as excessive complaints, resentment, or self-centeredness in relating with others. Therefore, from self-awareness flows self-transcendence that refers to the ability to rise above personal needs and interests in pursuit of higher values or purposes (Frankl, 2006). As self-transcendence deepens, individuals begin to find meaning in their experiences, including suffering, relationships, and daily responsibilities. Consequently, meaningfulness involves discovering purpose and significance in life experiences, especially in times of difficulty; Frankl (2006) emphasizes that human beings are capable of discovering meaning even in the midst of suffering. Thus, meaning-making is a human endeavour which involves a process of composing a sense of pattern, order, connection and significance among things (Udechukwu, 2023). Therefore, for priests and consecrated men and women, meaningfulness is achieved through connectedness to Jesus Christ, the definitive key to discover the meaning of life and of history (E. Alberich – J. Vallabharaj, 2004). Indeed, every person prompted by the disquiet within his/her heart, by way of the sincere search for the meaning of his existence, is able to understand himself or herself fully in Christ. In getting to know him, he or she discovers that he or she is walking along paths of truth (Udechukwu, 2023). As such, this capacity for meaning-making is expressed through service, sacrifice, and dedication to a higher calling. The ability to discover meaning in life experiences, then, gives rise to compassion, not only toward others but also toward oneself, expressed in a more selfless, patient, and loving manner. Consequently, compassion involves an affective response to suffering that is oriented toward care, protection, and the alleviation of suffering (Goetz et al., 2010).

Therefore, various approaches have been proposed to support the psycho-spiritual well-being of priests and religious. These include spiritual disciplines such as prayer, meditation, and Scripture reading (Scazzero, 2006), meaning-centered approaches emphasizing purpose and resilience (Wong, 2010), and psycho-spiritual counseling interventions integrating psychological and spiritual perspectives (Egunjobi, 2019). Despite these contributions, relatively few studies have explored how priests and religious themselves experience and sustain psycho-spiritual well-being within specific cultural contexts. This study addresses this gap by examining how priests and religious understand and sustain their psycho-spiritual well-being amid life challenges.

Research Objectives:

- i. To explore priests' and religious' understanding of the concept of psycho-spiritual well-being.
- ii. To examine the key dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being and how they are experienced by priests and religious.
- iii. To identify the challenges priests and religious face in sustaining their psycho-spiritual well-being.
- iv. To explore the strategies used to sustain psycho-spiritual well-being amid life challenges.

III. METHODOLOGY

Research Design: This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to explore how priests and religious understand and experience psycho-spiritual well-being amid life challenges. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to capture participants' perspectives, experiences, and meanings in relation to psycho-spiritual well-being.

Participants and Sampling: Purposive sampling was used to select 18 participants from across Nigeria who could provide relevant insights into psycho-spiritual well-being. The participants comprised seven Catholic priests and eleven religious men and women, with an equal number of males and females, who were engaged in various pastoral and ministerial roles.

Data Collection: Data were collected through semi-structured questions administered electronically using Google Forms between 20 February and 6 March 2025. Participants provided written responses to the questions, which allowed them to describe their understanding and experiences of psycho-spiritual well-being in their own words. Responses were collected and organized through Google Forms.

Data Analysis: The collected responses were analyzed using a thematic content approach. The responses were reviewed systematically to identify recurring patterns, meanings, and issues relevant to the research objectives. Related responses were organized into themes, and selected participant statements were used as illustrative excerpts to support the findings. Participant codes (P01–P18) were used throughout the presentation of the findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study: Trustworthiness was supported through systematic review and thematic organization of participants' responses in relation to the research objectives. The use of participant codes helped maintain confidentiality, while selected participant excerpts helped preserve participants' perspectives in presenting the findings.

Ethical considerations: Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and provided their responses voluntarily through the electronic questionnaire. No identifying information was used in reporting the findings, and participant codes (P01–P18) were used to protect confidentiality. The researcher retained the responses securely and used them solely for the purposes of the study.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Table 1

Age Distribution of Participants

Age Group	Frequency	%
20 – 30 years	2	11.1
31 – 40 years	8	44.4
41 – 50 years	5	27.8
51 – 60 years	3	16.7
Total	18	100

Table 1 presents the age distribution of participants, ranging from 20 to 60 years. The largest proportion of participants was aged 31–40 years (44.4%), followed by those aged 41–50 years (27.8%). The sample therefore included participants across a range of age groups.

Table 2

Gender Distribution of Participants

Gender	Frequency	%
Male	9	50
Female	9	50
Total	18	100

The sample included equal numbers of male and female participants, allowing the findings to reflect perspectives from both men and women in the study.

Table 3

Religious Status of Participants

Religious Status	Frequency	%
Priests	7	38.9
Religious Men and Women	11	61.1
Total	18	100

Table 3 highlights the religious status of participants, which included both ordained priests and religious men and women. This diversity reflects a variety of vocational commitments; hence, it offers a broad perspective on psycho-spiritual well-being shaped by the distinct yet interconnected realities of consecrated and priestly ministry.

Table 4

Years of Service in Ministry

Years of Service	Frequency	%
0 – 10 years	10	55.6
11 – 20 years	4	22.2
21 – 30 years	3	16.7

31 – 40 years	1	5.6
Total	18	100

The distribution included participants at different years of ministry experience, ranging from relatively short to long years of service.

Table 5

Apostolate and Ministry Roles

Ministry Role	Description/Examples
Parish Ministry	Parish priest, pastoral work
Education	Teaching, dean, head of department
Formation	Formator, novice mistress, spiritual director
Support Roles	Sacristan, receptionist, personal assistant
Specialized Ministries	Psychospiritual therapy, charity, Marian apostolate
Students	Medical sciences, theology

Table 5 shows the wide range of apostolate and ministry roles represented among the participants, including parish ministry, education, formation, support roles, specialized ministries, and student responsibilities. This variety reflects the breadth of ministerial engagement and the diverse contexts in which participants exercise their vocation.

The data obtained from the 18 participants were reviewed in relation to the four research objectives of the study. Participants' written responses were examined to identify recurring ideas, meanings, experiences, challenges, and strategies relating to psycho-spiritual well-being. The responses were then organized into thematic categories that reflected the participants' understanding and lived experiences of psycho-spiritual well-being. The participants were assigned codes, P01 to P18, which were used throughout the study to maintain confidentiality and organize data.

The analysis and discussion are organized around five interconnected themes: (1) psycho-spiritual well-being as integrated wholeness; (2) practices through which psycho-spiritual well-being is experienced and nurtured; (3) challenges to sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being; (4) strategies for navigating life challenges; and (5) relational and supportive resources for psycho-spiritual well-being. Each theme is discussed in relation to the participants' responses and, where appropriate, connected with relevant literature and the conceptual framework of the study. The five dimensions served as the conceptual framework for interpreting participants' accounts, while the themes emerged from the content of their responses and were not treated as direct equivalents of the five dimensions.

Theme 1: Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being as Integrated Wholeness

Participants understood psycho-spiritual well-being as a holistic and dynamic integration of the spiritual, psychological, emotional, relational, and, in some cases, physical dimensions of the human person. Rather than viewing well-being as merely the absence of difficulties, participants described it as a state and process of harmony, inner balance, healing, and growth rooted in relationship with God, self, others, and the broader environment.

A dominant idea across participants' responses was the integration of spirit, mind, and emotions. P01 defined psycho-spiritual well-being as: "A state of holistic wellness that integrates the spiritual, psychological, and emotional aspects of an individual's being." Similarly, P03 described it as: "A deep connection between the mind, emotions, and spirit, helping individuals find meaning, inner peace, and emotional balance."

Other participants emphasized inner harmony and balance. P02 understood psycho-spiritual well-being as: "A state of inner harmony where psychological and spiritual aspects are balanced." Likewise, P11 described it as: "How balanced, mature, and formed the operation of my mindset is in connection with my spiritual life." Participants also highlighted the relational nature of psycho-spiritual well-being.

Several respondents described it in terms of connectedness with God, self, others, and nature. P04 referred to it as: "A satisfactory feeling of being at home with oneself, with God and with the person's neighbour." Similarly, P14 defined it as: "The health of mind, soul and body in relation to God, self, people and nature." For P08, psycho-spiritual well-being involves: "The ability to relate well with ourselves and others."

The notion of healing, wholeness, and purposeful living also emerged strongly. P05 stated that psycho-spiritual well-being: "Helps the person achieve total healing and peacefulness." P09 associated it with: "The goal of wholeness," while P17 briefly expressed it as: "Holiness through wholeness."

Self-awareness was another recurring element in participants' understanding. P06 described psycho-spiritual well-being as: "Knowing myself, my emotions and my passions both mentally, physically and spiritually." Similarly, P16 emphasized: "Understanding myself better and knowing my strengths and weaknesses."

Some participants employed symbolic language to express this integration. P15 referred to psycho-spiritual well-being as: "The marriage of psychological and spiritual aspects of the human person."

Overall, participants understood psycho-spiritual well-being as an integrated and relational reality which is characterized by balance, inner peace, healing, self-knowledge, meaningful relationships, and harmony with God, self, others, and the broader environment. The recurring expressions of *wholeness*, *inner peace*, *healing*, *balance*, and *relationship* suggest that psycho-spiritual well-being is perceived not as a static condition, but as an ongoing journey toward deeper integration and authentic living.

While participants understood psycho-spiritual well-being as an integrated experience of wholeness, they also described specific dimensions through which this integration is lived and sustained. Their responses reflected five interrelated dimensions: connectedness, self-awareness, self-transcendence, meaningfulness, and compassion.

Theme 2: Practices Through Which Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being Is Experienced and Nurtured

Participants' responses showed that psycho-spiritual well-being was not understood merely as an internal state but as something that is continually nurtured through concrete spiritual, reflective, relational, and personal practices. Their accounts revealed that the five dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being—connectedness, self-awareness, self-transcendence, meaningfulness, and compassion—were expressed through everyday practices that helped them remain connected with God, understand themselves, relate positively with others, and find meaning in their vocation and ministry.

Spiritual practices and connectedness

Prayer emerged as one of the most consistent practices through which participants sustained their psycho-spiritual well-being. Participants referred to prayer, meditation, contemplation, Scripture reading, the Eucharist, confession, silence, and other forms of spiritual practice as ways of deepening their relationship with God. P02, for example, described prayer as “a heart-to-heart with God,” while also identifying silence, the Eucharist, confession, reflection, and gratitude as practices that supported her spiritual life. P18 identified prayer as the practice through which psycho-spiritual well-being was nurtured. For some participants, spiritual practices also provided a means of interpreting personal experiences and difficulties in the light of faith. P13 described contemplative prayer as a practice through which one “sees God in everything.” P03 similarly emphasized Bible reading, meditation, and contemplation, noting the importance of giving time to God. These responses suggest that connectedness with God was experienced not only through formal religious activities but also through an intentional orientation of everyday life toward God. As P01 explained, “The fruit of my communion/connectedness with God leads me to fruitful connections with others.”

This account illustrates how participants understood their relationship with God as influencing their relationships with others.

Reflection and self-awareness

Self-awareness was also nurtured through practices of reflection, self-examination, listening to oneself, and becoming attentive to one's emotions, conscience, strengths, and weaknesses. P04 linked self-awareness with self-acceptance, stating that “Accepting who I am, both my strengths and weaknesses, helps me to be aware of who I am.” P11 identified “self-assessment practice,” prayer, and asking others for feedback as ways of developing self-awareness. P06 similarly referred to listening to the conscience and to God, as well as having quality time with others.

These responses indicate that participants associated psycho-spiritual well-being with an increasing capacity to recognize and understand the inner self. Self-awareness was therefore not presented simply as psychological introspection; it was often connected with prayer, conscience, spiritual discernment, and openness to feedback from others. This suggests an understanding of self-awareness as an integrated spiritual and psychological process.

Relationships, service, and compassion

Participants also described connectedness with others as an important expression of psycho-spiritual well-being. Relationships were nurtured through love, charity, active listening, empathy, forgiveness, appreciation, communication, hospitality, and practical support. P01, for instance, emphasized active listening, empathy and compassion, open and honest communication, gratitude, forgiveness, and being open to others.

P04 similarly identified showing love and acts of charity as ways of connecting with God and others. P02 expressed this relational orientation concisely as “Love – Seeing Christ in others.” P12 described these relational qualities as being practiced through “practical love” and presence, while P13 referred to it as extending love to others and selflessness.

P10 identified listening to people, community living, and hospitality as practices through which these qualities were nurtured. These accounts indicate that compassion was experienced primarily through concrete relationships and actions rather than as an abstract ideal. Participants associated psycho-spiritual well-being with the ability to be present to others, accommodate differences, offer support, and respond to people with love and understanding.

Meaningfulness and self-transcendence in ministry

Participants' responses also showed that meaningfulness and self-transcendence were closely connected with their understanding of vocation, service, and ministry. P01 described meaningfulness in terms of having purpose, clear direction, spiritual growth, contributing to society, and feeling connected to something larger than oneself. The participant understood self-transcendence as going beyond personal ego and self-interest and linked this with humility, self-reflection, and attention to the good of others.

For P03, meaningfulness involved “living entirely for God” and finding purpose in acts of service, while compassion involved embracing others with Christ's mercy. P05 similarly described the nurturing of these qualities as staying connected with God, serving others with love, and continually growing in faith and wisdom.

Other participants expressed meaningfulness through the way they carried out their responsibilities. P04 stated that being inspired by God in prayer enabled the participant to approach assignments with joy and peacefulness. P09 described that meaningfulness was attained by aligning actions with personal values, setting meaningful goals, and engaging in activities that promote happiness and good health.

These responses suggest that meaningfulness and self-transcendence were experienced when participants perceived their ministry and daily activities as connected to a purpose greater than the self. Their accounts also indicate that service, humility, love, and commitment to others provided avenues through which personal faith was translated into vocational and pastoral action.

Silence, solitude, and disciplined living

Silence, solitude, healthy routines, and personal discipline also appeared in participants' responses as practices that support psycho-spiritual well-being. P07 mentioned silence, personal reflection, prayer, meditation on nature, and reading good books. P17 identified silence as a practice that supports well-being, while P16 emphasized self-discipline. P09 included exercise, a healthy lifestyle, prayer, meditation, study, and relationships among the practices that support well-being.

Taken together, these responses suggest that sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being requires intentionality and regular practice. Participants did not describe well-being as something that occurs automatically; rather, it was cultivated through habits that create space for prayer, reflection, healthy relationships, service, personal growth, and rest.

Overall, participants' accounts indicate that the five dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being were interwoven in their daily lives. Connectedness was expressed through prayer and relationships; self-awareness through reflection and self-examination; self-transcendence through surrender, humility, selflessness, and orientation toward values and purposes beyond the self; meaningfulness through vocation, purpose, and service; and compassion through

love, empathy, charity, and hospitality. Psycho-spiritual well-being therefore emerged as an ongoing practice of integrating faith, inner awareness, relationships, and purposeful action rather than as a condition achieved once and for all.

Theme 3: Challenges to Sustaining Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

Participants' responses revealed that sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being amid everyday life, community living, and pastoral ministry was not without difficulty. The challenges described were diverse and occurred at intrapersonal, interpersonal, vocational, environmental, and institutional levels. While some participants spoke of inner struggles and spiritual dryness, others emphasized misunderstanding, rejection, workload, lack of personal time, loneliness, environmental limitations, and institutional policies. These responses suggest that the pursuit of psycho-spiritual well-being takes place within complex human and vocational challenges.

Interpersonal misunderstanding, judgment, and rejection

Interpersonal difficulties were among the most prominent challenges in participants' accounts. Participants described experiences of being misunderstood, judged, rejected, mocked, or negatively perceived by others. P01 gave an extensive account of the difficulty of being misunderstood when responding to situations differently from others. The participant described people questioning her responses and making statements such as, "because you are not in my shoe, because you are a counsellor, you think everybody has such stupid time/patience," and referred to "many other discouraging and frustrating situations even in the apostolate." This account illustrates how differences in understanding and expectations can become a source of emotional strain in ministry.

P02 similarly identified "misunderstanding" as a challenge, explaining that one may be "loving and serving with compassion yet sometimes facing rejection or judgment." P04 recalled that the "notion held by many" about someone undergoing an inner journey was discouraging and described being "mocked for going through the Inner journey process." The participant further acknowledged that "Self-awareness was initially difficult to reach," but noted that help and quiet moments eventually facilitated progress.

Negative perceptions were also reported by other participants. P07 stated that others sometimes regarded the participant as "overconfident, self-love, too Spiritual," while P09 observed that people with low self-esteem sometimes perceived the participant as "a proud person" and could "gang up against you." P11 similarly reported, "Sometimes I am misunderstood by others, which may lead me to stay alone."

These accounts indicate that the relational environment can significantly affect psycho-spiritual well-being. Participants were not only dealing with their own inner development but also with how their growth, convictions, behaviour, or way of relating were interpreted by others. Misunderstanding and rejection could therefore become sources of discouragement, isolation, and emotional difficulty.

Inner spiritual and emotional struggles

Participants also identified challenges arising from their own internal experiences. P02 described "Inner Struggles" involving the need to balance self-awareness with humility and to face personal weaknesses while maintaining trust in God's mercy. The same participant identified "Spiritual Dryness" as moments of "emptiness in prayer," together with "Emotional Burdens" associated with carrying the pain of others while attempting to remain rooted in Christ's peace.

P05 similarly described "distractions that hinder self-awareness, spiritual dryness affecting connectedness, doubt about one's purpose, burnout from constant giving, and struggles with surrendering to God's will." This response brings together several dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being and shows how difficulties in one area may affect other areas.

P03 identified sexual feelings as a particularly challenging aspect of consecrated life, stating, "My most challenging is my sexual feelings." She explained that consecrating her life to God did not mean that she no longer experienced feelings associated with marriage and motherhood. P03's account illustrates the tension between her vocational commitments and the persistence of ordinary human feelings and desires. It suggests that psycho-spiritual well-being in consecrated life may involve acknowledging and negotiating these experiences in ways that remain consistent with one's vocational commitments, rather than assuming that consecration eliminates them.

Other participants described the challenge of living consistently according to their ideals. P14 referred to "Human limitation and indisposition to carry out these Christian acts," while P16 identified "Challenge of Consistency in routines." P18 identified "side attractions (distractions)" as a challenge. These responses suggest that participants recognized the ongoing effort required to translate spiritual convictions and personal intentions into consistent daily practice.

Workload, lack of time, and competing demands

The demands of ministry and daily responsibilities were another significant challenge. P08 identified "No time for quiet prayer, increase in workload, loneliness, conflict between inner development and external demands." This response captures an important tension within one's desire and action: participants may value prayer, reflection, and personal development while simultaneously facing external responsibilities that compete for their time and attention.

P15 similarly identified "Limited time to be with myself" as a challenge, together with a "Noisy environment." The responses suggest that the demands of ministry and community life can reduce opportunities for solitude, silence, reflection, and personal renewal.

P05's reference to "burnout from constant giving" further indicates the possible strain associated with continually attending to the needs of others. For participants engaged in service and apostolic work, sustaining their own well-being may therefore require deliberate attention to personal renewal alongside their responsibilities to others.

Loneliness, isolation, and the difficulty of communal living

Although participants generally identified relationships and community as important sources of psycho-spiritual well-being, relationships could also become a source of difficulty. P08 explicitly identified "loneliness" as one of the challenges encountered. P11 noted that being misunderstood could lead to staying alone, while P17 identified "individual differences" as a challenge.

These responses reveal a paradox within the participants' experiences; hence, community and relationships can nurture connectedness, yet differences, misunderstanding, and rejection within those same relationships can produce loneliness or isolation. Psycho-spiritual well-being in communal and

vocational life therefore involves not only maintaining personal spiritual practices but also navigating the complexities of human relationships.

Environmental and institutional challenges

Some challenges were associated with conditions beyond the individual's immediate control. P12 reported being "Misunderstood, lack of resources to help, environmental and health challenges." P13 identified the difficulty created by "the authorities of the church" and their policies. P10 referred to the "Unreadiness of others in accepting new initiatives about holiness through wholeness."

These responses broaden the understanding of psycho-spiritual well-being beyond an exclusively individual responsibility. Participants' ability to cultivate and sustain well-being may also be influenced by the resources available to them, their physical environment, institutional structures, and the openness of others to new approaches to formation and personal growth.

The interconnected nature of the challenges

The participants' accounts demonstrate that the challenges to psycho-spiritual well-being were not isolated from one another. Interpersonal misunderstanding could lead to rejection or isolation; increased workload could reduce time for prayer and reflection; emotional burdens and doubts about purpose could accompany spiritual dryness; and environmental or institutional conditions could make personal practices more difficult to maintain. Overall, the findings indicate that sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being among priests and religious involves negotiating a range of personal, relational, vocational, environmental, and institutional challenges.

Theme 4: Strategies for Navigating Life Challenges

Participants described a range of approaches for navigating the challenges that affected their psycho-spiritual well-being. Their responses reflected considerable variation: some relied strongly on prayer and spiritual practices, while others emphasized reflection, self-forgiveness, community support, rest, self-retreat, patience, discipline, or maintaining a positive outlook. Some participants also indicated that they were still struggling with certain challenges, suggesting that navigating difficulties was not always a completed process but could remain ongoing.

Prayer, Spiritual Practices, and Trust in God

Spiritual practices featured prominently in several participants' responses. P01 described a comprehensive approach involving prayer, sacramental life, Marian devotion, spiritual direction, Scripture, and surrender: "Deep Prayer and Trust – Surrendering my struggles to God, trusting in His unseen presence, and finding strength in silent adoration." The participant further described drawing strength from the Eucharist and Confession, praying the Rosary, seeking spiritual direction, meditating on Scripture, and "Embracing the Cross" by uniting personal struggles with Christ's suffering. The response also referred to following St. Joseph as a model of "silent trust" and humble service. This suggests that, for this participant, navigating challenges involved placing personal difficulties within a sustained spiritual framework.

Similarly, P06 explicitly identified prayer alongside reflection, community support, self-care, and trust: "I try to overcome it... overcoming this requires prayer, reflection, community support, self-care, and trust in God's plan."

P03 also described turning directly to God when experiencing difficult affective feelings, saying: "I will tell God, I know that you are watching." The participant continued by asking God to "fill this vacuum inside me" and interpreting the experience within the participant's relationship with God. Rather than simply suppressing the feeling, the response indicates an attempt to bring the experience into prayer and relationship with God.

P08 similarly reported: "Consistency in prayer and good work, maintaining my stand in what I know is worth doing." These responses indicate that prayer was not described merely as a religious obligation but as a means through which some participants sought strength, perspective, stability, and continued commitment amid difficulties.

Reflection, Self-Awareness, and Self-Acceptance

Some participants described navigating challenges through reflection and deeper attention to their own experiences. P05 stated: "I have always listened to myself, others, and looked into my past and present to find ways to survive, through prayer, counseling, spiritual direction and self-forgiveness." This response suggests that the participant approached difficulties through a combination of inward reflection and supportive relationships.

P04 similarly connected the process of navigating challenges with openness to the Inner Journey: "My openness to the Inner Journey process helped me greatly to find meaning in life and ability to do things I love to do." The participant also described discovering a hidden talent for drawing as a means of expressing an inspiration from God and recognized "the need to be compassionate to the other who I believe hurts my feelings." Thus, reflection appeared to contribute not only to self-understanding but also to meaning-making and a more compassionate response to interpersonal difficulty.

Other participants described approaches involving acceptance and understanding. P12 stated simply: "Acknowledging people are differently made," while P11 reported: "Trying to be more understanding and patient of those we are serving." These responses suggest that some participants navigated relational challenges by adjusting their own attitudes and responses rather than focusing only on changing other people.

Community, Relational Support, and Professional Help

The responses also show that participants did not rely exclusively on individual spiritual practices. P06 specifically identified "community support" as one of the resources used in navigating challenges. P05 mentioned both "counseling" and "spiritual direction," indicating the use of professional and spiritual support when dealing with personal difficulties.

For P02, navigating difficult interpersonal experiences involved continuing to relate to others despite frustration and disappointment. The participant described these experiences as "life lessons" and stated: "I keep trusting the image of God in them and continue partnering with them as my family, overlooking that human part in action by the grace of God." Although the response is expressed in highly personal terms, it indicates an effort to maintain relationships by looking beyond difficult human behaviors and continuing to see others within a framework of faith.

Altogether, these responses indicate that support from community, counseling, spiritual direction, and continued relationships formed part of some participants' ways of negotiating challenges.

Retreat, Rest, and Creating Space for Renewal

Some participants addressed challenges by deliberately creating space away from their usual environment and responsibilities. P07 reported: "Change of environment once a week to be in touch with myself (self retreat or recollection)." This response directly connects environmental change with

reconnecting with the self. P09 similarly stated: “Going for annual leave, devoted to personal prayer and taking rest in between work.”

These responses are noteworthy because they move beyond purely internal or spiritual coping and include rest, withdrawal from routine demands, and intentional space for renewal. They suggest that some participants recognized the need to create physical and temporal space for maintaining their well-being amid ministry and other responsibilities.

Discipline, Optimism, and Continuing Despite Difficulty

A few participants described more general attitudes or personal dispositions for navigating challenges. P10 stated: “To maintain my confidence, and take it the way others have seen me”

while P14 described the approach as: “Focused movement (optimism).” P16 responded: “I employed discipline,” and P17 stated: “Silent witnessing.” These responses indicate different personal approaches to dealing with difficulty, including confidence, optimism, discipline, and silent observation or witnessing.

Importantly, not all participants described their challenges as successfully resolved. P13 stated: “I have been trying to navigate them,” while P15 acknowledged: “Still struggling with them”

P18 simply responded: “No” when asked how the challenges had been navigated. These responses are important because they prevent the findings from presenting coping or spiritual practices as uniformly successful. For some participants, navigating life challenges remained an ongoing process, while others did not identify a particular strategy.

The findings suggest that participants employed diverse and overlapping strategies to navigate challenges to psycho-spiritual well-being. Spiritual practices such as prayer, Eucharistic participation, Confession, Marian devotion, Scripture, and surrender to God were prominent in some accounts. Other responses emphasized reflection, self-forgiveness, counseling, spiritual direction, community support, patience, compassion, rest, self-retreat, discipline, and optimism. These strategies correspond with the multidimensional understanding of psycho-spiritual well-being reflected in the study, in which spiritual, psychological, relational, and personal dimensions are interconnected.

At the same time, the findings indicate that sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being should not be understood as the complete elimination of life challenges. The responses of participants such as P15, who stated that they were “Still struggling with them,” and P13, who said, “I have been trying to navigate them,” demonstrate that psycho-spiritual well-being may involve an ongoing process of responding to difficulties rather than reaching a permanent state in which challenges no longer occur. The variation in participants’ responses also suggests that the strategies used were highly personal and depended on the nature of the challenges experienced and the resources available to each participant.

Theme 5: Relational and Supportive Resources for Psycho-Spiritual Well-Being

The participants’ responses indicate that psycho-spiritual well-being was sustained not only through personal practices but also through relationships and sources of support. Participants identified spiritual directors, counselors, family members, friends, community members, colleagues, parishioners, and professional helpers as important sources of encouragement, guidance, reflection, and emotional support during times of difficulty. For some participants, support came primarily through spiritual relationships and community life, while others also identified professional counseling, psychological resources, and personal relationships as significant.

Spiritual Direction and Spiritual Companionship

Spiritual direction emerged repeatedly as an important source of support. P02 identified: “Spiritual Direction – Guidance to stay rooted in God’s will.” P06 similarly described: “Community is a support, personal friendship, keeping a daily journal, monthly spiritual direction and constant communion with God”

P07 identified both professional and spiritual support: “Counsellor, Spiritual director and falling back to all I learnt during the Counseling sessions.” P11 also stated: “Prayer, my spiritual directors, relations, friends and parishioners” while P14 identified: “My Spiritual director and my close friends”

These responses suggest that spiritual direction was experienced as an important source of guidance and accompaniment. For some participants, it provided a means of remaining grounded in their spiritual life and receiving support while navigating personal difficulties. The recurrence of spiritual direction across the responses also points to the importance of ongoing accompaniment within the psycho-spiritual well-being of priests and religious.

Community, Family, Friends, and Collegial Relationships

Participants also emphasized the importance of human relationships. P04 described: “My Relationships: Encouragement from family, friends, and spiritual mentors helps me stay grounded.” P06 referred to “Community” and “personal friendship,” while P08 identified: “Sharing with colleagues” as one of the supports for psycho-spiritual well-being. P13 similarly identified: “Prayers and community, dialogue, spiritual direction.”

These responses indicate that community and interpersonal relationships provided participants with opportunities for encouragement, dialogue, sharing, and connection. Such relationships may be particularly relevant within religious and pastoral contexts, where community life and ministry involve sustained interaction with others.

Counseling and Professional Support

Several participants explicitly identified counseling or professional assistance as a source of support. P08 mentioned: “Counseling/spiritual direction” alongside exercise, positive thinking, and sharing with colleagues. P10 stated: “Been calm, reflect more, seek advice from experts, and take it to God in prayer”

P05 gave a particularly direct account of seeking professional help: “I always consult a professional in psycho-spiritual well-being, and I follow instructions; sometimes I might think my decision is very okay, but when I meet her I find out that I’m far from what I should do.”

This response indicates an openness to seeking professional guidance when personal judgment may not be sufficient. It also illustrates how professional support can provide participants with an opportunity to reconsider their perceptions and responses to personal difficulties.

Personal and Spiritual Resources Within Supportive Relationships

Some participants described support as emerging from the interaction between personal practices and relationships. P04, for example, identified journaling, silence, meditation, mindfulness, relationships, and psychological reading: “Personal Reflection: Journaling, silence, meditation and

mindfulness help me process challenges. I also do read some psychological books to get some solutions”

P05 connected present well-being with a longer personal and spiritual history: “The knowledge of me as a Spiritual and physical being. My spirituality from my childhood that I have developed; way of prayer, Relation with God, my family and friends.” P10 described a combination of reflection, expert advice, and prayer: “Been (sic) calm, reflect more, seek advice from experts and taking it to God in prayer”

These responses suggest that support was not experienced only as something provided by another person. Participants also drew on personal reflection, prayer, accumulated spiritual knowledge, and relationships as interconnected resources for navigating difficult experiences.

The findings highlight the relational dimension of psycho-spiritual well-being, as participants described personal practices alongside support received through relationships and helping resources. Spiritual directors appeared particularly prominent, alongside community members, family, friends, colleagues, parishioners, counselors, and other professionals.

The different sources of support appeared to serve different purposes. Spiritual direction was associated with guidance and remaining rooted in one’s relationship with God; family, friends, community members, and colleagues provided encouragement, sharing, and companionship; while counseling and professional support provided opportunities for reflection, clarification, and guidance.

The findings also suggest that participants did not necessarily depend on a single source of support. Rather, some combined spiritual practices with personal reflection, community relationships, professional counseling, or expert advice. This reinforces the broader understanding of psycho-spiritual well-being in the study as an integrated phenomenon involving spiritual, psychological, relational, and personal dimensions.

The responses demonstrate variation in the sources participants relied upon. Nevertheless, the recurrence of spiritual direction, community, friendship, counseling, dialogue, and professional guidance across the responses indicates that supportive relationships and helping resources form an important part of how some participants sustain their psycho-spiritual well-being.

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored how priests and religious understand and sustain psycho-spiritual well-being amid life challenges. The findings show that participants understood psycho-spiritual well-being as a holistic and dynamic integration of spiritual, psychological, emotional, and, in some responses, physical dimensions of human life. Their accounts reflected the five conceptual dimensions of psycho-spiritual well-being identified in the study: connectedness, self-awareness, self-transcendence, meaningfulness, and compassion.

The findings further indicate that psycho-spiritual well-being is experienced and nurtured through a range of personal and spiritual practices. Participants described prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, silence, reflection, participation in Eucharistic celebrations, confession, spiritual direction, community life, service, compassion, self-discipline, and healthy personal practices. These practices were not experienced in isolation but often worked together in participants’ efforts to maintain inner balance, meaning, connection, and spiritual growth.

At the same time, participants described several challenges that can affect their psycho-spiritual well-being. These included interpersonal misunderstanding and conflict, judgment and rejection, emotional and inner struggles, spiritual dryness, workload and competing demands, loneliness, communal difficulties, environmental limitations, and institutional or policy-related concerns. The findings show that these challenges are interconnected and may affect both personal well-being and the ability to remain available for ministry and community life.

Participants also described varied ways of navigating these challenges. Prayer, trust in God, reflection, counseling, spiritual direction, community support, self-care, retreat, rest, acceptance, compassion, discipline, and maintaining a positive outlook were among the strategies reported. However, the findings also show that not every difficulty was resolved. Some participants acknowledged that they were still struggling with particular challenges, suggesting that sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being is better understood as an ongoing process of responding to the realities of life rather than as a permanent state free from difficulty. Finally, the findings highlight the importance of relational and supportive resources. Participants identified spiritual directors, counselors, family members, friends, community members, colleagues, parishioners, and professional helpers as sources of support during difficult periods. The study therefore points to the importance of creating environments in which priests and religious can attend to their own spiritual, psychological, emotional, and relational needs while continuing to fulfill their vocational responsibilities.

Overall, the study demonstrates that sustaining psycho-spiritual well-being among priests and religious requires attention to the whole person. Personal spiritual commitment remains important, but it is complemented by self-awareness, healthy relationships, appropriate support, opportunities for rest and reflection, and access to psycho-spiritual and professional accompaniment. The findings contribute to the understanding of psycho-spiritual well-being within the lived realities of priests and religious in Nigeria.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Promote holistic formation

Formation programmes for priests and religious should continue to address the spiritual, psychological, emotional, relational, and human dimensions of development rather than focusing exclusively on spiritual or intellectual formation.

Strengthen access to spiritual direction and psycho-spiritual counseling

Priests and religious should have access to competent spiritual directors and qualified psycho-spiritual counselors or other appropriate mental health professionals. Such support should be presented as a normal component of ongoing formation and well-being rather than only as a response to serious difficulty.

Encourage regular personal spiritual practices

Individuals should be encouraged to cultivate sustainable practices such as prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, active participation in Eucharistic celebrations, silence, reflection, and retreat according to their vocation and circumstances. Participants’ responses suggest that these practices can provide important resources for navigating personal and vocational challenges.

Provide adequate opportunities for rest and renewal

Dioceses and religious congregations should give appropriate attention to annual retreats, periods of rest, personal reflection, and reasonable time away from demanding ministry schedules. Workload should be reviewed where necessary so that ministry responsibilities do not consistently prevent adequate opportunities for renewal.

Foster supportive community relationships

Religious communities and pastoral settings should promote environments characterized by listening, dialogue, compassion, fairness, mutual respect, and appropriate interpersonal support. Greater attention should be given to reducing isolation and creating safe spaces where members can discuss difficulties without unnecessary judgment.

Integrate psycho-spiritual well-being into ongoing formation

Workshops, seminars, and formation sessions on emotional awareness, self-awareness, relationships, sexuality and affectivity, coping with stress, human behavior, and psycho-spiritual well-being may be incorporated into continuing formation. Such formation should not be limited to initial stages of formation but should continue throughout religious and priestly life.

Increase awareness of professional help

Priests and religious should be encouraged to seek professional support when personal, emotional, relational, or psychological difficulties become difficult to manage alone. The use of counseling or therapy should be normalized within formation and pastoral structures.

Strengthen the availability of trained personnel

Church institutions and religious congregations may consider supporting the training of more qualified psycho-spiritual counselors, therapists, spiritual directors, and other professionals who can accompany priests and religious within appropriate professional and ethical boundaries.

Promote supportive leadership

Bishops, major superiors, formators, and other Church leaders should pay attention to the well-being of those entrusted to their care. Leadership practices characterized by listening, fairness, compassion, appropriate workload management, and timely attention to difficulties may contribute to a healthier environment for psycho-spiritual well-being.

Respect confidentiality in professional accompaniment

Where priests and religious seek counseling or therapy, appropriate professional confidentiality should be respected. Clear boundaries between therapeutic support and administrative or disciplinary processes are important for creating an environment in which individuals can seek help openly and safely.

VII. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study has several limitations. First, the sample was relatively small and purposively selected; therefore, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalized to all priests and religious in Nigeria. Second, data were collected through written responses to semi-structured questions administered electronically through Google Forms. Although this approach facilitated participation across locations, it did not provide the same opportunity for probing and clarification that interactive interviews might have provided. Third, the findings were based on participants' self-reported experiences and perceptions, which were not independently verified. Finally, the experiences reported may be shaped by differences in ecclesial, congregational, cultural, geographical, and ministry contexts; consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the participants represented in this study.

VIII. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Further research could build on the findings of this study in several ways.

- i. Comparative studies could examine differences between diocesan priests and members of religious congregations, as well as between male and female religious, to explore whether their vocational and community contexts influence experiences of psycho-spiritual well-being differently.
- ii. Studies across stages of formation and ministry could examine psycho-spiritual well-being among seminarians, novices, temporary and finally professed religious, newly ordained priests, and priests with longer years of ministry experience.
- iii. Mixed-methods research could combine qualitative accounts with quantitative measures of psycho-spiritual well-being, providing both depth of experience and measurable patterns.
- iv. Research on specific challenges could explore in greater depth issues identified in this study, including loneliness, interpersonal conflict, workload, spiritual dryness, emotional and affective struggles, sexuality and celibacy, and institutional pressures.

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