

# Competition and Psychospiritual Well-Being among Early-Career Priests: An Embedded Mixed-Methods Study

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## ABSTRACT

Grounded on Self-Determination Theory and Psychospiritual Theory, this study examined the relationship between Competition and Psychospiritual Well-Being among early-career priests, using an embedded mixed-methods design. A census approach was employed targeting 91 early career priests, of whom 52 participated in the quantitative phase. Data were collected using the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale and Psychospiritual Well-Being Scale. Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews with eight early career priests to provide in depth experiences. Pearson Correlation analysis showed a weak, negative and non-significant correlation between competition and psychospiritual well-being ( $r = -0.140$ ,  $p = 0.321$ ). Despite the statistically non-significant association, the qualitative findings indicated that experiences of comparison and subtle competition existed but were mediated through spiritual practices, community life and adaptive coping mechanisms. These findings suggest that psychospiritual well-being among early career priests may be sustained by internalizing spiritual resources and formation structures that mitigate potential effects of competition. This study contributes to the growing body of research on priests' well-being by illuminating the complex interplay between psychosocial dynamics and spiritual integration. Implications for priestly formation and on-going pastoral support are discussed. Given the modest quantitative sample and the non-significant statistical association, the findings should be read as exploratory rather than conclusive. The qualitative strand strengthens the interpretation by explaining how spiritual practices, vocation-centred identity and communal support may buffer the potentially harmful effects of competition.

**Keywords:** competition, psychospiritual well-being, early-career priests, self-determination theory, mixed-methods

## INTRODUCTION

### Background:

Early-career priesthood is a formative, developmental, and demanding stage characterized by the integration of personal identity, spiritual commitment and ministerial responsibility. For this study, early-career priesthood was defined as 0–20 years of ministry because priestly identity, pastoral responsibility, leadership exposure and vocational integration may continue to develop across the first two decades of ordained ministry. Priests within this stage often navigate difficult expectations related to pastoral effectiveness, community life, obedience and self-gift in ministry. Priestly life is traditionally grounded in service, humility, and communal responsibility. However, within this context, subtle forms of comparison and competitive dynamics related to leadership roles, recognition, responsibilities and material expectations may emerge. These dynamics can have implications for psychospiritual well-being which is the integration of psychological health and spiritual life. Both are necessary for sustaining effective ministry (Crea et al., 2024).

Competition as a psychosocial construct has been widely studied in secular professional settings, where it is often associated with both adaptive outcomes such as motivation and performance and maladaptive consequences including stress, burnout and diminished well-being. However, the manifestation and effects of competition within religious settings and especially priestly life is underexplored. Unlike secular environments,

priestly life is structured around communal living, shared mission and spiritual ideals such as humility, obedience and self-sacrifice. These characteristics determine how competition is experienced, internalized and mitigated.

At the same time, psychospiritual well-being, represents a holistic dimension of human functioning that integrates psychological, spiritual, and cultural health (Egunjobi, 2024). For early-career priests, well-being is not merely about the lack of distress but involves inner harmony, alignment with one's vocation and a lived relationship with the transcendent. This integration means that, external pressures, such as competition may not work in isolation but are mediated by internal spiritual resources. Even though there is growing interest in priest's well-being, existing research has largely focused on burnout, stress, mental health, often overlooking the possible relationship between social dynamics like competition and spiritual integration. Little empirical focus has been given to how competition relates to psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. This gap is significant, given that early-career years (0 – 20 years in ministry) for this research is a critical period for identity formation and resilience development. Comprehending how competition influences psychospiritual well-being is particularly important in early-career priests, a group still forming vocational identities, integrating personal, spiritual and communal dimensions of ministry (Han et al., 2025).

The gap addressed in this study is therefore not only empirical but also conceptual. Existing studies on clergy well-being often emphasize burnout, stress, affective well-being and coping, while fewer studies examine how competitive comparison operates within religious life where humility, obedience, fraternity and service are normative values. This study responds to that gap by examining competition as a psychosocial experience that may be transformed, moderated or softened by spiritual formation and communal belonging.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Competition within religious environments may manifest in leadership aspirations, social recognition and comparison with peers. These external pressures could challenge spiritual integration and psychological well-being. Previous research has always highlighted the protective role of supportive environments, spiritual practices, and communal life on clergy well-being (Picornell-Gallar & González-Fraile, 2024), but the direct relation between competition and psychospiritual well-being remains unclear. This study addresses this gap by examining whether competitive tendencies significantly relate to psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests across culturally diverse settings. The problem is sharpened by the possibility that competition among priests may remain hidden because it is inconsistent with the ideals of priestly humility and pastoral service. Consequently, early-career priests may experience comparison, performance pressure or desire for recognition without naming these experiences as competition. This makes the issue methodologically and pastorally important, since concealed psychosocial tensions may affect well-being even when they do not appear as overt conflict.

The study therefore asks whether measurable competitive attitudes are related to psychospiritual well-being, while also exploring why this relationship may be weak, non-significant or contextually mediated. This dual attention to statistical relationship and lived experience is necessary because psychospiritual well-being among priests is shaped not only by external pressures but also by spiritual practices, vocational meaning, self-knowledge and community life.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This present study is grounded by Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Psychospiritual Theory, providing a complementary psychological and spiritual view for understanding competition and psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests.

Self Determination Theory (SDT), developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan in the mid-1980s, is a broad framework for understanding human motivation and personality (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This theory posits that all humans have three basic psychological needs, or experiential requirements, whose procurement supports intrinsic motivation, growth, integrity and well-being. The three needs are: autonomy (needing to be self-regulating; to own one's actions and to identify one's self with one's behavior); competence (needing to be effective; to be moving towards greater mastery and skill); and relatedness (needing to feel psychological connection with important others; to support, and be supported by, those others) (Sheldon, 2012). Thus, "SDT

focuses on the degree to which human behaviours are volitional or self-determined - that is, the degree to which people endorse their actions at the highest level of reflection and engage in the actions with full sense of choice” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 231). Self-Determination Theory distinguishes between different types of motivation along a continuum from intrinsic (doing something for its inherent satisfaction) to extrinsic (doing something for external rewards or pressures) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Applied to early-career priests, Self Determination Theory (SDT) demonstrates that priests may struggle between intrinsic motivation rooted in vocation and external pressures related to performance, recognition, and comparison. SDT therefore, helps to explain how unmet needs for affirmation or belonging can manifest as competitive attitudes, which if unchecked, may erode emotional balance and community relationships.

Complementing Self-Determination Theory, the Psychospiritual Theory (PST) (Egunjobi, 2024), posits that, human well-being is not merely the absence of psychological distress but a dynamic state characterized by the harmonious interaction between mental, emotional and spiritual health. PST identifies three core dimensions: psychological well-being, spiritual well-being, and the integrated well-being. The psychological well-being involves emotional regulation, cognitive clarity, and the resilience that helps individuals to cope effectively with challenges. Spiritual well-being reflects an individual’s connection to a higher power, a sense of purpose, and alignment with core values which are developed through spiritual practices such as prayer and meditation. While the integrated well-being represents the interaction of psychological and spiritual health, leading to holistic fulfilment and balanced living (Egunjobi, 2024). Psychospiritual theory (PST) is particularly relevant for early-career priests, whose vocation demands sustained psychological resilience alongside deep spiritual commitment. Pressure from ministry, workload, stress and competition, whether intrinsic or extrinsic may influence both psychological and spiritual well-being. This interplay can either promote or affect the balance necessary for psychospiritual well-being (Egunjobi, 2024).

By combining SDT and PST, this study adopts a dual framework approach. SDT explains the psychological mechanisms that may be driving competition, how unmet psychological needs or extrinsic motives propel rivalry, while PST explores the spiritual and emotional consequences of such competition on inner peace, faith, and vocation. This integration offers a comprehensive understanding of how motivation, comparison and spirituality intersects to shape psychospiritual well-being in the early stages of missionary priesthood.

## Research Objectives

This study aimed to study the interplay between competition and psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. To examine levels of competitive attitudes among early-career priests, by using the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale, illuminating how intrinsic motivation and external pressures relate in early priestly ministry.
2. To assess levels of Psychospiritual well-being among early-career Priests, through the Psychospiritual Well-Being Scale, showing integration of psychological, spiritual and cultural health
3. To examine the relationship between competition and psychospiritual well-being among early-career Priests, by identifying whether competitive tendencies are associated with positive, negative or negligible effects on well-being.
4. To identify strategies and coping mechanisms that enhance the psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests, through semi-structured interviews, providing in depth understanding and experience of competition in early- career priests.

## METHODS

### Research Design

An embedded mixed-method design was adopted to survey the measurable patterns and contextual understanding of the concepts under study. Quantitative data provided statistical insights, and focused on measuring the levels of competitive attitudes, psychospiritual well-being and examining their relationship, while qualitative data offered depth regarding lived experiences of competition and psychospiritual well-being (Creswell, 2014).

The design was quantitative-dominant, with the qualitative strand embedded to explain, elaborate and contextualize the survey results (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative phase examined levels of competition and psychospiritual well-being and tested their statistical relationship, while the qualitative phase explored the meanings priests attached to competition and the spiritual or communal resources used to manage it. This structure was appropriate because a numerical correlation alone could not fully explain how priests interpret, internalize or spiritually reframe competitive experiences.

## Participants

A census approach was attempted by targeting all 91 eligible early-career priests. However, 52 priests participated in the quantitative phase, giving an achieved response rate of 57.1% (Cameroon - N = 13, East Africa – N = 23, India – N = 6, Malaysia – N = 10). For the qualitative strand, eight participants were purposively selected to take part in the semi-structured interviews to capture in depth understanding and experiences of competition, psychospiritual well-being and coping strategies. Participants were informed about the study purpose, assured of confidentiality, provided consent before they took part in the study and the data was collected anonymously.

The achieved quantitative response rate was approximately 57.1% (52 of 91 targeted early-career priests). The response rate of 57.1% was considered adequate for online survey research since comparable online survey studies have reported lower response rates. Wu et al. (2022) reported that the average online survey response rate is 44.1%. While this response rate provided sufficient data for exploratory correlational analysis, it also raises the possibility of non-response bias, a common concern in survey research when respondents may differ systematically from non-respondents (Dillman et al., 2014). Priests who chose to participate may have differed from non-respondents in openness to discussing competition, level of psychospiritual well-being, workload, regional accessibility or interest in the topic. For this reason, the findings are interpreted cautiously and are not presented as fully generalizable to all early-career priests.

The use of a census approach was intended to include the entire accessible population rather than draw a smaller sample from it. This census approach was considered appropriate due to the relatively small accessible population (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). However, because participation was voluntary and not all eligible priests responded, the final achieved sample functioned as a respondent census rather than a complete census of the target group. The sample size was therefore determined by the finite accessible population and actual response, not by an a priori statistical power calculation. With  $n = 52$ , the study had limited sensitivity for detecting small relationships; hence the interpretation gives attention to the direction and size of the correlation, the p-value, and the explanatory value of the qualitative findings.

The qualitative sample of eight participants was purposively selected to provide depth rather than statistical representativeness. The qualitative sample of eight participants was considered adequate based on the principle of information power, whereby sample size is determined by the richness and relevance of information rather than numerical size (Malterud et al., 2016). The aim was to capture varied experiences of competition, coping, spiritual practice and community life among early-career priests. The qualitative findings should therefore be understood as interpretive and explanatory, helping to illuminate the quantitative result rather than replacing the need for larger confirmatory studies.

## Instruments

Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale (Ryckman et al., 1990) was employed to assess the hypercompetitive tendencies, defined as an excessive need to compete and win, often at the expense of well-being. The instrument comprises 26 items with responses recorded on a 5-point Likert Scale. Higher scores indicate stronger hypercompetitive attitudes. This scale demonstrated good reliability and validity in other studies among adult populations (Ryckman et al., 1990).

The Psychospiritual Well-Being Scale (Egunjobi, et al., 2023), measures the psychospiritual well-being, integrating psychological and spiritual well-being, meaning, purpose and relational depth. It is a 25-item multidimensional instrument. Higher scores indicate greater alignment with spiritual and psychological

integration. This scale has been validated in African and religious settings, demonstrating acceptable reliability and construct validity (Egunjobi, 2023).

Semi-structured interview for qualitative data collection was employed to explore participant's experiences of competition, psychospiritual well-being, coping strategies and spiritual practices.

Instrument use was guided by the published reliability and validity evidence of the Hypercompetitive Attitude Scale. The scale has demonstrated high internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha reported at .88 in its original validation (Ryckman et al., 1982). The Psychospiritual Well-Being Scale was also found to be highly reliable - 25 items; Spearman Brown Coefficient = .857; Guttman Split-Half Coefficient = .856; at Cronbach's Alpha = .855 (Egunjobi et al. 2023). Because the present study applied these instruments to a specific intercultural and clerical population, the interpretation of scores remains context-sensitive. The instruments were used to provide empirical indicators of the constructs, but the study recognizes that further validation among early-career priests would strengthen future research.

The absence of full local psychometric re-validation is therefore treated as a methodological limitation rather than ignored. Future studies should report internal consistency coefficients for each scale in the priestly sample, examine item clarity across regional contexts, and consider confirmatory factor analysis where sample size permits. This would strengthen the precision with which competition and psychospiritual well-being are measured among clergy.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

Quantitative data were collected through self-administered questionnaire distributed electronically through Google Form. Two standardized instruments measuring hypercompetitive attitudes and Psychospiritual well-being were completed by the participants. Following the completion of the quantitative phase, semi-structured interviews with eight purposively selected early-career members was conducted with each interview lasting approximately 30-40minutes. These interviews were audio-recorded with the verbal consent of the participants. These were later transcribed verbatim using Turbo-scribe, and then analyzed.

The electronic mode of data collection enabled access to participants across several regions but may also have affected participation. Priests with limited internet access, heavy pastoral workload or low comfort with digital forms may have been less likely to respond. This possibility is important when interpreting the response rate and the representativeness of the quantitative findings.

The interviews were used to deepen understanding of the survey findings, particularly the weak and non-significant correlation. They allowed participants to explain whether competition was experienced openly or subtly, how it affected inner life and relationships, and what spiritual or communal practices helped them maintain balance.

Qualitative data was obtained through semi-structured interviews, examining participants experiences with competition, motivations, coping strategies and the influence of spiritual and communal structures on well-being.

### **Data Analysis**

#### **Quantitative Data**

Descriptive statistics were computed to assess the levels of hypercompetitive attitudes and psychospiritual well-being. Pearson correlation analysis was used to examine the correlation between competition and psychospiritual well-being. Analyses were conducted using SPSS version 26.

The Pearson correlation result was interpreted using both statistical significance and effect size. Because the sample size was modest, a non-significant result was not treated as proof that no relationship exists. Instead, it was interpreted as evidence that the observed relationship in this sample was weak and statistically uncertain. This approach is important because small samples may fail to detect subtle relationships, especially where well-being scores are clustered within a relatively high range.

The analysis therefore focused on the practical meaning of the coefficient as well as the p-value. The negative direction of the coefficient suggested that higher hypercompetitive attitudes tended to move with slightly lower psychospiritual well-being, but the small magnitude and non-significant probability value indicated that this tendency was not strong enough to support a firm statistical claim.

### Qualitative Data

Thematic analysis was done on the interview transcripts following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Themes were identified to provide insights into how competition is understood, experienced and mediated by early-career priests and how it relates to psychospiritual well-being.

The qualitative analysis followed the major phases of thematic analysis: familiarisation with the transcripts, generation of initial codes, identification of candidate themes, review of themes against the data, naming of themes, and interpretation in relation to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process enabled the researcher to move from individual interview responses to broader patterns concerning competition, spiritual coping, community life, vocation-centred identity and psychospiritual balance.

To enhance trustworthiness, themes were checked against the transcript content and interpreted in light of the study objectives and theoretical framework (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The qualitative strand was not used to make numerical generalisations; rather, it provided credible contextual insight into how early-career priests understood and managed competition in their lived priestly experience.

### Integration

Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated with to provide explanatory context, illuminating mechanisms through which competition may relate to or fail to influence psychospiritual well-being. Mixed-method integration was strengthened through an explanatory connection between the two strands. The quantitative finding showed that the statistical relationship between competition and psychospiritual well-being was weak, negative and non-significant. The qualitative findings then helped explain why this may have occurred by showing that priests recognized subtle competition but often mediated it through prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, fraternity, self-knowledge and vocational meaning.

The two strands should therefore be read together rather than separately, consistent with mixed-methods principles of integration and complementarity (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitatively, competition did not emerge as a strong direct predictor of psychospiritual well-being in this sample. Qualitatively, competition appeared as a real but moderated experience whose effects were shaped by spiritual and communal resources. This integrated interpretation provides a more complete answer to the research question than either strand would provide alone (Fetters et al., 2013).

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to examine the levels of hypercompetitive attitudes and psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. The results show that participants reported moderate levels of hypercompetitive attitudes ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) and relatively high levels of psychospiritual Well-Being ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.38$ ). The results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1:

### Descriptive Statistics of study Variables

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Hypercompetition	52	2.45	0.70
Psychospiritual Well-being	52	3.98	0.38

The results show the general distribution of hypercompetitive attitudes and psychospiritual well-being among the participants of this research. These descriptive findings give a foundation for understanding the relationship between the two variables.

### Correlation Analysis

To examine the relationship between hypercompetitive attitudes and psychospiritual well-being, a Pearson correlation analysis was conducted. This is presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation between Hypercompetitive Attitudes and Psychospiritual Well-Being

		1	2
Hypercompetition	Pearson Correlation	1	-.140
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.321
Psychospiritual Well-being	Pearson Correlation	-.140	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.321	
	N	52	52

Note.  $r = -.140$ ,  $p = .321$ , two-tailed.

A Pearson correlation showed a weak, negative and statistically non-significant relationship between hypercompetitive attitudes and psychospiritual well-being,  $r(50) = -.140$ ,  $p = .321$ . This therefore suggests that higher levels of hypercompetitiveness are associated with slightly lower levels of psychospiritual well-being; however, this relationship is not statistically significant.

This non-significant result has important interpretive implications. It does not mean that competition is irrelevant to priestly life; rather, it indicates that, within this sample, competition did not show a statistically reliable direct association with psychospiritual well-being. Non-Significant findings may reflect the complexity of relationships among variables rather than the absence of meaningful processes (Creswell, 2018). Several explanations are possible, including limited statistical power associated with modest sample size (Cohen, 1988), high overall psychospiritual well-being, restricted variability in well-being scores, cultural differences in how competition is expressed, and the possible buffering role of spiritual practices and community life (Sim et al., 2022).

### Qualitative Findings

To complement the quantitative results, thematic analysis was conducted on the data obtained from semi-structured interviews with eight early-career priests. The analysis revealed several themes related to the experiences of competition and psychospiritual well-being. First the participants acknowledged the presence of competition, particularly related to ministerial assignments, recognition, leadership and competence. While competition was not always overt, it was experienced through comparison with peers and internal expectations. Secondly, participants identified spiritual practices such as prayer, spiritual direction, retreats and reflection as key coping mechanisms. These practices were described as fostering inner stability and helping to reframe competitive experiences within vocational settings. Thirdly, community life emerged as a moderating influence, with participants highlighting the role of fraternity, sharing and mutual support in reducing the negative effects of competitive tendencies. Participants also identified the importance of self-knowledge, personal meaning and vocation-centred identity, suggesting a strong sense of awareness to help mitigate the psychological effects of competition.

Generally, the qualitative findings provide situational support for the quantitative results, indicating that although competition exists among early-career priests, its impact on psychospiritual well-being may be mitigated by spiritual practices, communal living and adaptive coping mechanisms.

In this sense, the qualitative findings expand the quantitative result rather than simply repeat it. The interviews suggest that competition may operate indirectly, subtly or situationally, and that its possible negative effects are often filtered through the priest's prayer life, sense of vocation, relationship with peers and capacity for self-reflection. These findings help explain why the numerical relationship was weak even though competition was present in the participants' narratives.

### **Mixed-Methods Integration of Findings**

When both strands are integrated, the central finding is that competition among early-career priests appears to be present but not deterministically harmful. The quantitative strand showed a weak, negative and non-significant relationship, while the qualitative strand revealed that competitive comparison was often moderated by spiritual practices, community life and vocational identity. This suggests that psychospiritual well-being in priestly life may depend less on the mere presence of competition and more on how competition is interpreted, managed and spiritually integrated.

The integrated finding also clarifies the practical meaning of the study. A formation program should not assume that all competition is destructive, nor should it ignore subtle comparison among priests. Instead, formation should help priests distinguish healthy striving for pastoral excellence from ego-centred comparison, while strengthening the spiritual and communal resources that protect psychospiritual well-being.

## **DISCUSSION**

The present study examined the relationship between competition and psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests across four regions of Cameroon, East Africa, India and Malaysia, using an embedded mixed-methods approach. It addresses the study objective of examining the relationship between competition and psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. The findings revealed a weak, negative and non-significant correlation between competition and psychospiritual well-being ( $r = -0.140$ ,  $p = 0.321$ ). Even though this suggests that higher levels of competitive attitudes are associated with slightly lower psychospiritual well-being, the relationship was not statistically significant.

The findings show that competition, in itself, may not be a strong determinant of psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. The diversity of regional settings represented in the sample may further explain the absence of a significant relationship. Differences in culture views of competition, spirituality and strength of community life across regions shaped how competition is perceived, experienced and mediated. These differing dynamics may have impacted the relationship between the variables, resulting in a weak and non-significant correlation.

The non-significant finding should be understood analytically rather than dismissed as a failed result. It suggests that competition may not have a simple linear relationship with psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. The relationship may be indirect, moderated by spiritual practices, shaped by regional and cultural differences, or weakened by the strong formation structures that support priestly identity and communal belonging. Another possible explanation is range restriction in psychospiritual well-being. The relatively high mean score and low standard deviation indicate that many participants reported fairly strong psychospiritual well-being. When most participants score within a high range, statistical correlation with another variable may be reduced even if competition is present in lived experience. This helps explain why the qualitative data identified competitive dynamics while the quantitative relationship remained weak.

From the viewpoint of Self-Determination Theory, these findings may be understood in terms of the nature of motivation and the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although, hypercompetitive attitudes are often associated with external validation and controlled motivation, the formation and lived experience of priesthood may enhance more intrinsic forms of motivation rooted in vocation, service, and relational commitment. Thus, even when competitive tendencies are present, their potential negative impacts on psychospiritual well-being may be mediated by a deeper sense of purpose and internalized values that support autonomy, competence and relatedness.

More specifically, Self-Determination Theory suggests that competition becomes harmful when it is driven mainly by controlled motivation, external validation or the need to outperform others. However, when priests experience ministry as an expression of vocation, service and belonging, their basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness may remain sufficiently supported. Under such conditions, competition may be reframed as growth, pastoral responsibility or self-improvement rather than destructive rivalry.

In the same vein, Psychospiritual Theory provides a valuable perspective for interpreting these findings. Psychospiritual Theory suggests that psychospiritual well-being is upheld by the integration of psychological stability, spiritual resources, communal belonging and vocation-centred identity (Egunjobi et al. 2023). The qualitative findings in this study reinforced this perspective, as participants reported relying on spiritual practices, community life and personal meaning-making to navigate experiences of competition. These internal and communal resources appear to function as protective factors, mitigating the potential negative effects of competitive pressures. Psychospiritual Theory further explains why spiritual practices may function as mediating or buffering mechanisms. Prayer, spiritual direction, retreats, reflection and communal support can help priests integrate emotional tension with vocational meaning. These practices do not necessarily remove competitive feelings, but they may transform the interpretation of such feelings and prevent them from damaging inner peace, relational balance and fidelity to priestly identity.

The qualitative data further highlights the intricacy of competition in early-career priests. Participants who took part in the interview, acknowledged the existence of subtle and often implicit forms of competition, particularly in relation to assignments, recognition, competence and leadership. However, these experiences were rarely described as obviously harmful. Instead, they were often reframed within a spiritual setting, emphasizing growth, humility, fidelity and making a distinction between growth-oriented competition and ego-centred competition. This suggests that competition in religious setting may be qualitatively different from competition in secular and professional settings, where external achievements and individual success are more dominant drivers (Ryckman et al., 1990).

The findings of this study both align with and extend existing literature. While previous study has often linked competitive environments with stress, burnout, and reduce well-being, the present results suggest that such relationships may not hold uniformly in contexts characterized by strong spiritual frameworks and communal support. In line with studies illuminating the role of coping strategies and spiritual integration in priests' well-being, this study underscores the importance of internal resources in shaping responses to external pressures (Kagume et al., 2022; Sim et al., 2022). The absence of a significant relationship should not be interpreted as a lack of relevance but rather as an indication of context-specific dynamics that warrant deeper exploration.

Importantly, the non-significant relationship observed in this study is itself a meaningful finding. It challenges the assumption that competition necessarily undermines well-being and points instead to the possibility that early-career priests are equipped through formation, spirituality and community life, with mechanisms that help sustain their psychospiritual well-being. This illuminates the need for a deeper understanding of well-being in religious settings, one that integrates both psychosocial and spiritual dimensions. The study therefore contributes by showing that the absence of statistical significance can still produce a meaningful pastoral and theoretical insight. In this case, the finding points to the protective role of spirituality and community rather than to the absence of competition. It also cautions against interpreting well-being among priests only through secular occupational stress models without attending to theological, spiritual and communal resources.

## **Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have important implications for priestly formation and on-going formation and pastoral support. Formation programs should continue to enhance intrinsic motivation, emotional awareness, and healthy identity development, helping priests to navigate competition constructively. The strengthening of spiritual practices and communal life remains essential, as these appear to play a critical role in sustaining the psychospiritual well-being. Providing spaces for reflection, spiritual direction, retreats and peer support may further enhance resilience in early ministry.

In practical terms, priestly formation programs should include guided reflection on comparison, ambition, recognition and healthy pastoral excellence. Formators and mentors can help early-career priests distinguish between competence-building motivation and ego-centred competition. This could be done through spiritual direction, peer mentoring, reflective seminars, pastoral supervision and structured conversations on emotional maturity.

Diocesan and formation policies should also strengthen systems of ongoing accompaniment after ordination. Early-career priests would benefit from regular mentoring, confidential counselling access, peer support groups, periodic retreats, and workshops on self-awareness, emotional regulation, conflict management and vocational identity. Such structures would not merely respond to crisis but would proactively protect psychospiritual well-being.

The findings also suggest that community life should be treated as a formation resource. Where fraternity, honest dialogue and mutual support are strong, competition is less likely to become destructive. Formation houses and dioceses should therefore create spaces where priests can speak honestly about pressure, comparison and recognition without fear of judgement.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

The study is not without limitations. The relatively small sample size and response rate limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal inferences. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how competition and psychospiritual well-being evolve over time. Further studies might also explore additional moderating variables, such as emotional intelligence, cultural context, and specific spiritual practices, to deepen understanding of the mechanisms underlying priests' well-being. Also, future studies also might also diversify the study population from only priests to include female religious.

A further limitation concerns non-response bias. Since only 52 of the 91 targeted priests participated in the quantitative phase, the experiences of non-respondents are unknown. It is possible that priests experiencing higher stress, stronger competitive pressure or lower psychospiritual well-being were less likely to participate, or conversely that those most interested in the topic were more likely to respond.

The study also relied on self-report measures, which may be affected by social desirability, especially in a priestly population where humility, service and emotional balance are valued ideals. Participants may have underreported competitive tendencies or overstated well-being. The qualitative interviews helped to reduce this limitation by allowing deeper reflection, but they did not eliminate it.

Another limitation concerns instrument validation. Although both scales have published reliability and validity evidence, the study did not conduct a full psychometric validation across the specific cultural and clerical contexts represented in the sample. Future studies should examine internal consistency, factor structure and cultural interpretation of scale items among early-career priests.

The qualitative sample was also small and purposive. Its purpose was depth and explanation rather than representativeness. Therefore, the themes should be understood as contextual insights that illuminate the quantitative findings, not as exhaustive descriptions of all early-career priests' experiences. Future research should use larger and more regionally balanced samples, apply longitudinal designs, and examine possible mediating or moderating variables such as spiritual direction, community support, emotional intelligence, personality, social desirability and pastoral workload. Comparative studies involving senior priests, seminarians, male religious and female religious would also help determine whether the dynamics observed here are unique to early-career priests or shared across forms of consecrated and clerical life.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study contributes to the growing body of research on priests' well-being by demonstrating that competition does not have a significant direct correlation with psychospiritual well-being among early-career priests. Instead,

the findings illuminate the role of spiritual integration, community life and coping mechanisms. These insights underscore the importance of approaching priestly well-being through a holistic perspective that recognized the interplay between psychological dynamics and spiritual resources. The broader significance of the study lies in its demonstration that clergy well-being cannot be understood only by measuring stressors; it must also examine the spiritual, communal and vocational resources that shape how those stressors are experienced. Although the sample size and response rate limit generalizability, the study opens an important area for further research and provides practical direction for priestly formation, mentoring and ongoing pastoral support.

The conclusion should therefore be read with appropriate caution and significance. Competition was present, but it was not statistically shown to be a strong direct threat to psychospiritual well-being in this sample. Its meaning appears to depend on mediation through prayer, self-knowledge, community life and vocation-centred identity. Strengthening these resources remains essential for the holistic formation and sustained well-being of early-career priests.

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