

## **Burnout syndrome among Catholic clergy: A systematic review**

Damián Picornell Gallar<sup>1</sup>, Eduardo González-Fraile<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Health Sciences, International University of La Rioja, UNIR,  
Logroño, Spain.

### **Corresponding author:**

Damián Picornell Gallar

Department of Health, International University of La Rioja.

C/ Gran Vía Rey Juan Carlos I, 41.

26002 Logroño, La Rioja. Spain.

E-mail: [damian.picornell075@comunidadunir.net](mailto:damian.picornell075@comunidadunir.net)

Phone: +34 644 495 118

## **Summary**

Burnout syndrome implies exhaustion, loss of motivation, low performance, and absenteeism. Catholic clergy are not exempt. This systematic review compiles and analyzes evidence related to burnout in Catholic clergy and potential modulating variables. Following the PRISMA methodology, systematic searches in different scientific databases identified 17 studies, revealing that burnout is related to age, personality traits, and type of priesthood. No relation between burnout and social support, self-care, spiritual practice, or workload was detected. It is necessary to adapt conceptual models to the peculiarities of burnout among clergy, extending assessment strategies and introducing working and organizational perspectives in the analysis of modulating variables, and in the development of prevention and intervention programs.

**Keywords:** *Burnout, Catholic priests, Systematic review, Assessment, Prevention*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2020, there were 5,363 bishops, 410,219 priests, and 48,635 deacons in the Catholic Church globally. Recent trends show a decrease in the number of priests and candidates under formation (Ufficio Centrale di Statistica della Chiesa, 2022). This phenomenon, together with the aging of the clergy, causes overload, geographical dispersion of work, and a lifestyle characterized by solitude, difficulty maintaining healthy habits, and the weakening of bonds with other colleagues (López, 2012). This profile matches the profile presented by Maslach (2017) of those vulnerable to burnout: people that constantly work with other people, perceive the receivers of their service as highly demanding, understand their work as an expression of vocation, hold strong ethical convictions, and work in a context of a shortage of financial and organizational resources. However, it should be considered that the clergy presents one peculiarity that differentiates it from other groups vulnerable to burnout. Non-working life and moral integrity are important parts of the work of priests, of which they can never walk away; that is, in their lives, there are no parts foreign to their vocation (Terry & Cunningham, 2020).

Interest in burnout arose in the field of psychology when signs of emotional exhaustion, and loss of motivation and commitment during a long career were detected in the caring professions (Freudenberger, 1974; Maslach, 1976).

Through five decades of research, burnout has been primarily described as a multifactor construct including three dimensions: i) emotional exhaustion (EE), referring to feeling overwhelmed, having insufficient physical or emotional resources to face work; ii) depersonalization (DP), arising from cynicism, understood as a negative, hostile or excessively distanced response to other

people; iii) low personal accomplishment (PA) or professional inefficiency referring to the decrease in competition, satisfaction and productivity at work (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) covers the phenomenon of burnout using a definition based on that of Maslach (WHO, 2021).

However, research on burnout is still open to new approaches, as there is no consensus on its definition (Guseva Canu et al., 2021) and its measuring instruments (Shoman et al., 2021). Furthermore, more evidence on the origin and development of the syndrome, the influence of contextual factors, and prevention and intervention strategies are required (Demerouti et al., 2021). Compared to other professions, research on burnout in the clergy of different Christian confessions, particularly the Catholic Church, has developed much slower (Terry & Cunningham, 2020; Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021). First studies considered burnout a rarely frequent myth in the reality of US priests (Fichter, 1984). However, the most recent works describe it as a silent virus with a significant impact on the life of priests (Crea, 2015). For example, a study in France estimates that 2% of active diocesan priests present severe burnout and 7% an important vulnerability to the syndrome (Piette et al., 2020). Burnout in the clergy has become a matter of interest, as evidenced by the abundance of publications, although their approaches, methodologies, and quality of the results obtained are uneven (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021).

Four literature reviews have been published within the panorama of burnout in Catholic clergy. Jackson-Jordan (2013) conducted a narrative revision on the relationship between burnout and resilience in clergy of several Christian confessions. She highlights the importance of factors such as the quality of

interpersonal relations, expectations associated with the role, the cultivation of spirituality, and emotional regulation. Positive psychology would offer an adequate framework for intervention in these areas. Mooney (2015) focuses on Catholic clergy in Ireland, reviewing the literature published between 1980 and 2015 about the burnout consequences and prevention in priests constantly exposed to illness and death situations. He highlights the importance of having personal and relational interests beyond their vocation, such as physical exercise, reading, retreats, personal accompaniment and friendship.

Adams et al. (2017) reviewed 84 publications about burnout in various occupations to establish comparisons with clergy of several Christian confessions. They concluded that the level of burnout in the clergy is moderate, with scores like those of teachers and social workers, somewhat better than those of police officers and emergency personnel, and worse than those of counselors. Finally, Ruiz-Prada et al. (2021) reviewed the literature on occupational stress and burnout syndrome in Catholic priests. They used the scoping review methodology to map the aspects of interest, highlighting factors related to personality, lifestyle, demand management, social support, and socio-cultural changes.

The four reviews mentioned use several methodologies, including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed studies, except for Mooney (2015), who refers to clergy overall. For this reason, the assessment of results obtained regarding burnout in Catholic clergy is limited. To consolidate research in this field, a systematic review providing a synthesis of the status of knowledge on this topic, identifying research priorities and problems, generating, or at least assessing, explanatory

theoretical models, is required. The PRISMA methodology provides a solid framework for this review (Moher et al., 2017; Page et al., 2021).

## **2. OBJECTIVE AND METHOD**

This work aims to compile and summarize evidence related to burnout in Catholic clergy and its potential modulating variables using the PRISMA methodology for systematic reviews.

### **2.1. Search strategy**

Studies assessing the burnout variable in Catholic clergy samples have been considered. Identifying possible studies was undertaken by systematically searching the following databases: PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, Springer, and Proquest Psychology. The following algorithm was applied: [(“Catholic”) AND (“clergy” OR “priests” OR “ministry”) AND (“burnout” OR “exhaustion”)]. The searches were carried out on May 31, 2023, and were not limited by date or language of publication.

### **2.2. Selection criteria**

The following inclusion criteria were established for the studies included in the review: (i) publications whose main topic was burnout in any aspect, (ii) samples of the Catholic clergy population. The exclusion criteria established were: (i) publications where burnout appears on a secondary level, (ii) studies with non-Catholic Christian clergy samples, (iii) studies with samples mixing priests, religious brothers and laypersons, or clergy of different confessions.

### **2.3. Data extraction**

The titles and the summary of the references found in the databases were examined independently by two researchers (DPG and EGF) to determine

which manuscripts passed the full-text review. Once the filtering was done, the same two authors independently reviewed the full-text manuscripts to determine which met the inclusion criteria. Disagreements were settled by discussion. If no agreement could be reached, the opinion of a third reviewer was proposed as the final decision.

### **3. RESULTS**

#### **3.1. Studies included in the review**

The search identified a total of 702 registers: Proquest (n=261), PubMed (n=16), Scopus (n=157), Springer (n=215), and Web of Science (n=53). After eliminating duplicates (n=199), the selection criteria were applied to the remaining 503 registries. The review of title, summary, and keywords showed a wide variety of themes, most unrelated to burnout syndrome. At this stage, 402 registers were excluded.

The remaining 101 references were recovered in full text, of which 51 were discarded where burnout among the clergy is studied within the frame of other themes (health, well-being, depression disorders, mood, occupational stress, or organizational structure). Another 18 references were discarded, as being studies with clergy samples belonging to non-Catholic confessions (mainly the Anglican Church in the United Kingdom and the Methodist Church in the United States). Other four review articles, four theoretical studies with no population sample, and ten with a mixed sample were rejected. The number of registries identified from databases included in the review was 14. Reading the selected registries allowed the identification of 9 relevant references not found in databases. A manual search was done to recover the full text of 7 studies, of

which one was excluded because it lacked a sample and three because of the heterogeneous composition of the sample. Finally, the total number of articles included in the review was 17. Figure 1 graphically outlines the selection process.

[Place Figure 1 here]

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the items included in the review. Since some studies are based on the same population sample, they have been considered only one piece of research.

[Place Table 1 here]

### **3.2. Prevalence**

When discussing the prevalence of burnout, it should be remembered that according to the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) manual (Maslach et al., 2108), high scores in the EE and DP subscales and low PA indicate burnout. However, there are no cut-off scores, nor can a total score by adding up the scores in the three subscales be obtained, to differentiate cases and non-cases. MBI provides a dimensional approach to burnout. Subsequently, the analysis of the data obtained in a sample must differentiate the scores in each dimension, establishing insofar as possible comparisons with normative values for the overall population or with other similar samples.

Among the reviewed articles, seven could be considered prevalence studies on burnout in Catholic clergy from population samples in one or more countries. However, not all of them meet the above mentioned requirements. In some, results are classified in tertiles, whereas in others, only the mean and standard



deviation for each dimension is reported, without establishing a comparison with normative data for the country's overall population or with similar research.

Two studies place burnout prevalence in clergy at a low level (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Machogu et al., 2022), and the percentage of priests affected by a high burnout level is minimal. On the other hand, five studies place clergy burnout prevalence at a high-level (Barzon et al., 2006; Caraballo, 2019; De Lima Dias, 2019; Francis et al., 2004; López-Herrera et al., 2014).

Table 2 presents scores in the three MBI subscales reported in some articles analyzed. The differences that can be found regarding the scores reported by Francis et al. (2004) are due to the use of the MBI version adapted to clergy (Rutledge & Francis, 2004).

[Place Table 2 here]

Table 3 presents the distribution by tertiles of the scores in the three MBI subscales reported by some studies. The sample size, reliability of instruments, cultural differences, and ecclesial context where priests exercise their ministry influence the results obtained.

[Place Table 3 here]

### **3.3. Modulating variables**

#### **Age and length of ministry**

Five of the studies reviewed coincide in pointing out a significant correlation between age and the level of burnout in Catholic clergy, although it is not identical for the three dimensions of the construct (Barzon et al., 2006; De Lima Dias, 2019; Francis et al., 2004; Machogu et al., 2022; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013). The correlation between age and EE is negative and significant, with the

highest scores among the youngest priests. The correlation between age and DP is also significantly negative; the lowest scores are among those over 70. However, the correlation between age and PA is very low or null. The youngest priests obtain the highest scores in EE and DP, although, paradoxically, they show high PA (De Lima Dias, 2019; Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013).

The length of ministry do not necessarily match age since it is possible to receive priestly ordination in a middle or even advanced age. Its correlation with EE and DP is moderately negative and not significant related to PA (De Lima Dias, 2019; Machogu et al., 2022). Barzon et al. (2006) note that the evolution of burnout through the length of ministry descends in peaks.

### **Personality**

The relation between burnout and personality as a protective and predictive factor of the syndrome was approached by three of the articles reviewed, Francis et al. (2004) adopted the Eysenck model, Joseph et al. (2011), the Big Five model, and Francis & Crea (2015), the Jung model. Results agree on highlighting that the correlation between the traits of kindness, extroversion, and conscientiousness with EE and DP is negative and positive with PA (Francis et al., 2004; Joseph et al., 2011; Francis & Crea, 2015). However, the traits of neuroticism and psychoticism correlate positively with EE and DP and negatively with PA (Francis et al., 2004; Joseph et al., 2011).

In sum, introverts, with greater cognitive rigidity, and less emotional stability are more vulnerable to burnout than extroverts, with a more flexible mind and more emotional stability.

### **Type of priesthood**

There are two types of priests: diocesan or secular, ordained in a diocese under the authority of a bishop, and religious, who belong to a religious order or congregation, professing vows and living in community with religious non-priests. Both secular and religious priests live in celibacy.

Four reviewed studies researched the relationship between the type of priesthood and burnout. Virginia (1998) and Raj & Dean (2005) detected the highest levels of burnout among diocesan clergy, followed by active-life religious and by monastic priests, who show significantly lower scores in EE and DP and significantly highest in PA. However, Rossetti & Rhoades (2013) and De Lima Dias (2019) did not find significant differences in burnout level between diocesan and religious priests. They concluded that the scores of both are similar when their living and working conditions are alike.

### **Celibacy**

Only the study of Joseph et al. (2010) discusses the matter of celibacy, asking whether there is a relation with burnout and engagement. After analyzing the correlation between celibacy and burnout, the authors concluded that the commitment to celibacy is negatively associated with the EE and DP dimensions and positively with PA.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality is an essential aspect of the priestly ministry, which can only be understood as a response to a vocation that affects their whole life beyond the mere exercise of professional activity. Six of the studies reviewed approach it as

an auxiliary variable in the assessment of burnout, according to two aspects: spiritual practice (De Lima Dias, 2019; Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998) and spiritual dryness (Büssing et al., 2013; 2017).

Regarding spiritual practice, no significant correlation was found with the level of burnout, except for monastic priests (De Lima Dias, 2019; Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998). Francis et al. (2017) found that the time invested in prayer correlates negatively with EE.

Büssing et al. (2013, 2017) approach the relationship between burnout and spirituality from the perspective of spiritual dryness, understood as a crisis caused by a lack of perception of the transcendent and a low sense of personal coherence, which is reflected in lower psychological health and low satisfaction with life itself. They found significant positive correlation between spiritual dryness and EE and DP. The EE dimension is one of the main predictive factors of spiritual dryness.

## **Lifestyle**

The reviewed studies discuss several aspects of a priest's lifestyle that appear as modulating burnout variables.

The first variable refers to workload, usually measured by the number of weekly working hours. Rossetti & Rhoades (2013) and De Lima Dias (2019) did not find significant correlation between workload and burnout level. On the other hand, Barzon et al. (2006) observed that the proportion of priests affected by burnout increases as working hours decrease.

The second variable refers to the academic level. Barzon et al. (2006) identify it as the independent variable that most affects burnout. The higher the academic

level, the lower the EE and DP, and the higher the PA. Machogu et al. (2002) confirm this conclusion in the different context of Kenya.

A third modulating variable in burnout is social support. According to Virginia (1998) and Raj & Dean (2005), the greater impact of social support variables such as support of superiors, sharing recreation and communication of personal problems, happens in the PA dimension. The variable that has most influence in a lower EE is support of superiors. Machogu et al. (2002) found that the support initiatives by the diocese, such as meetings, personal accompaniment, and spiritual retreats, are valued as inefficient by most priests in the sample of Kenya.

De Lima Dias (2019) found very weak correlation between social support and the MBI dimensions. Moreover, the correlation between burnout and self-care in food, sleep, or physical exercise was weak.

The last variable refers to the satisfaction with priestly vocation, the lifestyle, and the type of work it entails. Raj & Dean (2005) confirmed the hypothesis that priests with greater vocational satisfaction show the lowest burnout levels compared to those less satisfied. They found a significantly positive correlation between vocational satisfaction with PA and DP but not with EE. In conclusion, priests may simultaneously feel satisfied with their vocation and emotionally exhausted.

Rossetti & Rhoades (2013) highlighted the important role vocational satisfaction plays as a variable to prevent and reduce burnout. They found a negative correlation between the feeling of happiness as a priest and EE and DP, and a positive correlation with PA. Francis et al. (2017) found no significant correlation

between satisfaction in the ministry and time invested in prayer, nor between the burnout level and taking up a new hobby or living with other people.

The exposition of the modulating variables of burnout in Catholic clergy has shown that it is a complex phenomenon where very diverse factors intervene, not all of which are controllable. Table 4 summarizes the variables analyzed by the authors of the studies reviewed and the current status of accumulated evidence.

[Place Table 4 here]

### **3.4. Personal and professional impacts**

There are minimum references to the impacts of burnout on health and professional life in the studies reviewed. Only López-Herrera et al. (2014) report a significant positive correlation between EE and DP with anxiety and insomnia and a negative linear relation of PA with depression and social dysfunction. With regards to the consumption of tobacco and alcohol, results showed a relation between tobacco use and EE and DP and alcohol consumption and DP.

### **3.5. Prevention and intervention strategies**

Most of the studies reviewed occasionally allude to the need to prevent burnout in Catholic clergy, suggesting specific strategies to bear in mind in the future. However, there are barely any references to intervention. Barzon et al. (2006) highlighted that burnout syndrome does not start suddenly but develops slowly over time. Therefore, it is essential to provide adequate information on the manifestations of burnout, its causes, and preventive strategies. It is imperative to pay special attention to younger generations of priests to alleviate risks of

burnout triggered by the realities of ministry and also in priests aged between 40 and 50, so that disillusionment and mistrust do not contribute to maintain the syndrome. There is a need however for appropriate emotional training (bearing in mind the high DP score) to create protection strategies to deal with difficult situations.

Vicente-Galindo et al. (2017) detected the highest values in emotional intelligence and lower burnout among priests who felt fulfilled and have good self-esteem. The authors propose including several burnout prevention and intervention programs in priestly training, primarily focused on strengthening emotional clarity and attention as key dimensions of emotional intelligence and overall well-being.

Francis et al. (2007) studied the possible value of pets (dogs or cats) on burnout prevention, with inconclusive results.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

Most articles reviewed respond to the challenge raised by Fichter (1984) whether burnout in priests is a myth or reality. Except Rossetti & Rhoades (2013), the authors consider burnout as a reality among the clergy, which must be researched in depth, with the practical aim of promoting adequate prevention.

Prevalence data contributed by the studies show important differences in publication dates, countries, socio-cultural contexts and ecclesial situation. However these differences may be related to three requirements faced by an empirical study of the burnout identified by Francis et al. (2004): these concern the need for a conceptual model for burnout adjusted to the reality of priests,

the lack of a reliable assessment instrument operationalizing the construct, and the difficulty of compiling data from random samples.

#### **4.1. Conceptual models**

Regarding the conceptual model, the authors of the reviewed studies consider burnout a multidimensional construct, and the majority initially accept the Maslach model. However, they raise specific objections when confirming that EE and DP often work as a sole factor independent from PA (Joseph et al., 2010; López-Herrera et al., 2014). Moreover, as Virginia (1998) observed, it is unclear whether the PA dimension covers what fulfilment means for clergy.

Some studies have highlighted that many priests feel exhausted and personally fulfilled (De Lima Dias, 2019; Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013).

The model by Francis et al. (2005) arises as an alternative to Maslach's model to explain this fact, reducing the dimensions of burnout in the clergy to those of emotional exhaustion in the ministry and satisfaction in the ministry. A research priority consists of preparing burnout conceptual models sufficiently adjusted to the peculiarities the syndrome presents among clergy.

#### **4.2. Modulating variables**

The studies reviewed found significant results that contradict certain widespread ideas on the causes of clergy burnout. With regards to age and length of ministry, a growing degree of EE and DP is expected as years go by, but this hypothesis has not been confirmed (Barzon et al., 2006; De Lima Dias, 2019; Francis et al., 2004; Machogu et al., 2022; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013).

The results of the variable type of priesthood partially contradict those of the variable social support. Virginia (1998) and Raj & Dean (2005) found higher levels of burnout in diocesan priests than in religious priests, which they explain



by the lower social support they get from living in solitude. However, according to De Lima Dias (2019), the correlation between social support and the level of burnout is very weak, and the levels of burnout of religious priests are closer to those of diocesan when they exercise similar roles under similar living conditions. The relationship between social support and burnout does not seem to be entirely clear. Therefore more research is required.

Regarding workload, the results do not confirm the hypothesis that a greater number of hours impacts a higher level of burnout. Many priests with high workloads show a high level of EE and DP simultaneously, which may be evidence that they are two different constructs (De Lima Dias, 2019; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013).

On the other hand, Barzon et al. (2006) observed that the proportion of priests affected by burnout increases as working hours decrease. This could be explained by considering that burnout favors decoupling from priestly ministry.

The widespread view is that burnout in priests is due to neglect of spirituality.

The results contributed by the studies contradict this affirmation since no relation is found between spiritual practice and the level of burnout (De Lima Dias, 2019; Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998).

However, spirituality is not easily measurable with variables, as seen in the articles by Büssing et al. (2013; 2017). In any case, it seems clear that the mere increase in spiritual practice does not by itself solve burnout among priests.

The results regarding the influence of the personality match those of the research in other groups. Priests with a more introverted personality, emotionally unstable, and high neuroticism are more vulnerable to burnout (Francis et al., 2004; Francis & Crea, 2015; Joseph et al., 2011). Regarding the

relation between burnout and celibacy, more studies confirming the conclusions of Joseph et al. (2010) are required.

It is noteworthy that the authors of the reviewed articles barely refer to variables of the professional or organizational kind. Only Virginia (1998) includes the variables of support of superiors and the relation with colleagues; Rossetti & Rhoades (2013) and De Lima Dias (2019) refer to workload, and engagement is only researched by Joseph et al., with regards to celibacy (2010) and personality (2011).

This lack of interest in professional variables could be due to the bias of supposing that the origin of burnout stems more from the person than the working and organizational environment. According to Maslach (2017), this bias creates a vision of the impact of burnout reduced to a personal level and a type of intervention focused on the person that is limited if not coupled with environmental changes. In the studies reviewed, the references to the impact of burnout in priests and the prevention and intervention strategies confirm these views. For example, providing information on the subjects (Barzon et al., 2006), developing emotional intelligence (Vicente-Galindo et al., 2017), and anecdotally, the benefits of having a pet (Francis et al., 2007). As Mooney (2015) pointed out, preventing burnout is essential for persons and the health of the Church, which must articulate support structures.

### **4.3. Measuring instruments**

The MBI is the most widely used instrument in studies of burnout in Catholic clergy. Francis et al. (2004) pointed out the need for an assessment instrument to adequately operationalize burnout in clergy. Although the clerical group was

included among the groups whose burnout could be assessed using the original MBI version, several authors of the articles reviewed show reservations about whether this instrument is completely appropriate in the special case of burnout in priests (Francis et al., 2004; Francis & Crea, 2015; Joseph et al., 2010, 2011; Virginia, 1998). The change of MBI vocabulary to terms more applicable to ministry does not seem to cause significant differences (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013). The MBI modified version for clergy (Rutledge & Francis, 2004) had no continuity beyond the research conducted by Francis et al. (2004; 2007). The need to delve deeper into the interpretation of results is reviewed in the studies using more precise tools such as cluster analysis (Barzon et al., 2006) or correspondence canonical analysis (López-Herrera et al., 2014). On the other hand, the Francis Burnout Inventory (FBI), used in two studies (Francis & Crea, 2015; Francis et al., 2017), require adaptation and testing in samples of different countries.

#### **4.4. Quality of samples**

Compiling data from random samples is a serious difficulty in researching burnout in the clergy (Francis et al., 2004). Among the studies reviewed, there are very few that have used random samples. Moreover, other limitations should be mentioned, such as the low response rate to initial requests and the size of the samples, which is very small in some studies. Given these difficulties, sometimes heterogeneous samples composed by priests and nuns (Crea, 2018) or priests and religious brothers (Pacciolla & Sanagiotto, 2022) have been used. This option complicates research since it adds variables that cannot be sufficiently controlled.

In sum, the lack of random samples results in a weak empirical base, which in turn influences a low reliability of prevalence indexes, poorly supported conceptual models and a significant limitation when trying to establish comparisons with other groups, such as the clergy of other Christian confessions or even other religions.

The attainment of a solid empirical basis for the study of burnout in Catholic clergy also requires continuity in the lines of research. Francis et al. (2004) propose successive replications in their research every ten years to obtain scientific evidence of the evolution of burnout syndrome in Catholic priests in England and Wales. Vicente-Galindo et al. (2017) and De Lima Dias (2019) highlight the need to conduct longitudinal studies to better understand the relationship between burnout among priests and its modulating variables.

However, none of these recommendations have been implemented so far. Only the research by Virginia (1998) was replicated by Raj & Dean (2005).

A tradition of researching burnout in the clergy should be developed, creating synergies with other more established assessment and psychological intervention strategies with priests. Psychological help for priests has usually focused on personality assessment, especially for candidates to the priesthood, as well as on the diagnosis and treatment of pathologies (Chiclana-Actis, 2019). Burnout research can provide a complementary functional perspective of great value for candidates to the priesthood and for the different stages of priestly ministry.

#### **4.5. Limitations**

There are three main limitations in this work. Firstly, since it is the first systematic review on burnout in Catholic clergy, it has not been possible to

establish comparisons with the results obtained in other reviews since the existing four reviews use different methodologies. A second limitation stems from excluding research based on heterogeneous samples from the review, such as those by Crea (2018) and Pacciolla & Sanagiotta (2022). Less rigorous criteria for selecting studies may have revealed a richer range of evidence. Research on burnout in Catholic clergy is relatively recent. For this reason, the number of correlates that have been investigated is limited, as shown in the results of this systematic review. This has limited access to data of interest, which could have changed some conclusions in this work. The third limitation refers to the need for more results regarding the impact of burnout and prevention and intervention, which could be because these topics have been discussed in other studies in the wider framework of health and well-being. These three limitations could be solved by future research.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

This systematic review study has shown the complexity of burnout in Catholic clergy and the plurality of perspectives to approach it. Understanding of this phenomenon has improved due to the increase in the number and quality of research. There is clear evidence of the relationship between burnout, age, academic level, personality traits and the type of priesthood. No relation between burnout, spiritual practice, workload, social support, or self-care was detected. There needs to be more references to the impact burnout has on personal and professional life, as well as on prevention and intervention.

To extend and improve the quantity and quality of the evidence, it is necessary to have conceptual models better adapted to the peculiarity of burnout within

the clergy and openness to a professional and organizational perspective in the analysis of modulating variables.

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### **Competing Interests**

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

### **Author Contributions**

All authors contributed to the conception and design of the study. XXX and XXX performed material preparation, data collection and analysis. XXX wrote the first draft of the manuscript, and authors commented on previous versions. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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\* *Articles included in this review*

**Table 1.** *Characteristics of the articles included in the review*

	<b>Study</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Instrument</b>
1	Barzon et al. (2006)	n=321 diocesan priests	Range: not declared Mean: not declared	Diocese of Padova (Italy)	MBI
2	Büssing et al. (2013)	n=425 diocesan priests	Range: not declared Mean: 58 years	Several dioceses from Germany	MBI
3	Büssing et al. (2017)	n=3,824 diocesan priests	Range: 30-85 years Mean: not declared	22 of 27 dioceses from Germany	MBI
4	Caraballo (2019)	n=22 diocesan priests	Range: not declared Mean: not declared	Dioceses from Argentina	MBI
5	De Lima Dias (2019)	n=242 priests [diocesans n=142; religious n=100]	Range: 26-86 years Mean: 48.62 años	87 diocese y 52 religious orders from Brasil	MBI
6	Francis et al. (2004; 2007)	n=1,468 diocesan priests	Range: not declared Mean: not declared	Several dioceses from England and Wales	MBI adapted to clergy
7	Francis & Crea (2015); Francis et al. (2017)	n=155 priests [diocesans n=89; religious n=68]	Range: 24-74 years Mean: 46 yeras	From Italy n=98 From other countries n=57	FBI
8	Joseph et al. (2010; 2011)	n=511 diocesan priests	Range: 27-88 years Mean: 43.2 years	16 dioceses from South of India	MBI
9	López-Herrera et al. (2014); Vicente-Galindo et al. (2017)	n=881 diocesan priests	Range: not declared Mean: 45.89 years	10 dioceses from Mexico 5 dioceses from Costa Rica 1 dioceses from Puerto Rico 5 dioceses from Central America	MBI
10	Machogu et al. (2022)	n=126 diocesan and diacons priests	Range: 35-70 years Mean: not declared	Dioceses from Nairobi (Kenia)	MBI
11	Raj & Dean (2005)	n=101 priests [diocesans n=50; religious n=51]	Range: 30-93 years Mean: 45 years	6 dioceses from India 8 religious orders	MBI
12	Rossetti & Rhoades (2013)	n=2,482 priests [diocesans n=2,145; religious n=337]	Range: not declared Mean: 45 years	23 dioceses from United States of America	MBI
13	Virginia (1998)	n=142 priests [diocesans n=50; religious n=49; Monastic life n=43]	Range: not declared Mean: not declared	United States of America	MBI

MBI = Maslach Burnout Inventory; FBI = Francis Burnout Inventory

**Table 2.** Average scores in MBI subscales

Study	EE		DP		PA	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Barzon et al. (2006)	15.18	8.63	6.45	4.79	36.22	6.88
De Lima Dias (2019)	15.4	11.08	4.5	4.63	39.15	7.68
Francis et al. (2004)	24	6.5	23.2	5.4	23.4	4.4
López-Herrera et al. (2014)	18.88	0.32	6.91	.16	33.86	0.27
Machogu et al. (2022)	9.01	2.93	9.41	3.59	11.02	2.32
Rossetti & Rhoades (2013)	13.57	9.7	4.07	4.3	37.62	7.7

*M*: Mean; *SD*: Standard Deviation.

**Table 3.** Distribution by tertiles of the scores in the three MBI subscales

Study	Country	EE (%)			DP (%)			PA (%)		
		<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>
Barzon et al. (2006)	Italy	45.8	33	21.20	23.7	23.7	52.6	43	35.3	21.8
Caraballo (2019)	Argentina	19	57.1	23.8	19	61.9	19	23.8	47.6	28.6
De Lima Dias (2019)	Brasil	64.5	21.9	13.6	70.2	19.5	10.3	58.3	21.5	20.2
López-Herrera et al. (2014)	Mexico	36.7	31.9	31.4	34.1	28.4	37.5	40.9	21.7	37.3
	Costa Rica	30.1	26.6	43.4	36.4	33.5	30.1	35.3	15.6	49.1
	Puerto Rico	33.3	35.6	31.1	28.9	31.1	40	46.7	22.2	31.1
	Central America	21.7	26.1	52.2	17.4	39.1	43.5	17.4	34.8	47.8

*L*: low level; *M*: medium level; *H*: high level

**Table 4.** *Modulating variables of burnout in the Catholic clergy*

Category	Variables	Evidence
Age and length of ministry	Age	Negative correlation with EE and DP (Francis et al., 2004; Barzon et al., 2006; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; De Lima Dias, 2019; Machogu et al., 2022)
	Length of ministry	Descending evolution in peaks (Barzon et al., 2006) Negative correlation with EE and DP (De Lima Dias, 2019; Machogu et al., 2022)
Personality	Kindness	Negative correlation with EE and DP and positive with PA (Joseph et al., 2011)
	Extroversion	Negative correlation with EE and DP and positive with PA (Francis et al., 2004; Joseph et al., 2011) Negative correlation with SEEM and negative with SIMS (Francis & Crea, 2015)
	Conscientiousness	Negative correlation with EE and DP and positive with PA (Joseph et al., 2011)
	Neuroticism	Positive correlation with EE and DP (Francis et al., 2004; Joseph et al., 2011) Negative correlation with LP (Joseph et al., 2011)
	Psychoticism	Positive correlation with EE and DP (Francis et al., 2004)
Type of priesthood	Diocesan	Higher scores in EE and DP, lower in PA (Virginia, 1998; Raj & Dean, 2005) Insignificant differences in EE, DP, and PA (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; De Lima Dias, 2019)
	Active life religious priests	Lower score in EE and DP, higher in PA (Virginia, 1998; Raj & Dean, 2005) Insignificant differences in EE, DP and PA (Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; De Lima Dias, 2019)
	Monastic life priests	Significantly lower score in EE and DP, greater in PA (Virginia, 1998)
Celibacy	Commitment to celibacy	Negative correlation with EE and DP and positive with PA (Joseph et al., 2010)
Spirituality	Spiritual practices	No significant correlations, except for in monastic life (De Lima Dias, 2019; Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013; Virginia, 1998) Negative correlation between praying time and EE (Francis et al., 2017)
	Spiritual dryness	Positive correlation with EE, DP and PA (Büssing et al., 2013; 2017)
Lifestyle	Workload	There is no significant correlation. (De Lima Dias, 2019; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013)
	Academic level	Negative correlation with EE and DP and positive with PA (Barzon et al., 2006; Machogu et al., 2022)
	Social support	Positive correlation with PA (Raj & Dean, 2005; Virginia, 1998) Weak correlation with EE, DP and PA (De Lima Dias, 2019)
	Self-care	Weak negative correlation with EE and DP (De Lima Dias, 2019)
	Vocational satisfaction	Negative correlation with DP and positive with PA (Raj & Dean, 2005; Rossetti & Rhoades, 2013)



