

# Burnout Among Catholic Priests in Brazil: Prevalence and Associated Factors

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## RESUMO

Padres católicos experimentam uma infinidade de estressores em seu trabalho pastoral, enfrentam inúmeras demandas e irrealistas expectativas, estão sob constante escrutínio e cercados por uma cultura cada vez mais secular e aparentemente menos solidária. Consequentemente, padres podem experimentar níveis significativos de burnout, que é caracterizada como uma síndrome resultante de respostas inadequadas ao estresse emocional crônico. O objetivo desta pesquisa de natureza transversal foi investigar a prevalência de burnout entre clero católico no Brasil e fatores associados a esta síndrome nesta população. Os participantes (N = 242), selecionados aleatoriamente entre o clero católico no Brasil, responderam o Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), um questionário sociodemográfico e diversos itens para avaliar variáveis psicossociais e espirituais. Os resultados indicam que aproximadamente um terço dos padres no Brasil experimentam de moderados a altos níveis de burnout. Padres mais novos relataram níveis mais altos de burnout. Satisfação profissional, apoio social, autocuidado e práticas espirituais se correlacionaram significativamente com níveis mais baixos de burnout. Em consonância com a literatura sobre o burnout do clero, estes achados sugerem que esses fatores podem ter um efeito protetivo contra o burnout entre os padres. Em conclusão, há um significativo número de padres no Brasil sentindo-se sobrecarregados e experimentando níveis clinicamente significativos de burnout. Esse é um problema que deve ser levado a sério e que requer atenção imediata.

*Palavras-chave: Burnout; Padres; Clero; Maslach Burnout Inventory.*

## ABSTRACT

Catholic priests experience a myriad of stressors in their pastoral work, face countless demands and unrealistic expectations, are under constant scrutiny, and are surrounded by a culture that is increasingly secular and apparently less supportive. Consequently, priests may experience significant levels of burnout, which is characterized as a syndrome resulted from inadequate responses to chronic emotional stress. The purpose of this cross-sectional research was to investigate the rates of burnout among Catholic clergy in Brazil and associated factors. Randomly selected Catholic priests in Brazil (N = 242) were given the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a sociodemographic questionnaire, and several survey items to assess psychosocial and spiritual variables. Results indicated that approximately one third of priests in Brazil experience moderate to high burnout rates. Younger priests reported higher levels of burnout. Vocational satisfaction, social support, self-care, and spiritual practices were significantly correlated to lower levels of burnout. In consistency with the literature on clergy burnout, these findings suggest that these factors may have a buffering effect on burnout among priests. In conclusion, there is a significant number of priests in Brazil feeling overwhelmed and experiencing clinically significant burnout levels. This is a problem that has to be taken seriously and requires immediate attention.

*Keywords: Burnout; Priests; Clergy; Maslach Burnout Inventory.*

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cholars in the psychological field have manifested a growing interest in investigating religious and spiritual issues in the mental health context (see, e.g., Koenig, 2008; Levin, Chatters, & Joseph, 2011; Masters & Hooker, 2013; Park & Slattery, 2013; Vitz, 2005). In the religious context, clergy and other religious ministers have been recognized as an important population with unique needs in terms of mental health services (Daniel & Rogers, 1981; Frame & Shehan, 2004; Hall, 1997).

As much as other helping professionals, if not far more, clergy and other religious leaders pay an emotional price for the pastoral care and counseling they provide for individuals and groups that they serve. The job description of clergy is diverse and includes responsibilities that involve constant engagement with others. Clergy roles can be categorized into at least six groups: (1) preacher, (2) deliverer of rituals and sacraments, (3) pastor, (4) teacher, (5) organizer, and (6) administrator (Blizzard 1956; Milstein et al. 2005). These diverse roles, considered together, involve highly varied competencies and encompass several stressors. Priests have to frequently switch between roles several times throughout a single day (DeShon, 2012), resulting in potential role overload.

In addition, the nature of pastoral work can be highly emotional, such as when delivering the sacraments to terminally ill people, officiating funerals, and providing grief counseling. The stakes of interacting positively with faithful are quite high. Moreover, leading communities comprised of people with diverse backgrounds, cultures, histories, priorities, and personalities can be an extremely complex job. It entails, for instance, negotiating conflicts and taking a leadership role in decision-making, such as what positions to take on community matters or how to spend limited resources. Such decisions often lack clear right or wrong solutions and make priests susceptible to criticism. Overall, the stressors that priests experience are interpersonal in nature as priests serve a quite unique role within a social ecology (Proeschold-Bell et al., 2011). One of the consequences of the stress experienced in the context of clergy ministry is the burnout syndrome.

The first use of the term burnout seems to date back to Graham Greene's (1961) book *The Burn-Out Case*, where a spiritually distressed and disenchanted world-famous architect quits his job and sets off on a voyage to a leper colony in the Congo. In 1974, Herbert Freudenberger identified burnout based on his observation that new health care employees who worked with drug addicts experienced depressive-like symptoms, reduced motivation and energy, and developed several physical symptoms (Freudenberger, 1974). Freudenberger's description of this condition was rapidly recognized as quite familiar by professionals working in social services; and, in 1993, Maslach defined burnout as "a

psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with other people in some capacity" (Maslach 1993, p. 19).

The consequences of burning out can be serious and affect not only professionals but also beneficiaries of the intended care. Consequences associated with this syndrome include absenteeism, decreased productivity, job dissatisfaction, impaired physical health, reduced organizational commitment, reduced quality of life, loss of purpose, emotional problems, lowered self-esteem, loneliness, interpersonal conflict, and a significant loss of closeness and satisfaction in relationships both professionally and personally (Ayala & Carnero, 2013; Guntupalli, Wachtel, Mallampalli, & Surani, 2014; Hall, 1997; Maslach et al., 1996, 2001; Melamed et al., 2006). Consequently, burnout is a serious public health matter that has a significant effect on the well-being and health of helping professionals that can result in increased health care costs and reduced quality of care (Ayala & Carnero, 2013; Poghosyan, Clarke, Finlayson, & Aiken, 2010). Furthermore, burnout can also lead to changing jobs or abandoning the profession permanently (Maslach et al., 2001).

Several priests seem to be leaving the ministry prematurely (Beebe, 2007), and an increasing number of priests may be leaving the ministry due to clergy burnout (Randall, 2004; Spencer, Winston, & Bocarnea, 2012). Even though general clergy attrition numbers are unknown, a study of clergy across five large denominations indicated that 14% of clergy who had left the ministry reported that burnout was the main reason (Hoge & Wenger, 2005). Both priests and faithful attribute a sacredness to priesthood and ministry work, which may push them to work harder and longer than other helping professionals as a way to avoid perceived vocational failure, hence making them more disposed to burnout (Pargament & Mahoney, 2005; Stewart-Sicking, Ciarrocchi, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2011). On the other hand, experiencing the priesthood as a spiritual calling as clergy do, may increase persistence and motivation to perform their ministry, which may prevent burnout (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013).

Previous studies indicate that both external and internal factors may contribute to the development and maintenance of clergy burnout. External or systemic factors contributing to clergy burnout include excessive schedule demands, work overload, difficult parishioners, low social support, institutional structures, lack of personal time and self-care, and being "on call" 24/7 (Barnard & Curry, 2012; Doolittle, 2010; Evers & Tomic, 2003; Grosch & Olsen, 2000; Stanton-Rich & Iso-Ahola, 1998). The relentless nature of systemic

stressors that clergy may experience can lead to chronic, stress-related physiological over-arousal among religious ministers (Hart, 1984, 1995). Even the exciting and positive aspects of priestly ministry, such as comforting parishioners in crisis and preaching, may lead to physiological over-arousal, which, in turn, can result in a condition called adrenal exhaustion, in which the adrenal system is overtaxed, resulting in a series of physical and emotional issues (Foss, 2002; Hart, 1984, 1995).

However, it is intriguing that even though priests may face similar life circumstances, perform the same type of work, live in the same environment, attend to the same pastoral demands, and face the same stressors, some priests are burned out while others thrive. Individual differences may explain these diverse outcomes at least in part. In fact, the literature on burnout in general, and on clergy burnout in particular, has pointed out that internal factors such as personality types, personal mastery, coping mechanisms, or conflict management can influence clergy's predisposition to burnout (Brewster et al., 2015; Francis et al., 2004; Francis, Wulff, & Robbins, 2008; Francis & Rodger, 1994; Golden et al., 2004; Hills, Francis, & Rutledge, 2004; Miner, 2007a; Miner, 2007b; Parker & Martin, 2011; Rogerson & Piedmont, 1998; Turton & Francis, 2007).

In addition, a small but growing body of research has investigated spirituality and its relationship to burnout among clergy, including peer-reviewed literature (e.g., Chandler, 2009; Doolittle, 2007; Golden et al., 2004; Rogerson & Piedmont, 1998; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013) and several doctoral dissertations (e.g., Chng, 2012; Kayler, 2001; Kirsch, 2011; Prout, 1996; Shirey, 2001). Conversely, Chandler (2009) found that spiritual dryness, defined as "spiritual lethargy" in which there is a sense of emotional and spiritual disconnection in relation to God, is a crucial predictor of emotional exhaustion among clergy. An essential personal resource, spirituality may be negatively associated to clergy burnout because spiritual beliefs allow an individual to transcend their present circumstances, adopt a broader sight and alternative view of these circumstances, and place their hopes in God.

Several studies have also found that age is negatively correlated with clergy burnout (Barzon, Caltabiano, & Ronzoni, 2006; Doolittle, 2007; Doolittle, 2010; Francis et al., 2004; Francis, Wulff, & Robbins, 2008; Rutledge & Francis, 2004; Stanton-Rich & Iso-Ahola, 1998; Turton & Francis, 2007). According to Doolittle (2007), older clergy might have improved their ability to cope with the stressors inherent in the ministry, whereas the greater amount of burnout found among younger clergy may be resulted from the initial difficulties they face in adapting to the ministry and its demands.

Researchers have also investigated whether type of Catholic clergy (diocesan priests vs. religious order priests) has any impact on levels of experienced burnout. A diocesan priest is a priest who is committed to a certain geographical area and is ordained to the service of the faithful of a diocese, a church administrative region. A religious order priest, on the other hand, belongs to a community of men bound together by faith and the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In terms of ministerial work, a diocesan priest generally serves the pastoral, liturgical, and administrative needs of a specific parish, while a religious order priest, though can also serve the needs of a particular parish, his work usually depends on the charism of the religious order that he belongs to, which may include teaching, working with the poor, assisting the elderly, etc. In regards to the experience of burnout, the literature indicates that diocesan priests tend to experience higher rates of burnout, especially on its dimensions of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, than religious order priests (Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998). Some researchers suggest that this difference is explained by the lower levels of social support and higher levels of ministry demands experienced by diocesan priests (Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998).

It is not uncommon for Catholic priests to experience burnout as they are confronted by daily stressors associated to their occupation and by challenges inherent to their vocation, such as loneliness, celibacy, excessive demands, unrealistic expectations, role overload, etc. However, clergy burnout estimates vary broadly. In a survey of 1,242 Catholic priests in the United States, Rossetti and Rhoades (2013) indicated that 42% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I feel overwhelmed with the amount of work I have to do." This item reflects closely the MBI emotional exhaustion item: "I feel like I am working too hard on the job". Additionally, an Australian research found that 25% of clergy experienced burnout as a severe or significant problem, and 50% were considered at risk of developing burnout (Kaldor & Bullpitt, 2001). Based on the MBI criteria, Raj and Dean (2005) found that, among Catholic priests in India, 15% met the cutoff for high emotional exhaustion, 12% met the cutoff for high depersonalization, and 14% met the cutoff for low personal accomplishment.

Despite the well documented evidence of significant levels of burnout among clergy in other countries and the natural assumption that the prevalence of burnout among Catholic clergy in Brazil would also be significant, there has been a lack of research reporting the prevalence of burnout and associated factor in Brazilian Catholic clergy. In the Brazilian cultural context, priests are fundamental community leaders who interact with a great number of people on a regular basis. The enthusiasm, energy and motivation that

they do (or do not) bring to their pastoral work likely affect people in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, religious services or celebrations, personal counseling, and issues of social justice. Priests compromised effectiveness, impairment, and attrition result in a variety of negative effects on priests themselves, as well as parishioners and communities entrusted to them. Considering priests' important roles and the link between clergy burnout and increased ministerial work impairment and attrition, emotional and relational problems, and physical issues, it is crucially relevant to discuss the rates of burnout in this population.

Any discussion of burnout among Brazilian Catholic priests, however, would be well served to begin with a random sample and direct survey of priests, using a standardized instrument and comparing their scores with the scores of normative samples. This was, actually, the main aim of the present study, i.e., to identify burnout rates in its three dimensions (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment) among Brazilian Catholic clergy. In addition, this study also aimed to pinpoint demographic and psychosocial factors associated to burnout among Catholic clergy in Brazil.

## METHODOLOGY

This study was a cross-sectional correlational research design and analyzes whether, or not, the different variables being measured are related to each other without implying causality. In other words, this research investigates whether there are statistically significant correlations between clergy burnout scores, which are entered as dependent variables and some predictors or independent variables, which previous research has linked to clergy burnout, as well as other variables that seemed relevant in the participants' context. These variables were demographics (age, ministry time, workload, and type of clergy), social support, self-care, vocational satisfaction and spiritual practices. Since this study was part of this author's doctoral research at Argosy University, the research protocol was approved by the Institutional Review Board of this university, Protocol No. 453, on August 29, 2014 and by the National Conference of the Catholic Bishops of Brazil, Letter No. 0692/14.

## PROCEDURE

A written survey was mailed to 350 randomly selected Catholic priests serving the several Catholic dioceses throughout Brazil. All participants gave their informed consent for inclusion before participated in the study. The mailing included 175 diocesan priests and 175 religious order priests.

The participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality. Surveys were returned by mail in unmarked envelopes.

## PARTICIPANTS

There were 242 Catholic priests, representing 87 different dioceses and 52 different religious orders throughout Brazil, who returned usable surveys, including 142 (58.7%) diocesan priests and 100 (41.3%) religious priests. All participants were male and single, since these are requirements of the Catholic Church to admit someone into the priesthood. The age of participants ranged from 26 to 86 years of age ( $M = 48.62$ ;  $SD = 13.11$ ). Participants' ministry time ranged from 0 to 60 years ( $M = 19.02$ ;  $SD = 13.52$ ). In terms of racial group, 157 (64.9%) participants self-identified as "White", 65 (26.9%) as "Brown", 16 (6.6%) as "Black", and 4 (1.6%) as "Yellow." Regarding level of education, 53.72% holds an undergraduate degree, 19.83% has post-college specialized training, 22.31% holds a Master's degree, and 4.13% a doctoral degree. In regards to workload, 5% reported working 20 or less hours on average per week, 21.9% between 20 and 39 hours per week, 33.9% between 40 and 59 hours per week, 25.2% between 60 and 79 hours per week, and 14% 80 or more hours per week.

## INSTRUMENTS

Data collection was carried out through the Maslach Burnout Inventory – Human Services Survey (MBI-HSS), a form adapted by Carlotto & Câmara (2007), based on the version by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996). Data were also collected in two supplementary instruments: a sociodemographic questionnaire to characterize the sample – age, ministry time, skin color, level of education, type of clergy (diocesan or religious), and workload; and a several survey items, with evident face validity, to assess spiritual and psychosocial variables.

The MBI-HSS consists of 22 items to assess the syndrome of burnout in its three dimensions: emotional exhaustion (EE) (9 items), depersonalization (DP) (5 items), and reduced personal accomplishment (PA) (8 items) (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996). The inventory evaluates each dimension of the syndrome separately, according to the scores. Factorial analysis of the translated and adapted Portuguese version of the MBI-HSS confirmed the three burnout factors (EE, DP, and PA) and demonstrated that this version of the MBI is an adequate and reliable scale (Tamayo, 1997, 2003). Participants' burnout levels were examined taking into consideration the normative sample's cutoff points (see Table 1) indicated for other professionals, comprised of 2,897, including, attorneys, police officers, librarians, agency administrators, as well as religious ministers (Maslach,

**Table 1. Categorization of MBI Scores Based on Normative Sample (N = 2,897)**

MBI Subscales	Low	Moderate	High
Emotional Exhaustion (EE)	≤ 16	17 – 27	≥ 28
Depersonalization (DP)	≤ 5	6 – 10	≥ 11
Reduced Personal Accomplishment (PA)	≥ 40	39 – 34	≤ 33

Note: Source: Maslach, Jackson, & Leite (1996).

Jackson, & Leiter, 1996).

Several survey items, with evident face validity, were also included in this study to measure spiritual and psychosocial variables, which include the specific areas of social support (SS), self-care (SC), vocational satisfaction (VS), and spiritual practices (SP). These variables were chosen based in previous studies and burnout theory as likely associated with clergy burnout. Most of the 21 items of this survey used a 5-point Likert scale. For example, the item "Sinto-me satisfeito com o apoio social e emocional que tenho de minha família de origem (pais e irmãos)" (I feel satisfied with the social and emotional support I have from my family of origin (parents

and siblings) includes (1) bastante satisfeito (quite satisfied), (2) satisfeito (satisfied), (3) neutro (neutral), (4) insatisfeito (unsatisfied), and (5) bastante insatisfeito (quite unsatisfied) as options for response. The items related to time spent in daily prayer and the item related to daily time spent in spiritual readings also offer five possible answers: (1) mais de 60 minutos (60+ minutes), (2) 41-60 minutos (41-60 minutes), (3) 21-40 minutos (21-40 minutes), (4) 20 minutos ou menos (20 minutes or less), (5) não diariamente (not daily).

Principal component analysis was conducted to determine what, if any, underlying expected factors existed for measures on the 21 items of this questionnaire. Several

**Table 2. Factor Loadings and Communalities for Exploratory Factor Analysis After Principal Components Extraction With Varimax Rotation of Survey Items (N = 242)**

Item	F1 (α = .83)	F2 (α = .80)	F3 (α = .73)	F4 (α = .68)	Communalities
Re-choosing vocation	.80				.76
Relationship with God	.74				.61
Intimacy with God	.70				.52
Thoughts of leaving ministry	.70				.57
Vocational satisfaction	.69				.62
Support from superiors		.81			.71
Support from colleagues		.76			.67
Support from friends		.72			.52
Support from parishioners		.67			.51
Support from family		.59			.46
Spiritual reading			.76		.72
Personal prayer			.69		.69
Spiritual direction			.63		.46
Spiritual conferences			.58		.42
Divine office			.55		.59
Annual vacation				.76	.65
Physical exercises				.67	.67
Healthy eating habits				.61	.73
Weekly day off				.61	.69
Sleep quality and quantity				.54	.57
Eigenvalue	5.34	2.09	1.87	1.65	
% of variance explained	25.44	9.97	8.92	7.87	

Note: Factor loadings < .40 were suppressed. F1 = Vocational Satisfaction (VS); F2 = Social Support (SS); F3 = Spiritual Practices (SP); F4 = Self-Care (SC).



well-recognized criteria for the factorability of a correlation were used, which indicated that a factor principal component analysis was suitable to all 21 items. Eigenvalues greater than one for this analysis indicated five factors. However, items related to self-care were split into factors four and five.

Considering that the eigenvalue of factor five was slightly above one (1.14) and the sharp descending of the line of the scree plot after factor 4, the decision was made to fix 4 factors in the final analysis. This final analysis indicated self-care items grouped into one single factor, yielding 4 factors that explained 25.44%, 9.97%, 8.92%, and 7.87% of the variance respectively, which explained 52.20% of the variance. The rotated component matrix for this final solution is presented in Table 2. A reliability analysis, as presented in Table 2, indicated that the internal consistency of the four factors was sufficient for the use of the results in this study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Priests' burnout rates

The 242 respondents were given the MBI-HSS and all responses were scorable. As presented on Table 3, Brazilian priests mean was significantly lower ( $p < .05$ ) than all norm groups of the MBI (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996) on emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and higher on personal accomplishment. When compared to a sample of American Catholic priests (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013), as noted on Table 3, the Brazilian priests mean is significantly higher on EE ( $p < .05$ ) and on PA ( $p < .05$ ), and not significantly different on the DP subscale ( $p = .14$ ). These findings suggest that the Brazilian priests overall are not as burned out as the MBI normative samples but are more emotionally exhausted and experience a sense of greater personal accomplishment than the American priests.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI)**

Sample	EE		DP		PA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Brazilian Priests ( $n = 242$ )	15.40	11.08	4.50	4.63	39.15	7.68
American Priests ( $n = 2,460$ ) <sup>a</sup>	13.57	9.70	4.07	4.30	37.62	7.70
Total MBI sample ( $n = 11,067$ ) <sup>b</sup>	20.99	10.80	8.73	5.90	34.58	7.10
Social Services ( $n = 1,538$ ) <sup>b</sup>	21.35	10.51	7.46	5.11	32.75	7.71
Males ( $n = 2,247$ ) <sup>b</sup>	19.18	10.47	7.43	5.99	36.29	6.76
Singles ( $n = 732$ ) <sup>b</sup>	24.28	11.19	9.35	6.43	35.89	6.71
Other ( $n = 2,897$ ) <sup>b</sup>	21.24	11.05	8.11	6.15	36.43	7.00

Note: <sup>a</sup> Source: Rossetti & Rhoades (2013); <sup>b</sup> Source: Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter (1996); EE = Emotional Exhaustion; DP = Depersonalization; PA = Reduced Personal Accomplishment.

These findings are even more significant, when considering the fact that the priests in Brazil reported high workload (approximately 40% reported workload of over 50 hours per week), and the only statistically significant correlation found between burnout scores and workload was a very weak positive correlation with DP ( $r = .16$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

These findings indicate that clergy may experience stress levels similar to (or even higher than) other helping professions, but may, or may not, consequently experience higher burnout rates. It may be that, in spite of experiencing higher stress levels, priests report a lower rate of burnout due to buffering factors.

Interestingly, research indicates that clergy concurrently experience burnout and ministry satisfaction (Barnard & Curry 2012; Carroll 2006; Doolittle 2010; Rowatt 2001; Stewart-Sicking et al. 2011). Given the extensive literature on stressors experienced by clergy, one could anticipate that this

population may experience above-average rates of burnout. However, this is not necessarily the case. It is possible that priestly ministry constitutes somehow an experience of emotional extremes, and the joy, the meaningfulness, and the sense of purpose experienced in the ministry may be a buffering factor against experiencing all three dimensions of burnout.

This is not to say that burnout among clergy in Brazil should not be taken seriously. In fact, there is a significant percentile of Brazilian priests that scored in the moderate and high degree of burnout. As presented on Figure X, compared to the MBI normative sample for other professionals ( $n = 2,897$ ) provided by Maslach, Jackson, and Leiter (1996), which included religious ministers, 35.5% ( $n = 86$ ), 29.8% ( $n = 72$ ), and 41.7% ( $n = 101$ ) of the 242 participant priests of this study scored in the upper two thirds of the norm on the EE, DP, and PA subscales respectively. And thus they are

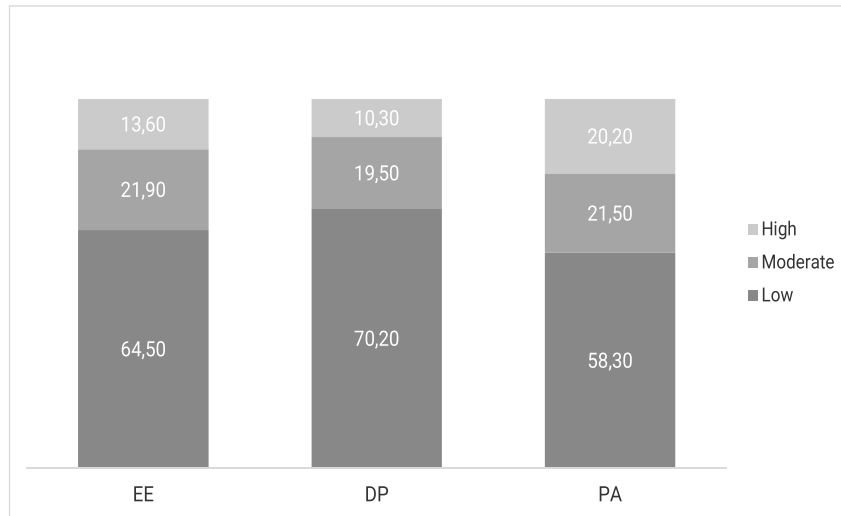


Figure 1: Priests' Burnout Rates (%) on the MBI Subscales

experiencing clinically significant levels of burnout. This suggests that clergy burnout among Catholic priests in Brazil is a serious problem and one that should be immediately and directly addressed by the leadership of the Catholic Church in Brazil.

**Type of clergy and burnout scores**

Comparing the three MBI subscale's means for type of clergy (diocesan priests vs. religious priests), as presented on Table 4, no significant differences was observed on EE ( $p = .75$ ), DP ( $p = .67$ ) or PA subscales ( $p = .83$ ).

These findings failed to support the findings of Virginia

(1998), Raj and Dean (2005), and Rossetti and Rhoades (2013), who used the MBI with Catholic priests in the United States, India, and United States respectively. One possible explanation for this inconsistency may be that, even though diocesan clergy have increased in the last years in Brazil, it is still a small group proportionally to religious order priests when compared to other countries (CARA, 2018; CERIS, 2015). Consequently, due to pastoral demands, religious priests in Brazil end up taking over pastoral roles (e.g., parish work as pastors and parochial vicars) that would be typically assumed by diocesan priests. As a result, instead of living in a religious community, which would provide, among other protective factors related to burnout, a greater sense of social

**Table 4. Means and SD on the MBI Subscales for Type of Clergy**

Type of Priest	EE		DP		PA	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Diocesan priests ( $n = 142$ )	15.62	11.77	4.63	4.48	39.04	7.65
Religious order priests ( $n = 100$ )	15.17	11.09	4.37	4.82	39.26	7.96

Note: EE = Emotional Exhaustion; DP = Depersonalization; PA = Reduced Personal Accomplishment.

support, 35% of the religious clergy surveyed in this study are living at rectories, and 10% reported they were living alone, which is an extremely unusual living arrangement for this type of clergy. Therefore, religious priests in Brazil may be at risk of burning out as much as diocesan priests and, consequently, experience similar levels of burnout.

**Burnout and demographic variables**

Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to

examine whether there were statistically significant correlations between burnout scores and some demographic variables, namely, age, ministry time, and workload. Correlations between burnout scores and these demographic variables are presented on Table 5.

A moderate negative correlation was found between age and EE ( $r = -.44$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and DP ( $r = -.40$ ;  $p < .05$ ). No statistically significant correlation was found between age and PA. The coefficient of determination for EE ( $r^2 = .19$ ) and DP ( $r^2 = .16$ ) revealed that 19% and 16% of the variance in EE

and DP, respectively, was explained by priests' age.

Similarly, a moderate negative correlation was found between ministry time and EE ( $r = -.42$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, a weak negative correlation was found between ministry time and DP ( $r = -.33$ ;  $p < .01$ ). No statistically significant correlation was found between ministry time and PA. The coefficient of determination for EE ( $r^2 = .18$ ) and DP ( $r^2 = .11$ ) revealed that 18% and 11% of the variance in EE and DP, respectively, was explained by ministry time.

**Table 5. Correlations Between Demographic Variables and MBI Scores (N = 242)**

Variable	1	2	3	EE	DP	PA
1. Age	–	.92*	-.12	-.44*	-.40*	.10
2. Ministry time		–	-.04	-.42*	-.33*	.09
3. Workload			–	.12	.16*	.04

Note: \*  $p < .05$ . EE = Emotional Exhaustion; DP = Depersonalization; PA = Reduced Personal Accomplishment.

One might hypothesize that midlife priests would be the most burned out given their stage in life, workload, and longevity in the ministry. However, younger priests showed higher levels of EE and DP, which supports other clergy burnout research findings (Barzon et al., 2006; Doolittle, 2007; Francis et al., 2004; Randall, 2007; Rutledge & Francis, 2004;). However, the present study did not support the findings of other research regarding statistically significant correlation between age and PA, as well as ministry time and PA (Francis & Turton, 2004; Francis et al., 2004; Randall, 2007; Rutledge & Francis, 2004). Interestingly, despite of experiencing higher levels of EE and DP, the younger priests in Brazil reported an inner sense of ministerial and personal accomplishment.

Generally, most interpretations on the negative correlation between age and burnout have accounted for it by means of professional development or professional experience. The longer an individual works in a stressful, people-related profession, the more they come to terms with its demands and develop strategies and behavioral patterns to reduce the likelihood of burning out. It is necessary, however, to look to the maturational process itself as making a person less prone to burnout. As individuals mature, they come to terms with whom they are and how their expectations of themselves and their actual performance need to be related to their individual psychological capabilities. In addition, the greater amount of burnout found among younger clergy may reflect differential processes in diverse phases of ministry and challenges faced to adapt to ministerial work and its demands. However, the cross-sectional design of this study does not allow

differentiation between the actual development of burnout and both ministry time and age. Therefore, longitudinal research on clergy burnout is needed in order to better understand the relationship between these variables and clergy burnout development.

In regards to workload, the only statistically significant correlation found was a very weak positive correlation with DP ( $r = .16$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Interestingly, even though the Brazilian clergy reported a significantly high workload (approximately 40% reported they work over 60 hours per week), the only statistically significant correlation found between this variable and burnout was a very weak positive correlation with DP. This result failed to support previous burnout research, which has consistently reported a statistically significant positive correlation between workload and burnout, especially in its EE dimension (Maslach, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001). The fact that priests consider their work as a "calling", rather than merely a job, may mitigate the impact of workload on perceived EE and PA. This finding echoes the findings of Gautier, Perl, & Fichter, 2012, p. 49), who quoted one of their respondent's comments to summarize their finding regarding workload and burnout: "Overworked but happy".

### Burnout and other variables

Pearson correlation coefficients were also calculated to examine whether there were statistically significant correlations between burnout scores and the four factors (VS, SS, SP, and SC) resulted from the several survey items which were also included in this study. Correlations between burnout scores and these factors are shown on Table 6.

A moderate negative correlation was found between VS and EE ( $r = -.47$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Additionally, a weak negative correlation was found between VS and DP ( $r = -.33$ ;  $p < .05$ ), and a weak positive correlation between VS and PA ( $r = .28$ ;  $p < .05$ ). A weak negative correlation was found between SS and EE ( $r = -.33$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and DP ( $r = -.22$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In addition, there was a very weak positive correlation between SS and PA ( $r = .14$ ;  $p < .05$ ). A weak negative correlation was found between SP and EE ( $r = -.24$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and SP and DP ( $r = -.20$ ;  $p < .05$ ). In addition, there was a very weak positive correlation between SP and PA ( $r = .13$ ;  $p < .05$ ). A weak negative correlation was found between SC and EE ( $r = -.32$ ;  $p < .05$ ) and between SC and DP ( $r = -.26$ ;  $p < .05$ ). There was no statistically significant correlation between SC and PA.

In consistency with the literature, several life-style or psychosocial factors were found to be associated with burnout in this study. This finding suggests that these factors may work as protective factors against burnout. Results revealed that priests who reported higher levels of SS were



less emotionally exhausted and depersonalized and had a greater sense of personal accomplishment. These results are consistent with previous research on clergy burnout (Evers & Tomic, 2003; Lee & Iverson-Gilbert, 2003), suggesting that priests who experience greater levels of support from family, peers, superiors, and parishioners tend to experience less burnout.

**Table 6. Correlations Between MBI Scores and Other Variables (N = 242)**

Survey Items Subscales	EE	DP	PA
Vocational Satisfaction (VS)	-.47*	-.33*	.28*
Social Support (SS)	-.33*	-.22*	.14*
Spiritual Practices (SP)	-.24*	-.20*	.13*
Self-Care (SC)	-.32*	-.26*	.10

Note: \*  $p < .05$ . EE = Emotional Exhaustion; DP = Depersonalization; PA = Reduced Personal Accomplishment.

Findings also indicated that priests who report greater VS experience lower levels of EE and DP, as well as an increased sense of PA. In consistency with previous research (Francis, Loudon, & Rutledge, 2004; Francis, Robbins, Kaldor, & Castle, 2005; Randall, 2004), these results indicate that vocational dissatisfaction may influence burnout experience.

Priests who reported greater engagement in SP also reported less EE and DP, and a greater sense of PA. These results confirm Rossetti and Rhoades' (2013) findings that spiritual practices such as private prayer, attending monthly spiritual journeys or retreats, daily spiritual readings, and regular spiritual direction were negatively correlated with burnout.

Another variable negatively associated with some aspects of burnout was SC. Priests who reported greater SC were less emotionally exhausted and depersonalized. However, SC did not have a significant impact on priests' sense of PA. While SC (physical exercise, sleep quality, healthy food, day off, and vacation time) tend to be frequently indicated as a protective factor against burnout, according to Rossetti and Rhoades (2013), and in fact may be at some degree correlated with not burning out, there seems to be much more powerful buffers against burnout, especially for priests. According to Rossetti and Rhoades (2013), self-care has been presented as the number one antidote to ward off burnout. Taking into consideration the findings of the present study, while self-care practices may be somewhat protective against clergy burnout, other variables, such as SS, VS, and SP, should be taken into consideration as well as important factors to warding off burnout.

## LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Aside from the limitations inherent in self-report studies, a few other limitations exist in this study. First, it is possible that the population surveyed is particularly susceptible to demand characteristics in survey research. As religious leaders, they may try to present themselves and their vocation in the best possible light. It is possible that there is a disproportionate amount of shame that impedes clergy from admitting to being burned out, especially considering that they perceive their ministry as a calling from God. Future studies may want to include personal interviews of randomly selected clergy to confirm participants' responses on the MBI.

The second limitation in this study is related to the instruments used. Even though the MBI has undergone extensive psychometric investigation leading to the confirmation of the operational definitions associated with EE, DP, and PA, these studies have not included Catholic clergy as part of their sample. Therefore, it is possible that while the MBI does an accurate assessment of burnout for most individuals within the helping professions, its current norms may not accurately reflect this specific population. Catholic clergy may be a population that might need a specific set of norms for validity and reliability of the MBI. In addition, the survey items, which was designed specifically for this study to measure spiritual and psychosocial factors, while being based on the clergy burnout literature and having obvious face validity, they did not have any data supporting any operational definition for their resulting factors (i.e., VS, SS, SP, and SP). Despite the satisfactory internal consistency found in this study for these factors, one should be aware that these factors and their use in this study are in need of further investigation in an attempt to establish operational definitions which may more accurately address the concepts that are being examined, and in doing so further explore its psychometric properties.

Finally, the area of psychological research with Catholic clergy in Brazil remains one with almost no empirical research in regard to not only burnout but also other psychological issues. For instance, future research on burnout among clergy in Brazil should also include other religious leaders from different denominations and take into consideration internal factors and personal differences that the literature has associated to clergy burnout. Additionally, further research should examine the unique qualities of spiritual practices and spirituality in the life of religious leaders in order to assist in defining the notion of spirituality as well as evaluate spirituality role on this population's mental health. Further, the development of an instrument to describe and measure clergy spirituality, to be used with a solid measure of clergy burnout, could help clarifying the unique relationship between religious

leaders' spirituality and burnout potential.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, findings of this study indicate that, even though Brazilian priests scored markedly lower on burnout than the normative sample, there is a significant number of priests in Brazil, especially those who are younger, feeling overwhelmed and experiencing clinically significant levels of burnout. This is a problem that has to be taken seriously and needs to be immediately and directly addressed. Priests compromised effectiveness, impairment, and potential for abandoning the ministry due to burnout experience may result in a variety of negative effects on priests themselves and on people entrusted to them.

This study begins to explore this issue in Brazil and highlights some important variables that may indicate whether a priest, or even other professionals, may become burned out. Essentially, the study found that a priest who is satisfied with his vocation, has a strong network of support, take good care of himself, and frequently engage in spiritual practices, which is an essential aspect of a priest's life, is very likely not going to burn out. Therefore, burnout is not simply a matter of how much priests work. If people are happy with their occupation, feel a sense of satisfaction with their lives and vocation, have a good sense of social support, and also have a strong prayer and spiritual life, they are able to endure the toughest of circumstances of their ministry.

This study only begins to build a base upon which other issues, such as celibacy, sexuality, addiction, depression, suicidality, and anxiety, to mention a few, might begin to be studied among clergy in Brazil in order to better understand their psychological functioning. The utilization of such studies by religious institutions may serve to develop programs of mental health promotion, as well as prevention and intervention to alleviate some of the experience of clergy burnout as well as other psychological needs of Brazilian priests.

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A pesquisa relatada no manuscrito foi executada com recursos próprios.

## DECLARAÇÃO DE CONFLITOS DE INTERESSE

O autor declara que não há conflitos de interesse no manuscrito submetido.

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