

Pastoral Stress and Psychological Resilience among Catholic Priests in Ondo Diocese, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study examined pastoral stress and psychological resilience among Catholic priests in Ondo Diocese, Nigeria. The objectives were to explore the primary sources of pastoral stress, assess levels of psychological resilience, and determine the relationship between pastoral stress and psychological resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, Nigeria respectively. The study was anchored on the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping as well as Richardson's Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency theories. A correlational design was adopted, where 103 priests were selected using simple random sampling based on Yamane's formula. Data was collected through adapted questionnaire using Google Form. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation) and Pearson's correlation were used for analysis. Findings revealed a moderate level of pastoral stress ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.57$) and a high level of psychological resilience ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.40$) among priests in Ondo Diocese. The relationship between pastoral stress and psychological resilience was negative but not statistically significant ($r = -.164$, $p = .097$). The study recommended that: Diocese of Ondo should ensure regular psychological evaluation of priests to determine their level of stress and administer appropriate remedy; that appropriate spiritual, social, economic and psychological support be rendered to priests to enhance their resilience; that institutions for priestly formation should educate their students on sources of stress and coping mechanisms to familiarize the priests and enable them cope with the daily demands of their pastoral roles. Future researchers should consider: longitudinal studies on stress and pattern of resilience among priests; comparative study on the lived pastoral experiences of priest in urban and rural areas.

Keywords: Pastoral Stress, Psychological Well-being, Resilience, Stress, Catholic priests

INTRODUCTION

There has been a growing outcry over the mental and emotional toll of pastoral life as studies reveal that pastoral stress and a lack of psychological resilience can significantly impact priests' wellbeing and longevity. Psychological resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands (American Psychological Association, APA, 2022). A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities. Predominant among them are: (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific coping strategies (APA, 2022). Psychological research thus demonstrates that the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced. Psychological resilience is heavily hinged on components such as emotional regulation, optimism, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, social support, and meaning-making, all of which contribute towards adaptive functioning under stress (APA, 2024; Villani et al., 2021).

However, stress is a natural aspect of human experience and a normal physiological response (Machogu et al., 2022). Pastoral stress therefore refers to the psychological and emotional strain experienced by priests due to the

demands of ministry. This includes role or work overload, isolation, unrealistic expectations, and exposure to trauma (Schaufeli & Taris, 2013). In a scoping review of global literature on occupational stress and burnout among Catholic priests, with a particular emphasis on European and Latin American contexts, Ruiz-Prada et al. (2021) found that priests frequently encounter death, trauma, and crisis situations in their pastoral duties, which contribute greatly to pastoral stress. These stressors can accumulate over time, leading to stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and even spiritual desolation. The traumatized person's story, affect, or behaviour can so affect the helper that they take on the same trauma (Ehusani, 2021). This is often referred to as secondary stress. However, the Catholic priest is expected to live a life of simplicity, humility and devotion to God. Thus, among the many duties and responsibilities of a priest is the fact that priests are authorized to celebrate the sacraments, provide spiritual guidance and leadership in terms of pastoral counselling support to the faithful and the people of God in general (Francis et al. 2020). In addition to the aforementioned, the priest is equally expected to serve as a leader in the community of the faithful and at the same time providing pastoral care to the sick, the dying and the bereaved (Catholic Church, 1999). However, in a bid to meet all of these needs, priests often experience great deal of pastoral stress that can become overwhelming. Since Catholic priests are expected to serve as spiritual leaders, counselors, administrators, and moral exemplars, these roles often lead to chronic stress and burnout if not properly managed (Ruiz-Prada et al., 2021).

Recently in Nigeria, there have been significant social and economic changes. These changes have affected the occupational behaviour of the individual worker especially those in the helping profession. As a result, Archbishop Matthew Ishaya Audu of Jos lately bemoaned that Nigeria is witnessing a rise in "mentally unstable priests" (ACI Africa, 2025). This is due largely to inadequate mental health training and support systems within Seminaries and Dioceses. While priests are highly educated individuals, some still lack awareness of mental health symptoms and coping strategies which affect their resilience. In Ondo Diocese, Nigeria, there seems to be no exception to this as it relates directly to priests' mental health, emotional burnout experienced and diminishing satisfaction.

In other words, given the growing psychological and vocational pressures priests face, research on pastoral stress and psychological resilience is critical for sustaining their health and ministry's effectiveness as it will help both the hierarchy and priests on how to cope with stress and relatively build strong resilience for positive mental and physical health. Consequent upon this, a lot of research and study has been done on the stress priests experience in pastoral life and its connection to their resilience at the global, regional, national levels but no research or finding has been done on this same subject matter as it relates to Catholic Priests in Ondo Diocese. Thus, the objectives of this study are: to explore the primary sources of pastoral stress experienced by priests of Ondo Diocese, South-Western Nigeria; to assess the levels of psychological resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South Western, Nigeria; and to determine the relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South Western, Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research employed the correlational design, making use of quantitative data, obtained through adapted questionnaire. The structured questionnaire was adapted to capture the three research objectives. This method was considered adequate for this study because it enables the researcher to analyze the quantitative data without manipulating the variables, while establishing their natural relationship.

Population and Sampling

The population for this research was 138 priests in Ondo Diocese (Ondo Diocesan Diary, 2024) who are in charge of the respective apostolates. The researcher considered this population because they are the direct and primary informants in the study. Also, the Yamane (1973) sample size determination formula with the confidence level at 95%, and the margin error at 5% was adopted, where the sample of 103 priests was obtained for the study. Also, the simple random sampling technique was employed in this study as it provides all the participants equal chances of participating in the study.

Instrumentation

Two sets of questionnaires were used for data collection. The first was “Work Stress Questionnaire (WSQ)”, adapted from Frantz & Holmgren, (2019). This tool was designed to identify specific stressors within the work environment. The second was the “Resilience Scale for Adults (RSA)”, adapted from Friborg et al, (2003). It was designed to assess protective factors that contribute to psychological resilience in adults and how individuals maintain mental health and adapt positively in the face of stress, adversity, or trauma. To ensure the validity of the instrument, the researcher checked the standardized questionnaires whose validities have been verified in a number of studies and opinions from experts’ in the field of psychology assisted in correcting the adapted questionnaire to fit the need of the current study. The reliability of the instruments was determined using the Cronbach’s Alpha, where the overall reliability was $\alpha = 0.83$ indicating strong internal consistency.

Data Analysis Procedure

Mean (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) were used to analyze the descriptive data obtained from the questionnaire. The response options for WSQ were: Never (N = 1); Rarely (R = 2); Sometimes (S = 3); Often (O = 4) and Always (A = 5). The cumulative percentage was used to for decision making in this regard. In the same vein, the response options for RSA were Not at all True (NT = 1); Rarely True (RT = 2); Sometimes True (ST = 3); Often True (OT = 4), and Very True (VT = 5). With the 5-point scale, the decision rule was, item with Mean score of $\leq 1 - 2.49$ were considered low stressors or not true; item with Mean score of $2.5 - 3.49$ were considered medium stressors or sometimes true; and item with Mean score of ≥ 3.5 were considered high stressors or very true. On the other hand, the index for interpreting the correlation coefficients (r) was: .0 and $< .10$ = no correlation; .10 and $< .30$ = low correlation; .30 and $< .50$ = medium correlation; .50 and $< .70$ = strong or high correlation; .70 and < 1.0 = very strong or very high correlation and 1.0 = perfect correlation. Also, the index to interpret the P-Values was: if $p < .05$, there is a correlation and if $p < .05$, then, no correlation. To this end, the total number of questionnaire sent out for this study was 103, and same number was filled and used for the analysis. This implies a 100% return rate. Thus, this number was considered adequate for analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 1 Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Factor	Category	N	%
	20 – 30yrs	3	2.90
	31 – 40yrs	23	21.4
Age	41 – 50yrs	53	51.5
	51 – 60yrs	19	18.4
	61 – 70yrs	6	5.80
	Total	103	100.0
	1 – 10yrs	32	31.1
	11 – 20yrs	50	48.5
Years of Priestly Service	21 – 30yrs	14	13.6

	31 – 40yrs	6	5.80
	41 – 50yrs	1	1.00
	Total	103	100.0
	Parish Priest	73	70.9
Current Pastoral Role	Administrator	12	11.7
	Chaplain	6	5.80
	Others	12	11.7
	Total	103	100.0
	BA/BSc	40	38.8
Level of Education	MA	41	39.8
	Ph.D	16	15.5
	Others	6	5.80
	Total	103	100.0

Source: Researcher’s field work, 2026

Demographic characteristics of respondents in Table 1 shows that, of the 103 respondents that participated in this study, 2.9% were between the ages of 20 – 30 years, 21.4% were between the ages of 31 – 40 years, 51.5% were between the ages of 41 – 50 years, 18.4% were between the ages of 51 – 60 years, and 5.8% of the respondents were aged between 61 – 70years. This implies that majority of the priests that participated in the study were between the ages of 41 – 50yrs. Also, years of priestly service revealed that 31.1% have been priests for 1 – 10years, 48.5% 11 – 20years, 13.6% 21 – 30years, 5.8% 31 – 40 years, and 1% 41 – 50years. It thus suggests that priests who are between 11 – 20yrs dominated the study. In terms of the current pastoral roles of priests sampled in the study, results shows that 70.9% were parish priests, 11.7% were administrators, 5.8% were chaplains while 11.7% were serving other roles. These findings implies that parish priests participated more in the study. Regarding the level of education of sampled priests, results shows that 38.8% had BA/BSc, 39.8% had MA, furthermore 15.5% had Ph.D and 5.8% had other qualifications. It therefore implies that priests with MA dominated the study.

Analysis Based on Research Objectives

Objective 1: To explore the primary sources of pastoral stress experienced by priests of Ondo Diocese, South-Western Nigeria.

Table 2 Descriptive result on sources of pastoral stress experienced by priests

Variables	Question Items	N	Mean	SD
Indistinct Organization	I receive conflicting expectations from parishioners and Diocesan authorities.	103	2.48	.82
	My pastoral responsibilities are clearly defined	103	4.28	.99

and Conflict	Role	I am expected to fulfill roles beyond my spiritual mandate (e.g., fundraising, conflict mediation).	103	3.16	1.14
		I experience tension between liturgical duties and administrative tasks.	103	2.40	.98
		I feel uncertain about what is expected of me in crisis situations.	103	2.10	.95
	Total			2.88	.58
Workload Intensity		I have more responsibilities than I can manage effectively	103	2.36	1.03
		I often work beyond normal hours, including weekends and holidays	103	3.22	1.12
		I feel emotionally drained due to the volume of pastoral tasks	103	2.56	.925
		I struggle to complete my assignments within the expected time	103	2.43	.847
		I frequently multitask without adequate support	103	2.65	1.10
	Total			2.65	.76
Exposure to Trauma, Death, and Crises		I Frequently conduct funerals or minister to grieving families	103	2.83	1.06
		I have been exposed to traumatic events such as violence, accidents, or disasters in my parish	103	2.04	.999
		I feel emotionally affected by the suffering of parishioners I counsel.	103	3.27	.899
		I experience lingering distress after responding to emergencies	103	2.39	.888
		I feel spiritually depleted after repeated exposure to death and trauma	103	2.07	.952
	Total			2.52	.72

Source: Researcher's field work, 2026

Results in Table 2 on sources of pastoral stress experienced by priests in Ondo Diocese were presented according to three main stressors. The first stressor being indistinct organization and role conflict has the highest overall Mean ($M = 2.88$) and Standard Deviation ($SD = .58$) followed by the second stressor, workload intensity, with an overall Mean ($M = 2.65$) and Standard Deviation ($SD = .76$). The third stressor i.e. exposure to trauma, death and crises situations had the lowest overall Mean ($M = 2.52$) and Standard Deviation ($SD = .72$). This implies that indistinct organization and role conflict is the most significant source of stress among priests in Ondo Diocese.

Table 3 Summary of descriptive result on sources of pastoral stress among priests

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
Mean sources of pastoral stress	103	1.13	4.20	2.90	.57

Source: SPSS, 2026

Table 3 presents the summary of the sources of pastoral stress among priests in Ondo Diocese. The overall mean is 2.90 which is between 2.5 – 3.49, suggesting that priests experience moderate stress in discharging their pastoral role.

Objective 2: To explore the levels of psychological resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South Western Nigeria.

Table 4 Summary of descriptive result on levels of psychological resilience among priests

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std Deviation
Mean Psychological wellbeing	103	3.08	5.00	4.50	.402

Source: SPSS, 2026

Table 4 presents the summary of the levels of psychological resilience among priests in Ondo Diocese. The overall mean in terms of their levels of psychological resilience is 4.50 which is above ≥ 3.5 , thus suggesting that there is a very high level of psychological resilience among priest in the area under study.

Objective 3: To explore the relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South Western Nigeria.

Table 5 Correlation matrix for relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests

		Sources of Pastoral Stress	Psychological Resilience
Sources of Pastoral Stress	Pearson Correlation	1	-.164
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.097
	N	103	103
Psychological Resilience	Pearson Correlation	-.164	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.097	
	N	103	103

Source: SPSS, 2026

The result in Table 5 shows a low but negative linear correlation between sources of pastoral stress and psychological resilience ($r = -.164$; $p = .097 > .05$). These findings imply that, for every increase in pastoral stress, there will be a simultaneous decrease in psychological resilience of priests'. Since, $p = .097 > .005$ and the correlation value is low between sources of pastoral stress and psychological resilience, hence, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that, there is no significant linear relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South Western Nigeria.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The first research objective sought to explore the primary sources of pastoral stress experienced by priests of Ondo Diocese, South-Western Nigeria. Findings revealed that priests experience different levels of stress depending on the stressor. However, the overall stress level was medium. In this study, the source of pastoral stress which had the most impact on priests was indistinct organization and role conflict, followed by workload intensity with medium impact while exposure to trauma, death and crises situations had the lowest impact. This

implies that organizational ambiguity and role conflict is the most significant primary sources of pastoral stress among priests in Ondo Diocese. The findings above are in line with those of Katz and Kahn (2015) who found that role conflict occurs when priests experience competing demands, expectations, or identities that clash with their role as spiritual leaders. This can lead to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and guilt. Role conflict if unaddressed according to Maslach et al. (2016) can lead to stress as explicit in emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment. In terms of clarity of responsibility, the findings support those of Ruiz-Prada et al. (2021) who found that clarity of roles and expectations in written descriptions by the Diocesan leadership reduces role conflict and submissive-obedience stress patterns that can bring about burnout.

While findings from this present study revealed that workload intensity had a moderate impact on stress among priests, previous study by Rossetti (2011) discovered that priests often experience stress related to heavy pastoral workloads, administrative tasks, financial management of parishes, and the expectation of being available. In the same vein, this present study revealed that exposure to trauma, death and crises situation is the least source of stress among priest. Contrary to this, findings from an earlier study conducted in the United States revealed that Catholic priests who frequently encounter death, trauma, and crisis situations in their pastoral duties, experience a significant level of pastoral stress (Rossetti, 2011).

To Rossetti, their roles basically in providing spiritual care during end-of-life situations, conducting funerals, and supporting grieving families often expose them to secondary trauma and emotional fatigue. However, these stressors can accumulate over time, leading to stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and even spiritual desolation. Such indirect exposure to trauma can cause helpers to internalize the suffering of those they serve and emotionally engage with traumatic experiences (Figley, 1995). This study also revealed that priests experience medium stress from frequently conducting funerals or minister to grieving families and by the suffering of parishioners they counsel. This is in line with the findings from Ehusani (2021) who found that the traumatized person's story, affect, or behavior can so affect the helper that they take on or express the same trauma. Hence, the impact of all this over time cannot be ignored as their accumulation constitutes a threat to mental health and resilience over time.

The second research objective sought to assess the levels of psychological resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South Western Nigeria. Five indicators i.e. emotional regulation, optimism, cognitive flexibility, social support and meaning making were used to measure their resilience. Results revealed that meaning making has the most influence on priests' resilience, followed by optimism, cognitive flexibility, emotional regulation and the least being social support. This implies that despite the situation that priests in Ondo Diocese find themselves, they try to make meaning out of this, thus meaning making as a component of resilience is of significant relevance to priests as it enables adaptive functioning under stress. Overall, the study found that there is high level of psychological resilience among priests.

The findings of this present study align with the findings of APA (2024); Southwick and Charney (2018); and Villani et al., (2021) who found that, psychological resilience is heavily hinged on components such as emotional regulation, optimism, self-efficacy, cognitive flexibility, social support, and meaning-making, all of which contribute towards adaptive functioning under stress. These are also in line with the findings of Francis et al., (2017) who discovered that attitudinal traits such as vocational commitment, emotional regulation, and reflective self-awareness may contribute to clergy resilience.

These findings are also in line with those of Machogu et al. (2022) who discovered several resilience-enhancing factors that contribute to the psycho-social well-being of diocesan priests. Among these was optimism, which helped clergy navigate stress more effectively. They further corroborate Machogu et al, (2022) who found that social support from parishioners, fellow clergy, and Diocesan leadership played a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and reducing isolation.

The third research objective also sought to determine the relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese. Contrary to expectations, findings in this study revealed that there is no significant linear relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese, South

Western Nigeria. These findings oppose those of Picornell-Gallar and González-Fraile (2024) who found stress among Catholic clergy to be significantly associated with personality traits such as neuroticism, type of priesthood, and age. But supports their findings in terms of factors like social support and spiritual practice showed no consistent correlation. The findings also support those of Nganga et al., (2025) who found weak negative correlation between psychosocial well-being and stress, with higher exhaustion among priests aged 35–40 and 51+, and indications that greater personal accomplishment aligns with better well-being. This can be associated with the medium stress and high resilience among priests in Ondo Diocese.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, findings revealed a moderate level of pastoral stress ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 0.57$) and a high level of psychological resilience ($M = 4.50$, $SD = 0.40$). The relationship between pastoral stress and psychological resilience was negative but not statistically significant ($r = -.164$, $p = .097$). Thus, the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping found support with the moderate stress level. Hence, it indicates that priests appraise pastoral demands as challenging but manageable given their coping resources. Similarly, Richardson's Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency is reflected in the high resilience scores, showing that priests are able to reintegrate positively despite ongoing stress. Based on the above, it was concluded that there is moderate source of stress experienced by priests in discharging their pastoral roles. However, indistinct organization and role conflict is the most significant source of stress among priests in Ondo Diocese. There is high level of psychological resilience among priests. This is because, most priests demonstrate strong meaning-making abilities in response to challenging situations. Again, there is no significant linear relationship between pastoral stress and resilience among priests of Ondo Diocese.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study recommends that: Diocese of Ondo should ensure regular psychological evaluation of priests to determine their level of stress and administer appropriate remedy; that appropriate spiritual, social, economic and psychological support be rendered to priests to enhance their resilience; that institutions for priestly formation should educate their students on sources of stress and coping mechanisms to familiarize the priests and enable them cope with the daily demands of their pastoral roles. As a result of limitations of the current study, future researchers should consider: (a). longitudinal studies on stress and pattern of resilience among priests; (b). comparative study on the lived pastoral experiences of priest in urban and rural areas.

Ethical Approval

All data presented in the study were obtained with the consent of the individuals that participated in the study, however, the principle of anonymity was ensured.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest

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