



# Psychological and Emotional Pathways to Sustainable Celibacy: A Phenomenological Study of Catholic Formators in Nairobi, Kenya

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived psychological experiences through which Catholic formators sustain lifelong celibate commitment in Nairobi, Kenya. The study adopted a qualitative approach grounded in descriptive phenomenology, with data collected through eight in-depth individual interviews with male Catholic priests serving as formators in formation centres in Nairobi County, Kenya, and analysed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method. The findings revealed that sustaining celibacy is accompanied by recurring experiences of loneliness, attraction, emotional struggles, and feelings of shame and guilt, which participants regarded as normal dimensions of vocational life. Psycho-affective maturity emerged as the principal psychological pathway to sustainable celibacy, with emotional awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, and internalised commitment enabling participants to navigate challenges while maintaining long-term commitment. Cultural pressures, particularly family lineage expectations and the stigma of childlessness in Kenyan society, intensified these experiences. Participants identified prayer, mentorship, supportive relationships, counselling, and reflective practices as complementary coping mechanisms fostering emotional resilience and vocational stability. The study focused exclusively on male formators in Nairobi, limiting generalizability, and future research should examine experiences across different ministry stages and cultural settings. Formation institutions must prioritise formator training in psychological accompaniment to address the emotional struggles celibates face, establish confidential counselling services to reduce stigma and encourage help-seeking, and develop culturally sensitive interventions addressing family lineage pressures and childlessness stigma to sustain celibate commitment in the Kenyan context.

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## Introduction

Lifelong celibacy is a defining commitment of Roman Catholic priestly and religious life. Yet sustaining that commitment has become an increasingly important psychological concern. Reports of emotional exhaustion, vocational dissatisfaction, burnout, and departure from ministry have

prompted growing attention to the human dimensions of celibate living, particularly the ways in which clergy negotiate loneliness, emotional attachment, interpersonal relationships, and psychological wellbeing over the course of ministry. These concerns have shifted scholarly attention from viewing celibacy solely as a theological obligation to recognising it as a lived experience that requires continuous psychological adjustment.

The need for this understanding is particularly evident in the African context, where celibate living occurs within societies that strongly value marriage, parenthood, and family continuity. In Kenya, Catholic clergy navigate unique cultural pressures, including family expectations to continue the lineage, community scrutiny of childlessness, and the psychological weight of being an only son expected to carry on the family name. Rop (2025) found that priests from the Kalenjin community in Kenya often experienced celibacy as psychologically burdensome within highly sexualised social environments, reporting emotional strain and internal conflict despite remaining committed to priestly ministry. Chepchumba et al. (2025) documented persistent cultural attitudes toward priestly celibacy among the Nandi community, showing that although attitudes had gradually become more accepting, cultural rigidities and social expectations persisted. A 2024 study conducted among clergy in Kenya revealed that 52 per cent of respondents exhibited symptoms of depression, with 28.5 per cent of Catholic priests in a Nairobi deanery struggling with untreated depression or related disorders (Kimotho, 2026). Nganga et al. (2024) found that priests aged 35-40 and over 51 experience greater emotional exhaustion than those aged 41-50, with weak negative correlation between psychosocial wellbeing and burnout among clergy in Kiambu County, within the Archdiocese of Nairobi.

Despite growing recognition that psychological experiences are central to celibate living in Kenya, evidence remains limited on how Catholic celibates make sense of these experiences and transform them into enduring vocational commitment within the Kenyan socio-cultural context. Existing studies have primarily examined the challenges clergy encounter rather than explaining the psychological pathways through which sustainable celibacy is achieved. Addressing this gap is important because understanding the outcomes associated with psychological wellbeing is fundamentally different from understanding the lived experiences through which such wellbeing is achieved and sustained.

Against this background, the present study adopted a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived psychological experiences of Catholic formators in Nairobi, Kenya. Specifically, the study explored the psychological and emotional experiences associated with sustaining celibacy, examined how psycho-affective maturity is experienced in maintaining long-term celibate commitment, and identified the coping mechanisms that promote sustainable celibate living. By foregrounding participants' lived experiences, the study extends existing scholarship beyond the identification of psychological correlates of vocational wellbeing to explain the psychological and emotional pathways through which sustainable celibacy is experienced and maintained within the Kenyan formation context.

### **Psychological and Emotional Experiences Associated with Sustaining Celibacy**

Contemporary scholarship recognises that sustaining lifelong celibacy involves more than adherence to a theological or disciplinary obligation. It requires engagement with loneliness, attraction, attachment, guilt, shame, and other experiences that may challenge commitment. Lague et al. (2025) found that Catholic priests in the Philippines experienced loneliness, temptation, and societal pressure despite seminary preparation, suggesting that formation does not necessarily eliminate emotional realities encountered in ministry. A systematic review of burnout among Catholic clergy (2024) linked burnout to age, personality characteristics, and inadequate support, while Nganga et al. (2024)

reported emotional exhaustion among priests in Kiambu County. Kimotho (2026) further reported high levels of depressive symptoms among clergy in Kenya, including untreated depression among Catholic priests in Nairobi. These findings indicate that psychological distress is central to celibate living.

Attraction and emotional attachment present a related challenge. Church teaching emphasises affective maturity as necessary for appropriate relationships and faithful celibate commitment (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016). Gnahoua (2024) argues that psycho-affective development enables individuals to understand and integrate emotional experiences rather than simply suppressing them. Keating (2023), drawing on John Paul II, similarly emphasises affective maturity as a basis for self-giving love. Yet limited research examines how priests experience and negotiate attraction and attachment in ministry, particularly in African contexts.

Emotional struggle is also complicated by shame, silence, and stigma. Gubi et al. (2023) found that supported clergy demonstrated better emotional regulation and lower distress. Mokoena (2023) reported that silence and moralisation of sexuality may promote shame and secrecy, while stigma reduced counselling uptake among seminarians in South Africa. Thus, scholarship identifies emotional challenges but provides insufficient understanding of how these experiences are lived and managed by Catholic priests in Kenya.

### **Psycho-affective Maturity and Long-term Celibate Commitment**

Psycho-affective maturity is increasingly presented as a foundation for sustainable celibate living. It encompasses self-awareness, emotional regulation, healthy relationships, and integration of sexuality with vocational identity rather than mere behavioural control. Gnahoua (2024) associates maturity with relational balance, self-awareness, and vocational integration, while Keating (2023) argues that affective maturity can facilitate movement from external conformity toward internalised vocational identity. The Ratio Fundamentalis identifies human maturity as foundational to formation (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016).

However, the literature does not establish that psycho-affective maturity independently guarantees sustained celibacy. Gnahoua (2024) notes that emotionally mature individuals may still experience loneliness, attraction, interpersonal conflict, and vocational uncertainty. Mokoena (2023) found that counselling availability did not translate into utilisation because stigma constrained help-seeking. This exposes a gap in understanding how priests develop and apply maturity throughout ministry.

### **Coping Mechanisms that Promote Sustainable Celibate Living**

Research suggests that sustainable celibate living depends on multiple coping resources rather than willpower alone. Spiritual practices remain central. Rossetti (2020) argues that prayer, reflection, and relationship with God provide meaning and resilience, while Gnahoua (2024) cautions that spirituality should complement psychological growth rather than substitute for addressing unresolved emotional difficulties.

Interpersonal and professional support are also important. Gubi et al. (2023) found that pastoral supervision and supportive relationships helped clergy manage emotional demands, while Mutuku (2024) identified community support, mentorship, and honest emotional dialogue as beneficial to Catholic clergy in Kenya. Rop (2025) similarly identified optimism, social support, and adaptive coping as protective factors among Kalenjin priests. Mokoena (2023) and Lague et al. (2025) emphasise structured counselling, formation, and community support.

Despite these insights, less is known about how Catholic priests combine spiritual, interpersonal, psychological, and personal coping strategies in responding to the actual emotional demands of celibate life. This gap is important in Kenya, where family expectations concerning marriage, children, and lineage may add pressures to celibacy. Understanding these lived coping processes is therefore necessary for determining what enables celibacy to be sustained over time.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study draws on Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2017) and Identity Formation Theory (Erikson, 1968). Self-Determination Theory explains how commitment may become internalised when individuals experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness, providing a basis for examining movement from external compliance toward personally owned vocational commitment. Identity Formation Theory explains how vocational identity develops through exploration and commitment and provides a lens for understanding identity integration and stability. Together, the theories help interpret how priests negotiate emotional experiences, develop psycho-affective maturity, and sustain celibate commitment.

Overall, the literature establishes that celibate living involves emotional demands and that maturity, coping, and support are important to vocational sustainability. However, significant contextual and experiential gaps remain. Existing studies are concentrated largely outside Kenya, often examine psychological distress, formation, or coping as separate issues, and provide limited attention to how priests themselves experience and make sense of these processes in everyday ministry. The present study addresses this gap through a descriptive phenomenological qualitative design focused on the lived experiences of Catholic priests sustaining celibacy in Kenya.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative approach grounded in descriptive phenomenology to explore the lived psychological and emotional experiences through which Catholic formators sustain lifelong celibacy. Descriptive phenomenology was appropriate because it seeks to describe how individuals experience and make meaning of a shared phenomenon while maintaining careful attention to participants' accounts and minimising the influence of preconceived assumptions. The approach therefore enabled the study to examine the psychological and emotional dimensions of celibate commitment as experienced and described by Catholic formators themselves.

### **Study Setting and Participants**

The study was conducted in Catholic formation houses and religious institutions in Nairobi County, Kenya. Eight male Catholic priests serving as formators in Catholic seminaries were purposively selected based on their direct experience of accompanying seminarians in formation. Participants were required to have served as formators for at least one year. This criterion ensured that participants had direct experience of formation work while also possessing personal experience of lifelong celibate commitment. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

### **Data Collection**

Data were generated through eight in-depth individual interviews, each lasting approximately 45–90 minutes. The interviews used open-ended questions designed primarily to elicit participants' lived experiences of sustaining celibate commitment, including experiences of loneliness, emotional attachment, attraction, emotional regulation, vocational identity, and the challenges associated with maintaining celibacy over time. Participants were also invited to reflect on formation practices where these were relevant to their own experiences of celibate commitment.



Probing questions were used to clarify and deepen participants' accounts while avoiding the imposition of predetermined themes. The interviews therefore provided participants with an opportunity to describe their experiences in their own words and to explain the meanings they attached to those experiences. Data collection continued across the eight interviews until the researchers judged that the interviews were providing sufficient experiential depth and that further interviews were no longer yielding substantially new dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analysed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method. The analysis involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts to obtain a sense of the whole, identification of meaning units within participants' descriptions, transformation of relevant meaning units into psychologically meaningful expressions, and synthesis of these transformed meanings into the essential psychological structure of the phenomenon. This approach provided a systematic procedure for examining the psychological meanings embedded within participants' descriptions while retaining their connection to the lived experience from which they emerged.

Throughout the analysis, particular attention was given to maintaining the distinction between participants' direct experiences and their observations or professional perspectives concerning seminarians. The primary analytic focus remained the phenomenon of sustaining lifelong celibacy as experienced and understood by the participating Catholic formators. Participants' observations concerning seminarians and formation practices were considered only insofar as they contributed to understanding the formators' own experiences and meanings related to celibate commitment.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness was addressed through procedures supporting credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, and peer debriefing. Reflexive journaling and maintenance of an audit trail supported dependability and confirmability by documenting the researcher's assumptions, emotional responses, analytic decisions, and development of interpretations throughout the research process. Thick description of the study context and participants' experiences was used to support transferability.

Reflexivity was particularly important given the sensitive nature of celibacy, sexuality, emotional attachment, and vocational commitment. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to identify and document preconceptions and interpretive decisions and to support the phenomenological practice of bracketing. These procedures helped maintain methodological awareness of the researcher's influence while keeping the analysis grounded in participants' descriptions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for participants' autonomy were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose and nature of the study and their right to participate voluntarily and to withdraw from the study without penalty. Given the sensitive nature of discussions concerning celibacy, sexuality, emotional experiences, and vocational commitment, particular attention was given to protecting participants' identities and maintaining the confidentiality of the information they provided. Pseudonyms were used in reporting participants' accounts, and identifying information was excluded from the presentation of the findings.

## Results

### *Psychological and Emotional Experiences Associated with Sustaining Celibacy*

Within participants' accounts, celibacy was experienced as a meaningful vocational commitment that nevertheless involved continuing psychological and emotional demands. Participants described ongoing needs for companionship, attachment, emotional expression, and belonging while remaining committed to their vocation. Loneliness, attraction, emotional tension, shame, guilt, frustration, grief, disappointment, and anger appeared across the accounts. These experiences were also described in relation to Kenyan expectations concerning marriage, children, family continuity, and adult roles.

Loneliness was particularly prominent in participants' descriptions. Participants distinguished emotional loneliness from physical solitude, explaining that community life did not necessarily remove the desire for companionship or intimate connection. Participant 5 explained, "There are moments when loneliness becomes very real, especially after ordination when community life changes." Participant 2 similarly stated, "When people cannot talk openly about their struggles, loneliness becomes heavier." Within these accounts, loneliness involved both unmet relational needs and limited opportunities to disclose and process difficult experiences.

Participants also described loneliness in relation to family and community expectations. Participant 6 stated, "In our Kenyan context, family and community expect you to marry and have children. Being a priest means you are seen as choosing a life that is incomplete. That pressure follows you everywhere." His account indicates that, for him, sustaining celibacy involved managing personal emotional needs while also negotiating expectations in which marriage and parenthood were associated with social fulfilment. Participants' accounts suggest that celibacy could require explanation or defence of a vocational choice that departed from expected family life.

Attraction was another recurring experience within participants' accounts. Participants acknowledged emotional and physical attraction without describing its occurrence, in itself, as evidence of failed commitment. The difficulty involved recognising attraction, establishing boundaries, and responding appropriately. Participant 3 explained, "The challenge was not really me becoming attached, but others becoming attached to me." Participant 7 recalled, "We were often told not to get too close to people, but nobody helped us understand what to do with feelings or attraction." These accounts suggest that participants experienced attraction as an aspect of human relational life that required understanding and appropriate boundaries rather than simple avoidance.

Participants also described frustration, confusion, grief, disappointment, and anger. Participant 4 stated, "I was not given the opportunity to learn how to regulate it, and I found myself reacting to small things." Participant 6 described the burden of family expectations: "Being an only son in a Kenyan family carries tremendous weight. My mother still hopes I will change my mind and give her grandchildren. That is a grief I carry." Within these accounts, celibacy could involve a genuine sense of loss even when the vocation remained valued and intentionally chosen.

Feelings of shame and guilt were also described in connection with limited openness about sexuality and emotional wellbeing. Participant 4 recalled, "Honestly, during my formation, I never heard the term psycho-sexual education. Talking about sexuality seemed scandalous." Participant 1 similarly explained, "Seminarians avoided such discussions because they feared getting into trouble because of how they might perceive us." Participants' accounts indicate that silence could make emotional experiences difficult to disclose and process.

***Psycho-affective Maturity and Long-term Celibate Commitment***

Within participants' accounts, psycho-affective maturity emerged as an important condition associated with sustaining celibacy over time. Participants described maturity as a continuing process involving self-awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, and personal ownership of vocational commitment. Loneliness, attraction, and emotional difficulty were described as experiences that could continue during ministry; what appeared to change was participants' perceived capacity to understand and respond to them.

Self-awareness emerged repeatedly in participants' descriptions of maturity. Participants described becoming more conscious of their emotions, vulnerabilities, relational patterns, and motivations. Participant 8 stated, "Psycho-sexual formation helped me understand my identity, my vocation, and the vow of celibacy." Participant 2 added, "It helped me understand why I chose this life and not just follow rules because I am in formation." These descriptions suggest movement from externally regulated observance toward a more personally understood commitment.

Emotional regulation was closely connected to this process. Participants did not describe maturity as eliminating difficult emotions. Instead, their accounts emphasised becoming better able to recognise, interpret, and respond to emotions. Participant 3 explained, "Without emotional maturity, sustaining celibacy becomes very difficult because challenges continue throughout ministry." Participant 6 described maturity as providing "self-awareness, maturity, and integration of emotion." Within these descriptions, emotional integration involved acknowledging emotions, understanding their significance, and choosing appropriate responses rather than simply suppressing them.

Identity integration was similarly prominent. Participant 5 explained, "It helped me understand my vocation more clearly. I no longer doubt every time I feel lonely or attracted to someone." His account illustrates that loneliness or attraction did not necessarily signify vocational failure within participants' accounts. Instead, celibacy appeared more sustainable when it was integrated into participants' understanding of themselves and their vocation. Participants associated long-term commitment with reflection, conviction, and acceptance of celibacy's emotional demands.

***Coping Mechanisms that Promote Sustainable Celibate Living***

Within participants' accounts, coping with celibacy was described as an ongoing process involving complementary resources rather than a single strategy. Participants referred to spiritual practices, supportive relationships, professional assistance, and personal activities as resources for managing loneliness, attraction, emotional strain, cultural expectations, and ministry demands.

Prayer and spiritual practices were prominent in participants' descriptions. Participants described prayer as a means of grounding themselves, reflecting on difficult experiences, renewing commitment, and restoring inner stability. Participant 2 stated, "I pray to remain mindful and careful. I use prayer and meditation to regulate my emotions." However, participants did not describe spirituality as sufficient in every circumstance. Participant 4 cautioned, "Sometimes spirituality covers unresolved emotional wounds, and that becomes a problem later." Within these accounts, spirituality was valued as a resource, while unresolved psychological difficulties could require additional forms of support. These meanings were evident across accounts.

Supportive relationships were another important resource in participants' accounts. Participants identified peers, community members, mentors, and fellow priests as sources of encouragement, perspective, accountability, and shared understanding. Participant 5 stated, "Mentorship has been the most helpful." Participant 3 added, "Community programmes, sports, and sharing with others help

people manage loneliness and emotional stress.” These descriptions indicate that supportive relationships could reduce isolation and enable discussion without interpreting difficulty as personal weakness.

Professional and structured support, particularly counselling and spiritual direction, was also valued. Participant 4 stated, “There should be dedicated counselling rooms for confidential discussions,” while Participant 1 observed, “Counselling and spiritual direction are very supportive because they help people process their struggles honestly.” Participants’ accounts placed particular emphasis on confidentiality and trust, suggesting that access to support was most meaningful when participants perceived the environment as safe enough for honest disclosure.

Participants also described reflection, journaling, exercise, recreation, healthy interpersonal boundaries, and meaningful pastoral engagement as personal strategies. These activities helped manage stress and maintain psychological balance, while meaningful ministry was associated with purpose and vocational identity. Participant 6 explained, “You must learn to explain your choice to family and community in ways they can understand. It is not enough to be faithful; you must help others understand why this life matters.” Within his account, coping also involved negotiating the social meaning of vocation.

Taken together, participants’ accounts portray sustainable celibate living as an ongoing process rather than a state in which difficult emotions disappear. Within this sample, participants described loneliness, attraction, grief, and other emotional challenges alongside processes of self-awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, and vocational commitment. Their accounts also identified spiritual, interpersonal, professional, and practical resources that supported their efforts to manage these experiences. The study findings therefore suggest, within participants’ accounts, a movement from recognising emotional challenges toward understanding, regulating, and integrating them within continued vocational commitment. The Kenyan context further shaped this experience through expectations concerning marriage, children, family continuity, and adult social roles.

## Discussion

### *Psychological and Emotional Experiences*

Within participants’ accounts, sustaining celibacy involved continuous negotiation of psychological and emotional experiences rather than freedom from them. Participants described loneliness, attraction, emotional struggles, shame, and guilt as recurring aspects of vocational life. This is consistent with Lague et al. (2025), who found loneliness and social pressure among Catholic priests in the Philippines, and Rop (2025), who reported psychological burdens among Kenyan priests. Nganga et al. (2024) similarly reported emotional exhaustion among priests in Kiambu County. Within this sample, the significance of these experiences depended on how participants understood and managed them.

Participants’ experiences highlight a Kenyan dimension. Participants described family lineage expectations, pressure associated with being an only son, and stigma surrounding voluntary childlessness as sources of emotional strain. This extends Chepchumba et al. (2025), who documented cultural attitudes toward priestly celibacy in Kenya, and complements Rop (2025), who linked cultural expectations to emotional strain among Kenyan priests. Within participants’ accounts, these expectations intersected with personal vocation, making celibacy a negotiation between individual commitment and socially defined expectations concerning marriage and parenthood. Formation may



therefore need to prepare candidates to manage culturally embedded expectations alongside vocational commitment.

Participants also described shame and guilt when emotional struggles could not be discussed openly. This complements Mokoena (2023), who found that stigma and cultural attitudes reduced seminarians' use of counselling services. The present findings suggest that stigma may operate before formal help-seeking by encouraging concealment. Thus, support is insufficient unless formation environments also make vulnerability psychologically safe.

### ***Psycho-affective Maturity and Long-term Celibate Commitment***

Within participants' accounts, psycho-affective maturity emerged as an important process linking emotional experience with sustained celibate commitment. Participants associated maturity with self-awareness, emotional regulation, identity integration, and personal ownership of vocation. This supports Gnahoua (2024), who argues that affective maturity enables candidates to recognise emotions without being controlled by them, and Keating (2023), who emphasises movement from external conformity toward internalised self-giving. It is also consistent with the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, which positions human maturity as foundational to formation (Congregation for the Clergy, 2016).

Importantly, maturity did not eliminate attraction, loneliness, or emotional tension. Rather, participants described becoming better able to interpret and manage such experiences. Gubi et al. (2023) similarly found that adequate support and supervision were associated with better emotional regulation and lower distress among clergy.

Identity Formation Theory provides an additional explanation for this process. Participants' descriptions suggest that celibacy became more sustainable when it was incorporated into a coherent understanding of self and vocation. Loneliness or attraction were not necessarily interpreted as evidence of vocational failure; instead, they could be acknowledged while remaining compatible with a celibate identity. This perspective helps explain why participants described ongoing formation and reflection as important beyond initial preparation. Their accounts suggest that vocational identity develops through continuing experience.

Self-Determination Theory complements this identity perspective by explaining the motivational dimension of commitment. Participants distinguished between following celibacy as an external rule and personally understanding and embracing the vocation. This corresponds with Deci and Ryan (2017), who argue that commitment is more sustainable when values become internalised and self-endorsed. Identity Formation Theory therefore helps explain how celibacy becomes incorporated into the self, while Self-Determination Theory helps explain how commitment becomes personally endorsed. Together, the theories clarify participants' accounts of maturity, identity integration, and vocational ownership.

### ***Coping Mechanisms***

Within participants' accounts, sustaining celibacy involved multiple, interconnected coping resources rather than a single strategy. Prayer, supportive relationships, counselling, spiritual direction, and reflection were described as resources for managing emotional demands and sustaining vocational commitment. Prayer was particularly prominent, supporting Rossetti (2020), who associates authentic prayer with psychological grounding and vocational meaning. However, participants' accounts did not support a purely spiritual explanation. Prayer was described as most helpful when accompanied

by honest emotional reflection, consistent with Gnahoua's (2024) emphasis on integrating spiritual and emotional development.

Interpersonal support was similarly important. Gubi et al. (2023) found that supportive supervision improved clergy coping, while Mutuku (2024) associated supportive relationships with resilience and healthy emotional expression. Rop (2025) likewise identified social support and adaptive coping as protective resources. Within participants' accounts, support therefore functioned not merely as crisis assistance but as an ongoing resource for vocational stability and emotional processing.

Psychological accompaniment was also valued, but participants clearly emphasised confidentiality and trust. This aligns with Mokoena (2023), who identified stigma as a barrier to counselling uptake, and Lague et al. (2025), who emphasised formation and community support. Participants' experiences suggest that providing counselling services alone may be insufficient. Within this sample, psychological support appeared most useful when seeking help was compatible with vocational commitment and was not interpreted as evidence of weakness. Overall, participants' accounts indicate that sustainable celibacy involved the interaction of emotional maturity, integrated vocational identity, internalised commitment, and access to spiritual, interpersonal, and psychological resources.

### **Limitations**

The study has three principal limitations. First, the sample comprised eight male Catholic formators in Nairobi, limiting transferability to female religious, seminarians, priests in other ministry contexts, or Catholic communities outside Nairobi. Second, the study relied on participants' retrospective self-reports, which may have been influenced by recall, selective disclosure, or social desirability, particularly given the sensitivity of celibacy and emotional struggles. Third, descriptive phenomenology prioritises depth and meaning over statistical generalisation. The findings should therefore be understood as contextually grounded accounts of how participants experienced and interpreted celibacy, rather than as claims representing all Catholic formators. Nevertheless, participant consistency and convergence with relevant literature support the importance of psycho-affective maturity, supportive relationships, and culturally responsive accompaniment within the specific Kenyan Catholic formation context.

### **Conclusion**

The findings indicate that lifelong celibate commitment among the Catholic formators interviewed was sustained through an ongoing process of emotional recognition, regulation, and vocational integration rather than through the absence of emotional difficulty. Participants described experiences of loneliness, attraction, emotional strain, and cultural pressure as recurring realities requiring conscious management. Their accounts showed that psycho-affective maturity was particularly important: recognising emotions, regulating responses, integrating affective needs with vocational identity, and maintaining an internalised commitment to priestly vocation enabled participants to respond constructively to these challenges. The data also showed that prayer, supportive relationships, mentorship, psychological accompaniment, and personal reflection functioned as complementary coping resources. These resources helped participants process difficult emotions, maintain psychological balance, and remain committed to celibacy. Participants further identified family lineage expectations and the stigma associated with childlessness as culturally specific pressures that could intensify emotional strain. Overall, the findings suggest that sustainable celibacy, within this study, was associated with the interaction of psycho-affective maturity, adaptive coping resources, vocational commitment, and the ability to navigate culturally embedded expectations. Importantly, participants' accounts also suggest that coping resources were most useful when they

were accessible, trusted, and combined with personal reflection rather than relied upon in isolation. This also highlights the importance of sustained support beyond initial formation. alone. The conclusion is therefore grounded in participants' accounts rather than a claim that all Catholic formators experience celibacy in the same way.

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